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# Public History: Its Origins, Nature, and Prospects

ROBERT KELLEY

IN ITS SIMPLEST MEANING, Public History refers to the employment of historians and the historical method outside of academia: in government, private corporations, the media, historical societies and museums, even in private practice. Public Historians are at work whenever, in their professional capacity, they are part of the public process. An issue needs to be resolved, a policy must be formed, the use of a resource or the direction of an activity must be more effectively planned—and an historian is called upon to bring in the dimension of time: this is Public History.

## THE HISTORIAN'S PERSPECTIVE

The historian has a special way of looking at human affairs, and a special way of explaining them. He or she instinctively asks the question, how did they evolve over time into their present arrangement? This is an essentially genetic cast of mind; that is, one which assumes that we do not understand something until we dig out its origins, its subsequent development, and its causal antecedents. Each scholarly discipline, in fact, consists of people who look at the world differently, who have a shared sensibility. We live in one world, but to glance at the way scholars from the separate disciplines distill it on paper is to be reminded how diversely our minds filter what we perceive and reflect upon. The

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distinctions are perhaps most graphically apparent in painting. On a colorist's canvas, a Greek village will appear as blocks of primary colors. An artist who is sensitive primarily to form and line will paint the same scene as a structural interlinking of planes and geometrical figures. Among a group of social scientists seeking to explain the Vietnam war, the political scientist will talk about the decisionmaking process; the sociologist will see the dynamics of military elites and WASP racism as the significant factors; the economist will point instead to the search for resources and markets. Within its own assumptions, each view is valid; each aids us in working toward an overall understanding.

Because the historical mode of thinking has been professionally located almost solely within the academic community, where it has been put to use on matters far distant in time, history has been thought to be like the arts and the humanities. That is, it is thought to produce things which are interesting, which are essential to the human spirit, but which are not immediately useful. The cultivated mind should have a knowledge of history; that is an accepted truism. History's connection with the real world, however, has been thought to be limited to such sophisticated fields as foreign policy or the conduct of government within the White House.

### THE PRACTICAL VALUE OF HISTORY

This is the fundamental misconception which must be swept away. The historical method of analysis is not simply relevant to the fate of nations, or to issues of war and peace. It is essential in every kind of immediate, practical situation. A jury asked to consider the disputed alignment of a system of flood control levees remains doubtful and unconvinced when told only of flowage figures and engineering theory. When helped to see the system as the end product of generations of cumulative decisions, flood by flood, worked out by trial and error and actual experience as well as in the light of engineering principles, the jury's uncertainties disappear and the correct judgment becomes clear. A city council which knows a part of its community primarily as a problem for safety engineers, since the buildings are old, and for the police, since the drunks must be cleared out regularly, and for the asses-

sor, since its tax revenues are declining, thinks in terms of bulldozers and wrecking balls. When brought to see it as a neighborhood with deep roots in time and an historical character which, if preserved or restored, will enrich the city's sense of itself, that same city council will shift its planning and start thinking of an "old town," facade easements, and revitalization.

A state legislature bent on overhauling a civil service system will proceed confidently with major innovations in mind until it learns, by means of an historical study, that in earlier times lost to memory these innovations had been tried and found wanting. A corporation which is growing rapidly and is staffed increasingly by new executives needs an historian to explain the origin and purpose of existing policies. Since the corporate community must now pay close attention to its social surroundings, it needs historians in public affairs offices to explain why Georgia is the way it is, or how Californians have responded to particular issues in the past and are likely to in the future. A city heading toward litigation with a surrounding irrigation district over water rights must ask an essentially historical, not legal, question: how did its water rights originate and evolve?

In these examples, there lies another definition of Public History. The significant question, in discriminating between the kind of history we have been accustomed to and Public History, is the following: who is posing the question to which the historian is seeking to give an answer? In academic history, we minister to humanity's generalized need to comprehend its past and to diffuse that comprehension, by means of formal schooling, within each generation. Researchers, stimulated by their particular intellectual interests and by their sense of where the profession's knowledge of the past is incomplete or inaccurate, pursue individually chosen lines of inquiry. Granting agencies may give or withhold support funds in aid of the project, but the initial choice of topic lies with the researcher.

In Public History, the historian answers questions posed by others. He or she serves as a consultant, a professional, a member of the staff. There are times when an academic historian's intellectual interests and the needs of the public flow together naturally. In such situations, the historian is called upon to provide information out of an already-acquired expertise. Congress develops

a renewed interest in national planning, and it summons the historian most expert in the history of this process to its committee hearings. Or, faced suddenly with the prospect of initiating impeachment proceedings, it forms a consulting group of historians and asks them to explain the process. The Defense Department initiates a long study of basic policies, and brings in as consultants the academic historians who have become authorities in the field. Environmental consciousness emerges, and historians are retained to give advice, and to serve as expert witnesses in litigation. John Hope Franklin has recently described to us the way in which attorneys formed a team with historians expert in the history of race relations during the presentation of testimony leading up to the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954.<sup>1</sup>

When academic historians perform professionally in this way, they are practicing the role of public historians. However, we shall not see historians moving into the public process in a major way—that is, in hundreds, and eventually thousands, of settings located not just in Washington, but throughout American society—until their potentiality is widely recognized and they are permanently employed as practicing public historians and not simply as academic historians carrying out an occasional task of public service.

### NEW DIRECTIONS

In the spring of 1975, my colleague G. Wesley Johnson and I sat in my office talking of all these matters and exploring the question: how could this breakthrough be made? We concluded that the best method was to begin training small groups of graduate students in public history skills, imbuing them with the idea of a *public* rather than an *academic* career, and sending them out, one by one, to demonstrate their value by their work. Everything has small beginnings, as each scholarly discipline has learned as it began to go public. Economists had to demonstrate their usefulness before they were taken seriously, and the same would have to be true, we believed, with historians. We would not be able to swing the entire United States, en masse, into the hiring of historians, but we might be able to persuade a few government offices or

1. See his "The Historian and Public Policy," delivered as the Nora and Edward Ryerson Lecture at the Center for Policy Study of the University of Chicago in 1974, in *The History Teacher*, 11 (May, 1978), 380–383.

business corporations to do so—and move on from there. If by our efforts we could show that the idea of public history worked, then other institutions across the country might launch similar programs. In time Americans would grow used to the sight of historians at work in the decisionmaking process *as historians*, bringing their particular method of analysis and explanation to bear upon points at issue, just as public administrators, economists, engineers, attorneys, and other professionals have brought their expertise into policy making and are now established fixtures in that process.

This would, of course, have the result of greatly expanding professional employment for historians, an objective well worth striving toward. There are great numbers of young people who enjoy history and would be glad for the opportunity to practice it professionally. Keeping graduate study alive means insuring that departments of history will continue to be places of intellectual vitality. This, in its turn, will enhance teaching, as well as the broader enterprise of historical scholarship. There is, however, a larger purpose to be served by this enterprise. At present, people in positions of responsibility do not think historically, though they like to think that they do. They think, rather, in terms of immediate context. The turnover in executive positions is always rapid, legislators come and go, and few have more than a thin understanding of how things have come to be the way they are, what led to particular policies, what has been tried and found wanting, and when the wheel is being reinvented. If by sending young people out to take up careers in public history we slowly change this situation, so that the historical method of analysis becomes an integral element in all decisionmaking, we shall have made a signal contribution to American life. Historically-grounded policies, in small and large settings, cannot help but be sounder in conception, and they are likely to be more effective, consistent, and, one hopes, more aligned with human reality. In the long run, they should be less costly to administer. This is a large ideal, and who can say that we shall ever fully realize it? It is no larger, however, than the fundamental belief that undergirds our teaching, which we are convinced leads, by some process that we cannot concretely describe, to more humane and informed citizens and therefore a more civilized society. Every professional under-

taking must have an encompassing social purpose, even though its fulfillment may elude us and be filled with human error and incapacity. Changing and improving the public process throughout American society, by bringing the historical consciousness into a working role in the daily conduct of affairs, is a purpose honorable in character and elegant in its dimensions.

### ROLE MODELS

Fortunately, the professional model is already out in the public arena, proven and seasoned, though academic historians have paid it little attention. To the Graduate Program in Public Historical Studies at UC/Santa Barbara we have been bringing a stream of visiting lecturers who are now practicing public historians in many separate locations: in state and city governments, in private corporations, in historic preservation programs, in historical societies, and in private practice. Among these, those who represent Public History in perhaps its fullest development are at work in the Federal history offices. Two of them come particularly to mind: Richard Hewlett, chief historian for the Department of Energy, and Wayne Rasmussen, who holds the similar post in Agriculture. Their careers present to us, in microcosm, the stages in development that public history will, in each setting, pass through. Hewlett and Rasmussen began their labors more than twenty years ago, when their presence in their organizations was essentially ignored. They devoted themselves for long years to solid, basic research into the work and history of their agencies, leading to the writing of narrative histories. At the same time, they were gaining a command over their agencies' archives and documentary resources unrivaled by anyone else in their organizations.

Eventually, their presence as an increasingly valuable resource in policy making was recognized. Requests from senior administrators began to arrive on their desks. How had this policy come to be adopted, and what was the origin of that operation or administrative unit? Had the agency encountered particular issues in the past, and how were they resolved? In time, the incoming traffic of such requests mounted, taking up an ever larger share of the historical offices' time. By the 1970's, the operations headed by Hewlett and Rasmussen had completed the evolutionary progression from simply being obscure offices buried in the cata-



combs whose function no one seemed to understand, to essential elements in making policy. In the latter days of the Atomic Energy Commission (succeeded by the Energy Research and Development Administration and now by the Department of Energy), Hewlett was brought in regularly as consultant to the Commissioner, and to sit with the Commission as it carried forward its deliberations. The Department of Agriculture has recently been engaged in a searching re-examination of its inner structure, and Rasmussen has been closely involved in preparing historical explanations of the existing system and its predecessors.

This is the evolution of role and function which should, ideally, occur whenever an organization establishes an historical office. The problem, however, is to locate that niche from which an historian with the public history concept in mind can begin his or her work. The ultimate objective has to be the establishment of an historical office in every organization of significant size. It will take a long time, however, to reach that objective. In 1975, when we were gestating our program, we believed that the untapped frontier for historians lay within the thousands of local governments, at the city and county level, which are almost entirely without historical offices. There were exceptions, as in the City of Rochester, New York, where for decades Blake McKelvey held forth, now succeeded by Joseph Barnes. Historic preservation undertakings are rapidly burgeoning, fueled by federal legislation and urban redevelopment projects, and it appeared that historians were ever more in need in urban planning offices. Now, however, the spreading tax revolt spearheaded by California's Proposition 13 campaign may drastically reduce the sources of funds which might have financed the entry of historians, *as* historians, into urban and regional government.

It is unlikely, in any event, that there will be many "front doors": that is, situations where historians will be hired at the outset in their professional capacity and put to work with the appropriate title. However, there should be many "back door" entry points, not only in government but especially in business corporations. Lawrence Bruser, now in the public affairs office of Mitsui Corporation, has been insisting for some years that there is not a job crisis for historians, there is an identity crisis. In fact, historians have a number of qualities which are essential to or-



ganizations of all kinds. They should think of themselves, Bruser observes, as specialists in information management. Under the auspices of the Graduate Program in Public Historical Studies here at UCSB (and with NEH funding), we have held a series of conferences, the most recent of them with a group of business executives. From these people we learned that Bruser's concept is quite sound. A room full of corporation executives—representing firms like Dow Corning, DataProducts, Hewlett Packard, Bank of America, and InterAmerican Bank—informed us that the information services market is exploding; that specialists in information management are much in demand.

What corporations increasingly need on their staffs, they tell us, are analysts and planners. That is, they need people who have the skills and qualities historians traditionally develop: narrative communication in concise clear form; an appetite for extended research; an interest in problem solving; and the power of conceptualization. People are important to large organizations who are good at presenting things, learn fast, seize quickly upon ideas, have a wide body of general knowledge to draw upon, understand the workings of the larger society, and can link things together. The strictly "business skills" which such people need to acquire are relatively simple, related to the reading of budgets and programming.

We anticipate, therefore, that graduate students in Public History will move into positions in the community at large, either at the governmental or corporate business level, not so much as "historians" to fill a post specifically so designated, but as planners, analysts, managers of the internal flow of information, directors of public affairs offices in private corporations, assistants to administrators, and the like. The variety of such positions open to them, reaching into the media and into such immense fields as medical administration, is impossible to list in any comprehensive way. Certainly the rapidly growing profession of cultural resource management, involving historic preservation, museums, and the like, will continue to provide a major theater of employment for professional historians, in this case one where historical research and writing are the center of the enterprise. Wherever located, historians trained with the public history ideal—that the historical method is uniquely valuable in problem solving and policy making

—will serve as missionaries for that concept, and will put it to use at every opportunity. The Fabian tactic of permeation, in short, provides the model the historical profession should follow as it seeks, in our own time, to begin enlarging its role in national life.

### TRAINING IN THE PUBLIC HISTORICAL STUDIES PROGRAM

We admitted the first class to the Graduate Program in Public Historical Studies in the fall of 1976. With the aid of the Rockefeller Foundation, which provided a three year grant (mainly for graduate fellowships), we accepted nine students to study for the master's degree, and one who began work on his doctorate. As we screened applicants, we looked carefully to see if their dossiers revealed a certain entrepreneurial, risk-taking quality of mind and character. We have continued ever since to make this our highest priority, in addition to the capacity for strong scholarly performance. To pioneer is difficult, requiring a certain resilience and a readiness to make one's own way. There are few role models to follow, and very little in the way of an established pattern of career progression in Public History.

Essentially, the Public History curriculum is an option, a second route by which the student may earn a master's or doctoral degree. It has been tailored to equip the student for what we believe lies ahead, in the way of likely challenges and necessary skills. We will continue to learn as we proceed, and already, in the Program's second year, we have begun the polishing and reforming process in the curriculum. The heart of the Program is a two-quarter core seminar, taken by every master's candidate and by entering doctoral students. It provides, first of all, a continuing forum in which to discuss the nature of Public History and its ethical challenges: how do staff historians keep their integrity, when under pressure to produce desired results rather than a history which is true to the facts? To the core seminar, we also bring historians from around the country, already working in public settings, to serve as visiting lecturers. This has proved to be one of the Program's most valuable and fruitful features. It not only gives students direct knowledge of the many ways in which historians can be employed, outside of academia, it gives them personal acquaintances and the prospect of future assistance within the profession.

In our planning of the Program, we talked with historians already employed in public settings. We learned that students need to get used to working in team situations, which is unlike the usual pattern of professional activity among academic historians, and they need to get used to the concept of mission-oriented research. In public settings, they will usually be engaged in helping their organization achieve its goals, and the questions they will be asked to explore—as earlier remarked—will not, as among academic historians, arise simply out of their own interests. To give direct experience in this kind of team, mission-oriented research, the core seminar in the Program focuses upon a problem of current concern to the City of Santa Barbara. The students are asked jointly to research and write a historical study of that problem, of book length, which is then put to use by the City in its planning and operations. During this process, they learn how to do community-centered research, which is different from library-centered research (though library resources, where available, are also used). They learn where the documentary resources in a city are to be found: in voting offices, surveyor's files, court records, tax assessor's records, newspaper archives, city council minutes, private homes, basements, dusty attics, and in private memories—to just begin the list. They also learn how to work with various media, including television, to transmit to the public what is learned, and they receive close instruction in what is the historian's principal skill, distilling research notes into a prose narrative. Meanwhile, the students in the Program are engaged in other activities as well: putting on the Program's series of conferences; editing this journal; and acquiring such practical competencies as the writing of grant applications. Also, during the first quarter, the students enroll in a seminar in the history and nature of planning, and another in the use of social science, quantitative methods in historical research.

Out of these diverse joint experiences, a strong sense of community develops within each class of graduate students in the Program which greatly enhances and intensifies every learning activity. In a way denied to traditional graduate students, who scatter widely in their seminars and work individually in their research, students in the Public History program acquire a feeling of corporate identity and common involvement. The level of mu-

tual assistance, and the depth of personal ties between participants in the Program, is quite beyond the usual graduate student experience. Field trips enhance the sense of community. A valuable trip of this nature, each year, is to the state office of cultural resource management in Sacramento and its historic preservation activities, both as they relate to local communities and to the state park system. Students and faculty take meals together with visiting lecturers, and in faculty-student retreats, when extended discussion of the Program and of individual student needs constitutes the agenda.

We urge students in the Program to take work outside the Department in fields such as public administration and business economics. As we are able to develop relevant courses in other departments, they will probably become requirements. The Department continues to require competency in a foreign language, involving an examination. We also stress that the historian has not only a method to offer, but a broad command of human history and the perspectives upon government, ideas, and social institutions that such a command provides. The students are involved, therefore, in intensive reading seminars, and in a great deal of joint study in preparation for a broad master's level comprehensive examination (usually in American history). They also start moving in individualized directions during the winter quarter, according to the particular public history direction that they wish to head toward, and its associated studies. Taking work with individual professors in the department, they develop a special field in such areas as historic preservation, planning, urban studies, the history of technology, water resource history, environmental studies, and the like. This, in turn, leads to a second master's level comprehensive examination.

#### PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE FOR STUDENTS

At the end of three quarters of residency, the M.A. students depart for (salaried) internships. Planned to take six months, during this period the students research and write the history of a problem of current concern to their hosting organizations. While doing so, they are under the joint supervision of a superior in the organization itself, and of a professor in the Department. When completed, and approved by a University committee, this study becomes the student's M.A. thesis.

Doctoral students participate in most of this first year's work, though they do not prepare either for the M.A. comprehensives or take, necessarily, an internship. Rather, their program of study aims, as is usual, at a series of doctoral level written and oral examinations, and a dissertation on a public history topic. They present three fields of history for examination, one in a broad, general field of history, and two closely related to or directly concerned with an area of public history interest. An outside field in another Department is supportive of that interest. One of our doctoral students is interested in the history of technology and in that of local communities, leading to an appropriately designed program of study. Another is heading for a career in the history of marine resource management, which dictates yet a different grouping of learning experiences. The dissertation is to be prepared in conformity with the general principle governing the nature of the M.A. thesis: it is to be on a major issue in the public setting in which a hosting organization or group of organizations is interested.

Our experience with the first class of entering students was most encouraging, and it has continued to be so with the second class as well. We have had students interning in a number of cities (making studies of water rights issues, historic preservation needs, the operations of municipal departments, and the like); at the Los Angeles International Airport (making a study of noise pollution and expansion controversies with surrounding communities); the Governor's Office of Research in the state capital (researching the history of the state's civil service system); the National Park Service; and in the headquarters offices of a national corporation. In several cases, these experiences have led either to permanent positions or to the promise of such positions when the M.A. is completed. One student is going on for doctoral studies in urban resource management history at another university; another has gone to a graduate school of business to take a second M.A.; a third is preparing to form a private company to do environmental impact studies; a fourth is preparing to work for the state in historic preservation; and a fifth has now decided, in light of her internship activity, to proceed further in the Program to the doctorate. The second class, just now preparing to depart for internships in San Francisco (a private foundation), Kansas City (the Public Works department), Los Angeles (a private corporation),

and others involving the US Forest Service, the University of California, a privately-funded research organization, the federal Historic American Engineering Record survey, and the like.

The Program is considerably more arduous, for both faculty and students, than the traditional curriculum. The students have to work at a tiring pace acquiring skills much more various and novel than those normally involved in graduate study. Learning how to do community-centered historical research; acquiring a command of oral history techniques, and of media skills; venturing into public administration courses and others in economics; developing the ability to program computers, to divide up research tasks, and to write a team-created piece of analysis and historical narrative; studying the history of planning; putting on conferences; working in a public or private agency as an intern who is carrying on historical analysis in corporation or government documents; struggling with the ethical complexities of being a "house historian" who nonetheless is going to call the shots as the evidence dictates: these are not the things that graduate students in history have in the past been called upon to undertake. Out of all of this, however, there seems to come a sense of pride and accomplishment which brings a fresh atmosphere and an optimistic spirit into a situation which, in recent years, had become one of depression and loss of purpose. The ultimate dividend, for the faculty persons involved, lies in working with such students. To this point, therefore, Public History has seemed to us an enterprise well worth the heavy commitment of time and energies it requires. It is an experiment with many risks, but its rewards thus far for both faculty and students, and its potentiality, make it an undertaking which is far preferable to going on as we were before.