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978-1-107-02159-4 - Being a Historian: An Introduction to the Professional World of History

James M. Banner

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## Being a Historian

### *An Introduction to the Professional World of History*

Based on the author's more than fifty years of experience as a professional historian in academic and other capacities, *Being a Historian* addresses both aspiring and mature historians. It offers an overview of the state of the discipline of history today and the problems that confront it and its practitioners in many professions. James M. Banner, Jr., argues that historians remain inadequately prepared for their rapidly changing professional world and that the discipline as a whole has yet to confront many of its deficiencies. He also argues that, no longer needing to conform automatically to the academic ideal, historians can now more safely and productively than ever before adapt to their own visions, temperaments, and goals as they take up their responsibilities as scholars, teachers, and public practitioners. Critical while also optimistic, this work suggests many topics for further scholarly and professional exploration, research, and debate.

James M. Banner, Jr., holds a B.A. from Yale and a Ph.D. from Columbia, where he studied with Richard Hofstadter. From 1966 to 1980, he was a member of the history department at Princeton University, which he left to found the American Association for the Advancement of the Humanities. He has also been a book publisher and foundation officer. A former Guggenheim Fellow, Fellow of the Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History at Harvard, member of the board of directors of the American Council of Learned Societies, and Fulbright Visiting Professor of American History at Charles University in Prague, he is the author of many books and essays on American history, education, and public affairs. He has written for the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and other newspapers. His most recent works include *The Elements of Teaching* and *The Elements of Learning*, both with Harold C. Cannon, and *Becoming Historians*, edited with John R. Gillis. He is also the editor of *A Century of American Historiography*. Banner is a co-founder of the History News Service and of the National History Center.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Frontmatter

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Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02159-4 - Being a Historian: An Introduction to the Professional World of History

James M. Banner

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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*To my historian colleagues, in the hope of making even stronger  
the professional world we share*

Cambridge University Press

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James M. Banner

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02159-4 - Being a Historian: An Introduction to the Professional World of History

James M. Banner

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xix
1 The Discipline and Professions of History	I
2 The Structure of the Discipline of History	34
3 A Multitude of Opportunities: Sites, Forms, Kinds, and Users of History	63
4 The Academic Trinity: Research, Teaching, Service	96
5 History outside the Academy	121
<i>A Note on "Public Intellectuals"</i>	158
<i>A Note on Advocacy and Expert Testimony</i>	167
6 Teaching and Writing History	176
<i>A Note on Popular History</i>	206
7 Professional Principles, Responsibilities, Rights	211
8 Being Oneself as Historian	238
<i>Index</i>	261

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02159-4 - Being a Historian: An Introduction to the Professional World of History

James M. Banner

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02159-4 - Being a Historian: An Introduction to the Professional World of History

James M. Banner

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Preface

If I intended this book to introduce readers to the nature of historical knowledge, I would entitle it, after Peter L. Berger's *Invitation to Sociology*, "An Invitation to History" or, after G. H. Hardy's *Mathematician's Apology*, "A Historian's Apology." If I sought to counsel aspiring historians about how to pursue their work, I would follow P. B. Medawar's *Advice to a Young Scientist* with my own "Advice to a Young Historian." If my purpose were to reflect on how historians create and present historical knowledge, I would follow the path blazed more than seventy years ago by Allan Nevins's *Gateway to History* and try to capture again what Nevins so bracingly and infectiously termed history's "free and joyous pursuit." Or if I wished to examine historical scholarship today, I would adopt the approach of John Higham's essential study, *History: Professional Scholarship in America*, and appraise the internal growth, intellectual development, and overall intellectual condition of the discipline of history. But I have written this book for other purposes and for other kinds of audiences than those to whom those authors directed their wise and enduring works.

Instead of being a welcome to readers who might like to learn something about the house of history from the outside, these pages are meant for people who wish to learn of history's dwelling place from within. I have two groups of readers especially, although not exclusively, in mind. The first are those, principally graduate students, who have already stepped through Clio's front door and now have need of guidance within her residence – guidance on many matters too seldom offered to them. The second are more experienced historians – and, as readers will see, I define that term broadly – who might find that what I write affects the

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978-1-107-02159-4 - Being a Historian: An Introduction to the Professional World of History

James M. Banner

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

ways in which they view our shared discipline, its condition, and our work as professionals.

The book is thus more than an introduction to history. It is instead a kind of companion to the world that historians have made and now inhabit, at least in the United States. It looks to the discipline's past so as to locate its present condition in relation to its origins, and it emphasizes its present condition in an effort to identify its strengths and weaknesses. But at the risk of disappointing those who would have me offer detailed proposals for the discipline's improvement, I offer only general suggestions in that regard. The work is rather a set of reflections on a choice of subjects, some of them frequently discussed, others less so, that I believe warrant consideration that is greater than or different from what they receive. Thus the book is less prescriptive than suggestive and is purposefully anchored concretely in the present when it does not survey parts of the past; it looks to the future only in general ways. Nor is this an advice manual, a what-to-do and what-to-avoid guide for graduate students. Other works of that sort already exist. Instead, it is a call for more attentiveness to matters usually overlooked in historians' preparation, in their work, and in their professional world. I have not designed it, for instance, to help students learn their crafts of research, teaching, writing, and the many other historians' arts, all of which they can learn elsewhere. Because I am less acquainted with historians' work outside the United States than within it, readers will find that I confine myself to American professional practices. They will also find that I have little to say about metaprofessional matters, such as the state of universities and the universalization of communications, or about research methods and historiographical issues – knowledge already conveyed superbly in the graduate programs of research universities and already the subject of authoritative works of scholarship and thought. By contrast with those studies, I examine here what practicing historians do, where they carry out their work, how the changing world of historical practices affects the choices they make, and what aspiring historians especially might consider as they prepare to make those choices – matters that are rarely encountered formally in graduate schools.

In fact, it is a sobering and disconcerting fact, freighted with ethical significance, that very few departments of history that award doctoral degrees bother to prepare their graduate students, as other kinds of professional schools prepare their students, for the full realities and conditions of employment in even the academic sector and instead leave the occupational dimension of professional life to on-the-job experience. Even

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978-1-107-02159-4 - Being a Historian: An Introduction to the Professional World of History

James M. Banner

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

xi

those departments that make some gesture toward offering this kind of employment preparation consider their responsibilities largely discharged by helping doctoral candidates prepare for college and university hiring interviews, providing opportunities for students to gain some experience in teaching, and encouraging students to attain more knowledge of general world and comparative history in anticipation of having to teach survey courses in these subjects. No department to my knowledge offers courses, analogous to those in law and medical schools, in what might be called “clinical history” – experiences in the actual practices that historians perform.

While even modest departures from older, conventional norms of graduate training are all to the good, no one should lose sight of the fact that, at least at the leading, most powerful, and most prestigious research universities that often set the standards for professional preparation, most of these happy exceptions among preparatory programs are all focused on training for academic employment, not for the many other kinds of history work outside the academy in which an ever-larger proportion of young historians find themselves engaged. Furthermore, one may safely assume that the few departments preparing their students for the full range of historical practices, both academic and extra-academic, that historians pursue today do so principally through distinct programs in public history, programs usually designed for those who wish to pursue work in careers gathered under that general rubric and not designed for all graduate students whom the departments enroll. Thus, very few graduate students in history doctoral programs in the United States are exposed to knowledge of the entire universe of historical practices among which they may (and an increasing number of them will have to) choose. Accordingly, such are aspiring historians’ attitudes in entering graduate school that, as surveys show, many graduate students complain less about being ill-prepared for the full range of work pursued by faculty members than about their ill preparation for being employed as historians outside higher education – in governments, archives, museums, businesses, and other professional settings where they may undertake research, write, teach, or otherwise use history but not make their livings as faculty members. That is to say, few are prepared to be historians in the full, possible, and contemporary connotations of that term. And yet perhaps more than one-half of them, as indicated repeatedly by annual employment surveys, will not, for whatever reason, enter the academy at all.

I have tried to compensate for these discipline-wide failures in the preparation of historians with this book. It can justifiably be read as

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978-1-107-02159-4 - *Being a Historian: An Introduction to the Professional World of History*

James M. Banner

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

an extended critique, albeit a sympathetic and optimistic one, of historians' preparation and their understanding of key dimensions of their discipline's history, as well as a set of suggestions as to what historians ought to be better aware of, even if not all of them will enter all of the professional worlds in which they can now practice. Therefore, *Being a Historian* principally concerns the professions, institutions, and practices of the discipline of history. For reasons that I am at pains to make clear throughout the book, however widespread may be the use of the word "profession" to indicate the intellectual and institutional landscape within which all practicing historians work, the term is usually incorrectly used when referring to what is carried out in Clio's name. What really constitutes work in "the history profession," as we usually term it, belongs instead to many practices and activities linked to the single discipline of history that are spread among many distinct professions and occupations, among them school, college, and university teaching; museum work; government employment; and independent consulting and writing. Each of these professions and occupations requires different forms and presentations of knowledge, and each is governed by particular conventions and rules of its own. Historians work within the same discipline through the use of many accepted practices in a growing variety of professions and occupations. This book concerns those practices and, by extension, all those kinds of work.

Neglecting the distinction between discipline and profession is more than an innocent terminological error that, once corrected, allows us to speak and write of history as before. Instead, the error strikes deep into the heart of the discipline of history and creates more than mere intellectual confusion. It fatefully affects the development of the discipline's structure and hierarchies, the training and employment of historians, the honors and compensation extended to individuals, and the aspirations and sense of self-worth of those who contribute in their many ways to history's welfare. The error also helps determine the mistelling of the history of historical studies and practices in the United States. To correct the error ought to allow us to keep faith with one of history's enduring purposes: to honor what in the past warrants honor and to free ourselves from those conditions that no longer serve us or our fellow citizens well.

To argue that we must learn to distinguish clearly between the discipline of which all historians are members and the distinct occupations in which historians pursue their work is not to deny that most practicing historians are "professional historians" in the sense that they pursue their work as people whose professional labors – be they on

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02159-4 - Being a Historian: An Introduction to the Professional World of History

James M. Banner

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

xiii

school, college, and university faculties or in museums, corporations, and national parks – are consecrated to the creation, transmission, evaluation, and preservation of historical knowledge and subject to roughly the same normative scrutiny in every case. Nor is it to deny that most practicing historians perform their work, as we say, “professionally” – that is, knowledgeably, skillfully, and ethically. Most have received their doctoral degrees from the history departments of research universities, and their work is evaluated against widely shared, universalistic standards of evidence, citation, argumentation, interpretation, presentation, and conduct. Nothing that I write is meant to suggest that I do not believe these historians to be professional historians or historians who act professionally.

Yet even many of those who practice history without having been formally trained to do so or who may not be compensated for the historical work they produce can be, and I believe ought to be, considered professional historians in the way I use that term. After all, in the role of historian – whether as writers of history, schoolteachers of history, or docents in museums of history – they know deeply (or at least should know deeply) one or more of the same bodies of knowledge that academic scholars have mastered. They are judged (or at least should be judged) by the same governing norms of historical research and presentation. Surely they are affected by the same institutional structures and realities of historical pursuits as are more conventionally defined historians, and they are expected to conduct themselves by the same ethical standards that govern the historical work of those to whom the term “professional” is customarily applied. Are we to consider them lesser historians and their endeavors lesser historical practices by virtue of their not possessing a doctorate in history or not devoting themselves full time on a college or university faculty to Clio’s discipline?

In answering that question in the negative, I indicate my conviction that people like schoolteachers of history who choose to consider themselves members of the world of learning – and who does not wish that there were many more of them? – must be embraced as professional historians, as must be those writers and journalists who diffuse historical knowledge without holding professorial appointments or having secured their doctoral degrees. They must also be held to generally accepted standards in their work. Yet, as long as many of us confine our definition of professional historian to academic teachers and scholars of history, we shall both exclude such teachers, writers, and others from historians’ ranks and from the critical scrutiny their work warrants and, perhaps

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978-1-107-02159-4 - Being a Historian: An Introduction to the Professional World of History

James M. Banner

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

worse, we shall fail to help aspiring doctoral candidates list secondary school teaching or independent writing among those many worthy occupations from which they may make reasoned choices while remaining practicing historians.

It is also essential to distinguish, as Christopher Jencks and David Riesman some years ago insisted we must, between the terms “intellectual” and “academic,” as well as between the communities they denote. While most academic historians are intellectuals, not all intellectuals who practice history are found on school, college, and university faculties. Those who seek to create and diffuse historical knowledge in museums or through films have every right to expect to be accepted as intellectuals whose efforts aspire to the same *gravitas* and play of ideas and to the same influence on understanding as do the labors of academic historians. The burden of demonstrating that this is not so falls upon those who would level the charge.

Therefore, emphatically and purposefully so, this book is for all those who wish to carry out work toward understanding the past and helping others understand it in whatever ways they choose to do so. It is not a book just for those who serve in an academic capacity or just for those who are paid by some institution, be it a government, historical society, or museum, for some extra-academic pursuit of professional historical work. It is for everyone who practices history in any of its many forms. I thus hope that experienced practitioners of the historian’s craft, especially those who educate graduate students for today’s multifarious world of history, as well as those who plan to become professional historians, may learn something from what I have to say. For it has been my discouraging experience from both inside and outside university walls to observe that a still-too-large proportion of academic historians remains skeptical of the growing number of activities carried on professionally in history’s name and, consequently, is unable, with knowledge and experience, to help students adjust to the changing realities of their professional world. Others, while deeply knowledgeable about the many dimensions of their world of work, simply fail to pass on that knowledge to their students when preparing them for a career within history’s precincts. Perhaps, therefore, this book will help those who read it to enter with clearer understanding and expectations into the increasingly diverse world of historical practice. For while there are many portals into Clío’s house and many rooms inside it, all those chambers are guarded by the same tutelary muse and, though inhabited by people of many professions and

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02159-4 - Being a Historian: An Introduction to the Professional World of History

James M. Banner

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

xv

pursuits, are organized toward the same ends: the creation and diffusion of historical knowledge.

Because I have written this book for all historians, I have written it out of a firm conviction that all historians must adopt the broadest conception of the discipline of history and confer full recognition on all pursuits undertaken legitimately in history's service if the practices of history are to remain engaging and robust. This will no doubt displease some – even though, if my observations are accurate, a declining number – who think that what is presently carried out as history work is already too broad and often self-defeating and that history must remain centered on its academic core and on scholarly research principally. I believe that they are wrong. Although there was a time when written scholarship was almost the sole means of making a lasting contribution to historical knowledge, that is no longer the case. Of course, the creation of new knowledge and understanding through original scholarship remains one of the great glories of Clio's world, and nothing that I have written here is meant to suggest otherwise. Yet, while other historical practices besides scholarship now make signally important contributions to historical understanding, we still lack agreed-on professional guidelines for preparing our students for their lives as practicing historians, the shared terms of discourse for conveying much of what we do and ought to do, and consensus about the weighty professional issues, in addition to research and writing, for which all young students of history should be prepared. More important, due in large part to lapses in the preparation of young historians, in many respects we lack strong and adaptive professionalism. Many historians are fine scholars, filmmakers, and private consultants without engaging themselves fully and actively in the lives of their professions and without being citizens of their discipline. Therefore, much of what follows is also an effort to bring into the open many topics neglected in the professional lives, as well as in the education, of practicing historians.

While this work is not a memoir, in many respects it reflects my own experiences and beliefs; it certainly betrays many of the views formed by my more than half century as a historian who has practiced both inside and outside the academy. Like most professional historians, I was prepared in a demanding academic setting to be an academic historian. Throughout my graduate education, however, and unlike so many of today's aspiring historians who receive handsome fellowship funding, I had to support myself while in graduate school by teaching history to high schoolers, community college students, and collegians enrolled in general

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978-1-107-02159-4 - Being a Historian: An Introduction to the Professional World of History

James M. Banner

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

studies and part-time baccalaureate programs, and thus I inaugurated my career in a diversity of educational settings. Subsequently, I joined a research university faculty, where I taught undergraduate and graduate students, produced published historical scholarship, and came to think of myself as an academic – which I was. On being convinced that the humanities in the United States needed additional institutional and other resources, I resigned my university professorship and founded a nonprofit organization devoted to strengthening the humanities. When that effort failed, I was left to improvise a career as historian outside college and university walls. I did so as the book publisher of a research institute, then as a foundation officer, all the while working to maintain my bona fides as a historian. Not surprisingly, as I shifted from an academic to a more public setting in my work, my angle of vision similarly shifted and was enlarged. So was my understanding of what it means to be a historian.

Yet, while I never intended to become a public historian or, in fact, thought of myself as one, my somewhat inadvertent career trajectory has led most of my colleagues to consider me a public historian. They do so because I have not retained an academic berth but instead have functioned for three decades as a historian elsewhere. I do not, however, hold myself out either as an academic historian or as a public historian. I do not do so because I do not believe that my own or other historians' professional locations adequately convey how they can or ought to define themselves as historians. I have long felt that assuming the mantle of public or academic historian misrepresents the overlapping professional orbits in which I have worked and in which so many others find themselves working. For while not holding a formal academic position, I have continued to teach undergraduate and graduate students, for years directed an unaffiliated seminar for experienced historians, have kept abreast of and written historical scholarship, and still participate fully in the larger intellectual, as well as professional, life of the discipline of history. So what then am I, an academic or public historian?

I believe that I am both, a hybrid of sorts, and thus simply a historian. When I left the academy, in many respects I brought the academy along with me, just as those who enter academic historians' academic ranks from outside carry with them the experiences and ethos that they gained elsewhere. The simple designation of historian thus strikes me as fitting, honorable, factual, and clear. And so this book, drawn from all my experiences as well as from extensive reflection about the entire discipline, is about being a historian in the many dimensions of that term. I hope that the book conveys my conviction that, while different kinds and locales

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978-1-107-02159-4 - Being a Historian: An Introduction to the Professional World of History

James M. Banner

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

xvii

of history work must be distinguished for purposes of analysis, for the long-term health of history we would all serve ourselves best by using a single, unmodified noun – historian – to designate ourselves professionally. Our aim should be to incorporate into the ancient company of historians any and all who follow history’s muse.

Some other historians might compose elegies to history’s yesteryears and see in my account of its circumstances substantiation of the decline in the quality of history, the degradation of its pursuit, and the fallen ways of its practitioners. I would not. There were wonderful qualities, some of them no doubt lost forever, in history’s prelapsarian days; but the price of their retention was too high – uniformity of view, insularity of interpretation, and, worst of all, an exclusiveness of approach and subject that resulted in ignorance of large parts of the past. Never should there be such innocence again.

History is a moral discipline. It leads us to conceive of the possible in human terms and to gain the courage to pursue our own aspirations guided by the exemplary achievements of those who have gone before us. By learning, writing about, and conveying historical knowledge, we create meaning and diffuse values. Not that we shall ever come to unanimous agreement about those meanings and values, or about the many options of emphasis and method we face in doing history. Powerful works of theory and epistemology in the past half century have made manifestly clear the insoluble complexity of problems of language, knowledge, memory, reality, presentation, and fact to allow complacency on that score. Yet this is all the more reason to wrestle unceasingly, each one of us, with meaning and value as we go about our work and, through the history we produce, to assist our readers, viewers, and listeners, our fellow citizens and fellow humans to understand their lives and the lives of others in historical terms.

Others would write a book with different emphases and contents about the nature and pursuit of history work in our time, and many will disagree with at least some of what I write and the convictions with which I write it. Others would also write a book that offered prescriptions for what should be done to ease history’s difficulties and to move the discipline smartly forward. I happily leave that task to them – or to another time. Instead, I have tried in the pages that follow to consider most of the situations in which I believe both fledgling and experienced practicing historians today are likely to find themselves in future years. Although, as this account ought to make abundantly clear, I regret that the world of history still contains many shortcomings, I also believe that it is much

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02159-4 - Being a Historian: An Introduction to the Professional World of History

James M. Banner

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

xviii

*Preface*

better poised than it was more than five decades ago, when I began to become a professional historian, to reduce their number. I hope that this book makes a contribution toward that end and that it may help bring into being new elements in the preparation of historians and broader, more frequent, and more intense discussions about the professional roads historians have yet to travel.

James M. Banner, Jr.  
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Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02159-4 - Being a Historian: An Introduction to the Professional World of History

James M. Banner

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Acknowledgments

Because this book grows from a half-century career, it owes itself to countless people, many no doubt beyond my own recall, who introduced me to the study of history; contributed to my historical and professional knowledge; made known to me their views of our discipline, its practitioners, institutions, and ways; and made me think clearly about what I was trying to achieve, whether that made sense to them or (as surely was often the case) it did not. In fact, I have accumulated debts that go back to a time before I had decided to become a historian – debts owed to teachers, some of them not historians, whom neither I nor they knew would serve later as examples to me. Were I to name them here, the roster of their names would be long, but I have paid tribute to the most important of them already elsewhere.

In preparing this book, I have taken on new debts to many people who have provided assistance along the way. Some read an entire draft of the book's manuscript before its publication; some took hold of single chapters and, shaking them hard, rid them of errors, imbalance, and infelicities; others gave me specific assistance on request. Among them, some of whom may not even recall the help they extended or were unaware that they were in fact giving me assistance, were the participants, especially Michael Kammen, in a jointly sponsored Salzburg Seminar–Smithsonian Institution conference on Public History and National Identity in Salzburg, Austria, in 1999; Otis L. Graham, Jr., friend of my college days, colleague for more than fifty years, and distinctive, as in so many other ways, in his understanding of public history; Victoria A. Harden, who, more than most historians, has thought deeply and to great effect about the ethical issues that confront historians but that too often they fail to confront;

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02159-4 - Being a Historian: An Introduction to the Professional World of History

James M. Banner

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xx

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The subject of this book being what it is, I dedicate it to my colleagues. Were love, spirit, laughter, and wisdom its subject, I would dedicate it to Phyllis Kramer.