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THEODORE S. HAMEROW

When in 1984 the American Historical Association commemorated the centenary of its founding, the prevailing mood was appropriately festive and celebratory. There were conferences, symposia, colloquia, and round tables tracing the way in which the discipline had advanced in the last hundred years and describing the newly developed fields, newly discovered techniques, and newly gained insights. The profession looked back with understandable pride at the remarkable progress it had made, at the transformation of a gathering of a handful of scholars into a vast organization embracing thousands. Was there not good reason for self-satisfaction and self-congratulation? History as an organized branch of learning had unquestionably come a long way.

But now that the tumult and the shouting have died, it may not be inappropriate to look back once again, less jubilantly perhaps, more soberly, at the way in which history has changed in the course of a century. To those who founded the American Historical Association, professionalization had meant above all a more scholarly, more scientific, more fruitful discipline. They believed that the organization and institutionalization of history would transform what had been a scholarly avocation or hobby into a disciplined, systematic quest for truths as indisputable as those of physics or chemistry.
“These years from 1880 to 1900,” wrote Charles M. Andrews, who had lived through that exciting era, “were a time of great awakening in the American historical world, as effective in its way as was the corresponding awakening taking place in the field of the natural sciences. It was a time of exhilaration and almost religious fervor among the younger scholars, who saw new spheres of opportunity opening before them and entered on the quest with the zeal of explorers making new discoveries or of crusaders advancing to new conquests.” As he recalled forty years later the sense of mission inspiring those who had set out at the end of the nineteenth century to transform historical study, Andrews still felt that here was “a true renaissance, in which the conception and treatment of history, under the inspiring leadership of men who saw visions and dreamed dreams, rose above the level of mere schoolmastering and became creative. This was the springtime of the historical movement in America.”

To what extent has the development of the historical profession lived up to the expectations of the founders of the American Historical Association? To a considerable extent, no doubt. If they could attend the current meeting of the organization they had created, they would be enormously impressed. They would marvel at the vast increase in membership, at the hundred or more scholarly sessions held in the space of three days, at the dozens of affiliated learned organizations, at the breakfasts and the luncheons, the receptions and the social hours, the sheer diversity of specialties, techniques, purposes, and interests. To someone who had been present when it all started a hundred years ago, when there were only fifteen professors and five assistant professors of history in all the colleges and universities in the United States, a week in Cincinnati in 1988 would be an extraordinary experience. For there can be no doubt that the content and structure of historical learning have become fundamentally transformed.

Why then not join in the celebration of professionalization? Why be a wet blanket? It is because a price has been paid for the achievement of this progress, a price which may well be worth the purchase but which has strained and diminished the resources of the purchaser. And yet the reshaping of historical learning must also be seen as part of a broad cultural process by which scholarship in the course of the twentieth century became bureaucratized and rigidified in institutions of higher education. It reflects the same forces that have led to the transformation of the humanities as well as the social and the natural sciences into professional academic disciplines.

In other words, the formation of the American Historical Association was not the cause but the result, the manifestation of a basic change in the organization of historical learning. A similar change can be seen in virtually every other field of study. The physicist and the chemist moved out of the cellar or attic, where they had been conducting their scientific experiments, into an elaborate, expensive laboratory maintained by some university, institute, or foundation. The philosopher and the literary critic left the pulpit or Grub Street to find a

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more secure livelihood teaching in the classroom. And the result has been that scholarship as a whole became divided into numerous separate, independent, and distinct branches of learning. Simply put, it became bureaucratized.

This process involved several important changes in the organization of research and scholarship. The first was the introduction of a clearly defined program of training, usually involving a prolonged period of study at an institution of higher education, the completion of which became a requirement for admission to the profession. The acquisition of technical proficiency was as a rule attested by the conferral of the doctoral degree, which began to serve as a hallmark of scholarly competence. Those who failed to earn the Ph.D., however dedicated or talented, came to be regarded as less than fully qualified members of the discipline. A growing distinction thus developed between professionals and amateurs. The former, sacerdotal in outlook and superior in attitude, regarded the latter with disdain. They in turn felt resentment toward the professionals who increasingly dominated a field of study the amateurs had once ruled. But, in the end, the bureaucratization of learning inevitably meant the exclusion of those who did not possess proper academic credentials.

Another result was specialization and fragmentation. The professional historian, like the professional biologist or the professional economist, was expected to achieve mastery of one of the subdivisions of the discipline to which his or her scholarly activity would thereafter be directed and confined. Historians soon learned to meet, confer, discuss, argue, and agree or disagree primarily with other scholars in their specialties. They learned to restrict their research and writing to some recondite, unexplored area in a particular field such as sex and family in Restoration England or the disobedience and rebelliousness of labor in early German industrialization. For it would be highly risky to encroach on a neighboring but independent area like sex and family in Georgian England or the disobedience and rebelliousness of labor under the Weimar Republic. It would invite criticism for not being sufficiently familiar with the "latest scholarship," for not being close enough to the "cutting edge," wherever that might be. Hence, for prudent scholars, the course of wisdom became to stick to their own specialties. There they would be secure against the scholarly watchdogs guarding the other specialties.

The bureaucratization of learning led in turn to the growing estrangement between the broad educated public and the world of scholarship. In the nineteenth century, it was still common for leading scientists, economists, philosophers, and linguists to give lectures before large, appreciative audiences of interested amateurs. Even the most eminent or abstruse scholar would often address nonprofessional groups organized to promote the knowledge, understanding, and cultural improvement of their members. A close connection was thus maintained between theoretical investigation and practical experience, between research and community, between study and life. But the transformation of amorphous scholarly disciplines into distinct professional castes had the effect of weakening this tie between learning and society. Intellectual activity became increasingly isolated from the world of affairs. Scholars ceased to be
concerned with communicating their findings to an interested though inexpert public. Instead, the accepted means of publishing the results of research became the scholarly journal and the specialized monograph. The fact that outsiders were now no longer able to understand the findings of organized learning came to be regarded not as a sign of cultural isolation but as a proof of intellectual profundity. Those scholars who still tried to bridge the widening gap between abstract thought and everyday existence were generally dismissed as journalists, popularizers, or hacks. Learning became rigidified and hieratic.

The effect of this transformation of scholarship was especially profound in history. Here was a discipline in which the connection between practical experience and contemplative study had been traditionally very close. For over two thousand years, longer than in any other field of learning, historical research had been conducted not by professional scholars but by self-taught amateurs who had spent most of their lives in politics, warfare, theology, bureaucracy, journalism, or literature. What attracted them to the study of the past was a spontaneous curiosity, an instinctive interest in how the world had become what it was, how society had changed and grown with the passage of time. They did not bring to the discipline technical expertise or systematic methodology but exuberance, enthusiasm, excitement, and joy in learning. Even more important, their historical writing was informed by a rich practical experience in the world of affairs. Theirs was no cloistered scholarship dusty with archival dust, smelling of the lamp and leather binding. It was lively and vibrant, rousing and compelling. It had the breath of life.

The virtues of the amateur historians should not be exaggerated, to be sure. Their strengths were also their weaknesses. They displayed in the writing of history the same passions and prejudices, the same interests and predispositions that they revealed in everyday life. Some of them were jingo and chauvinists celebrating the virtues of their class, their nation, or their race. Some were moralists and sermonizers preaching that divine Providence had decreed the eternal submission of the lower classes to the established order. And some were simply tattletales and gossipmongers specializing in amusing anecdotes or scandalous revelations about those in high places. Yet, in the hands of the best nonprofessional scholars, in the hands of a Gibbon or a Macauley, a Voltaire or a Tocqueville, historiography acquired a sharpness of insight and an understanding of character that only familiarity with everyday practical affairs can provide. They helped shape the golden age of historical writing.

This long millennial tradition of amateur history, subjective and undisciplined yet spontaneous and exciting, came to an end in the twentieth century. Little by little, those who had been trained, tested, doctored, and diplomaed began to displace those who could bring to the study of the past nothing but talent, enthusiasm, and love for the subject. For about forty years, the struggle raged, sometimes obscured by the appearance of mutual respect or at least tolerance but always bitter and unrelenting. On one side were the nonprofessionals, once the undisputed masters of the field, now fighting a losing rear-guard action against what they considered dry-as-dust pedantry that would stifle the creative
spirit with footnotes and bibliographies. On the other side stood the triumphant professionals, convinced that they represented the wave of the future, confident of their scholarly superiority, determined to transform the discipline through a more precise methodology and more critical analysis. Between two so diametrically opposed views of historical learning, no compromise was possible.

The struggle, increasingly uneven and futile, continued until World War II. But the rapid growth in the number of historians after 1945 led to the final victory of the professionals. The new generation of scholars, trained in a graduate school, armed with the doctoral degree, and conversant with the reconditeness of monographic research, had little patience with the unorganized, unsystematic, hit-and-miss approach of the amateurs. The result was the expulsion of the latter from the discipline. History became more exact but less eloquent, more scientific but less exciting. The amateurs continued to write and to publish, they continued to attract readers and to earn royalties. They often achieved a popularity most professionals could not approach. But that did not matter. They were denied the cachet of scholarly respectability because they had no Ph.D., they had no monographic publication, they did not as a rule attend learned conferences or symposia, they were not even in most cases members of the American Historical Association. How then could they be real historians? They were forced to seek consolation in their book sales and royalty statements. Yet they were not the only ones to suffer a deprivation. The discipline as a whole became poorer through the loss of their talent, exuberance, experience, and insight.

Even more serious was the departure of the nonprofessional readers of history. For the discipline had from its beginning attracted a wide public, drawn from all walks of life, which sought in the past a sense of collective identity or a guide to collective action. To some of them, history was a means of establishing a link between what was and what had been, between the individual and the community. It provided an insight into human destiny from a vantage point loftier than ordinary, everyday existence. It helped create a feeling of shared experience between generations, between ancestors and descendants, between the living and the dead. It seemed to satisfy a profound instinctive yearning to see human society as the outcome not of some haphazard aggregate of random contingencies but of a long, slow process of organic growth. It gave direction to the search for roots.

That had not been the only attraction of history, however. To the intelligent reading public, a knowledge of the past seemed the key to understanding the future. Thus the historian was also in a sense an oracle, a prophet. He or she could help the community make more intelligent choices, adopt more fruitful policies. Is it any wonder that the lectures and books of prominent historians enjoyed such wide popularity? They appeared to furnish a bright light amid the darkness enshrouding man’s fate. The historian, it must be admitted, could not really live up to all the expectations of society regarding the predictive value of history. The inscrutability of the human condition is too profound, the illumination provided by historical learning too feeble to make possible more than a
few informed guesses, conjectures, and speculations. It would be deceptive or self-deceptive to pretend otherwise. And yet what other guide is there? The historians who once prophesied so confidently about the future of humankind were no doubt guilty of the sin of pride, intellectual pride. But they were also attempting to communicate to society at large what they believed to be the indisputable lessons of their discipline.

To be sure, not all of those who read and listened to history were seeking a sense of identity or an insight into the future. Some were simply interested in a good story, all the more fascinating because it was true. They were carried along by the sweep of a great national epic, by the account of the peopling of a continent, of the rise of a few backwater colonies to the position of a world power, of a tragic, bloody war between North and South, and of the struggle to create a freer and more just social order. In other words, the sheer drama of history attracted wide audiences for the same aesthetic reason that literature or music or art attracted them. And, to historians of a hundred years ago, that reason seemed entirely valid. They did not look down on those who sought inspiration or excitement in the past, and they did not dismiss those who provided it as storytellers or gossipmongers. The tie between scholar and community was still close.

The professionalization of knowledge has now destroyed that tie. Historians have ceased to write for ordinary readers and begun to write for other historians. They have become more specialized, more adept, more abstruse. Their claim to recognition no longer rests on the ability to explain to society where it has come from and where it is going but on their success in finding a new subdivision or approach or methodology or technique within the rigid confines of the discipline. History has become more detached, more aloof from the interests of the community that had once looked to it for direction and guidance. It has largely ceased to be part of the popular culture. By a curious paradox, at the same time that the field was becoming more accessible and egalitarian, it was also becoming more exclusive and elitist.

Yet the professionals have been able to avoid paying a penalty for their cultural isolation. They have managed to survive despite their abandonment of the vital function of communal instruction and edification. Their salvation has been higher education. They have retreated from the marketplace to the classroom; they have ceased to be bards and oracles and become schoolmasters. Secure behind the walls of the campus, they no longer need to worry about public favor, they no longer need to adapt to changing popular tastes and fashions. They are free to concentrate on an intellectual discourse with other professionals and on the pursuit of academic politics. How does the number of history majors compare with the number of majors in sociology, economics, or political science? Will the dean smile on the history department or, instead, favor one of its competitors? Which colleague will get the next major appointment, the next endowed chair, the next award for distinction? Such are the concerns of a discipline that has withdrawn from the hazards of literature and prophesy to become part of the college curriculum.
Perhaps all this is too harsh. Perhaps it depreciates the progress history has made as a result of professionalization. Let us by all means acknowledge that the scope of the discipline has widened in our century, that it has begun to examine issues and problems, groups and communities that traditional historiography had largely ignored. The broader range of scholarly research, its richer insight and deeper sympathy, may well be worth the cost of cultural isolation and intellectual esotericism. In any case, there can be no going back to an earlier and more innocent age when the historian still played the augur and the poet, the orator and the priest. Tempora mutantur. Yet, while celebrating the advances made by historical scholarship, we should also count the losses suffered as the price of those advances. We have become not only stronger but a little weaker, not only richer but a little poorer.

And one last point. Admittedly, the profession could not turn back the clock even if it tried. The changes taking place in the last hundred years have been too profound, too fundamental to be reversed. They are part of a broad cultural transformation leading to the institutionalization and bureaucratization of all knowledge. What has happened in history only reflects what has happened in every other branch of scholarship. We must therefore learn to understand and accept the basic alteration that the discipline has undergone. Yet, even as we do so, we should not ignore the adverse effects of institutionalization and professionalization, of specialization and fragmentation. Not all the results of the growing expertness of historical learning have been beneficial.

Once we recognize that, we may be able to mitigate some of the harsher consequences of the bureaucratization of history. Perhaps historians can learn to narrow a little the gap between professional and amateur, between academic and free-lancer. Perhaps they can do a bit more to impart to the public a sense of collective identity. Perhaps they can even offer the community some cautious guidance based on historical experience. To be sure, they must resist the temptation of transforming their sympathies and predispositions into immutable laws of history. They must avoid the intellectual hubris that so often characterized the scholarship of the past. Yet, by drawing closer to vital public interests and concerns, they can still enrich not only the discipline of which they are students but the society of which they are members.