

## I

## The Discipline and Professions of History

History is a single discipline practiced in many professions – in many places, in many ways, and through many means. Historians share the same discipline but not the same profession. In fact, they never have, unless an unwarrantedly limited definition of the term “discipline” is used. Throughout history’s American history, even some of the most illustrious and ostensibly “academic” of academic historians have ventured to practice history, however episodically, in other occupations. This fact, until recently omitted from the taught history of history, lies at the heart of almost everything that touches the organized practices of the discipline today – just as it characterized those same practices more than a century ago, before historical study had become a clearly demarcated subject of inquiry and instruction. A full history of the efflorescence of history into many professions, one that goes beyond the elementary distinction between academic and public history, is yet to be written or yet to be incorporated into the way we normally speak of history and prepare students for careers in it. What follows is a sketch of how that history might be told.

Before the emergence of recognizably modern professions in the nineteenth century, historical knowledge was deeply implicated in the learning and arguments of lawyers, doctors, and clerics whose learned callings and occupations would be the first to form themselves into professions. No less significantly, argumentation from history was the stock-in-trade of statesmen and politicians. But from the late nineteenth century on, when the norm that governed a career in service to history came increasingly to be the creation, transmission, and evaluation of historical learning by

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specially trained people working full time as historians on college and university faculties, professional history became roughly coterminous with academic history. Yet it is now becoming clear that, rather than being a terminal point in the history of the discipline of history, history's main residence in the academy, although a century long, ought to be considered provisional and, while still the center of gravity in a larger constellation of professional locations, only one among many places from which history has begun to reemerge into the larger society. The consequences of ignoring the implications of these historical facts – of thinking that the history of the discipline in the United States is solely a correlative of the history of research universities – haunt historians' bearing, work, and thought and make difficult their adaptation to rapidly changing professional realities.

The collapse of the terms “discipline” and “profession” into each other mirrors the realities of a passing era in which a professional historian could with some accuracy be assumed to be an academic. Although that is no longer the case, almost all scholarly works and professional commentaries about history still refer to the “history profession” or the “historical profession” as if there were a single one. In such instances, those who employ the term are alluding either to the academic profession in which the largest single group of historians continues to work or to the body of knowledge that composes the entire discipline of history. They have confused profession with discipline.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Two illustrative examples chosen at random: the subtitle of Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); and the comment, “It is difficult to discuss the historical profession, or American life, for very long nowadays without encountering references to ‘diversity’ – its history, current status, and future prospects,” in Eric Foner, “On Diversity in History,” *Perspectives* 38 (April 2000): 2. A more recent confusion of the terms is found in Barbara D. Metcalf, “Gender across the Generations,” *Perspectives on History* 47 (October 2010): 5–7. The confusion is especially consequential for public history. Yet the *Public Historian* now advertises itself appropriately as “the definitive voice of the public history profession.” A precise, and rare, use of the term “profession” in reference to the academic profession only is to be found throughout Anthony Grafton and Robert B. Townsend, “Historians’ Rocky Job Market,” *Chronicle Review*, July 11, 2008, B10–11. But see the title of Townsend, “A Profile of the History Profession, 2010,” *Perspectives in History* 48 (October 2010): 36–39, which concerns only academic historians. For another rare example of the use of the term “academic profession” that by implication distinguishes “profession” from “discipline,” see the fall 1997 issue of *Daedalus*, entitled “The American Academic Profession in Transition.” Burton R. Clark, wise student of academics and their world, denominates that world “the academic profession” without any suggestion that the term is problematic. See Clark (ed.), *The Academic Profession: National, Disciplinary, and Institutional Settings* (Berkeley:

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Were the distinction not central to understanding the state of history today, it might be passed over in silence, especially because, like so many concepts and terms, these two words are richly complex and because their definitions, especially that of profession, are widely contested. An effort at clarification is nevertheless warranted. A discipline is a domain of knowledge, a capacious province of inquiry (*science* in French, *Wissensgebiet* in German) with generally agreed-on, if not firm or impermeable, boundaries. It is a universe of thought, not, like a profession, an arena of action. As a field of intellectual endeavor, a discipline possesses distinctive, if neither unique nor unchanging, methods for pursuing its particular kind of knowledge and understanding, evaluating the evidence that creates that knowledge, and ascertaining the validity of assertions built on that evidence. Yet a discipline is constituted by much more than its subjects and methods. A particular broad subject matter and particular methods used to create it roughly mark off one discipline from others and create reasonably distinct domains of discourse. A particular institution, the university, becomes the normal, often idealized, location of preparation for pursuit of the discipline's subjects. A discipline is also a framework within which certain approaches are legitimated, certain kinds of language and argumentation accepted, certain outlets for the dissemination of knowledge favored, and certain kinds of standards of peer evaluation accepted as conventional – and within which others are not. A person occupies a place in that discipline by becoming immersed in its subject matter, its vocabulary, its methods, and its traditions. One joins a discipline but, unlike a profession, does not have to be admitted to it, and in this sense a historian is a historian by command of historical knowledge, not by skill in any particular activity.

Historians are defined as historians not by the kind or location of their work or by the audiences they address but rather by holding themselves out as people who seek to know what happened in the past and why

University of California Press, 1987); and Clark, *The Academic Life: Small Worlds, Different Worlds* (Princeton: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1987). Some argue that use of the term “profession” to denominate the lofty work of history reduces it from an intellectual enterprise to a means of livelihood. I see no merit in this argument. For a different approach to the matter, which calls for fuller exploration than it has yet received, see the brief discussion, which in part I provoked, in Thomas Bender et al., *The Education of Historians for the Twenty-First Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 4–5. For a superb history of the disaggregation of discipline into professions, see Robert B. Townsend, “Making History: Scholarship and Professionalization in the Discipline, 1880–1940” (Ph.D. dissertation, George Mason University, 2009).

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it did so and then to present that knowledge to others in the formats – whether articles, books, films, radio transmissions, Web sites, or museum exhibits – of their choice. Historical knowledge is the coinage of their authority. Thus people with little proven competence as researchers or teachers but great love and knowledge of history – amateur historians who dedicate their labors to uncovering and teaching about the past without professional training or even compensation for their work – are historians, even if not trained to be or serving as professional historians. They participate in the same community of thought, in the same parent discipline, as academic and public historians do. Because they dedicate their labors to the same ends, they are entitled to bear the title of historian.<sup>2</sup>

These amateurs are not, however, professional historians unless they are working as writers, teachers, or filmmakers of history. A profession – and here one enters a world of robust debate, extensive historical and sociological literature, and considerable disagreement – is like a discipline in that it constitutes a community of people; but that profession is a distinct kind of community, one composed of people who share the same occupation without necessarily being members of the same discipline. Thus one can pursue the profession of museum curator as historian, philosopher, paleographer, biologist, or linguist. A profession, as distinct from a discipline, is a field defined by endeavor, not by a body of thought; it concerns the direction and manner of use of a body of knowledge, not that body of knowledge itself. More than that, a profession is an occupation for which roughly uniform education in a body of knowledge and protocols of practice at a research university – sometimes said to be a “learned” education for a “learned” calling, such as the law, medicine, or teaching – is necessary. It is an occupation to which access is deeply influenced, if not totally controlled, by this training; and the training is itself constituted of generally accepted curricula and requirements at research universities (courses, oral and written examinations, and final rites of passage such as moot court debates and dissertations leading to doctoral degrees). In fact, a profession controls the training and admittance of its successor generations in its own image, and for that privilege – in return

<sup>2</sup> For a fuller discussion of public history, see Chapter 5. Some historians view history as both discipline and discourse, each distinct. It seems to me that efforts to make and maintain that distinction only muddy the matter and lead to endless tangles of language and philosophy. Be that as it may, this book is concerned with history as a discipline – an arena of thought, endeavor, and institution – not as a universe of theory, discourse, and philosophy.

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for performing certain social functions considered necessary – it receives sanction from the community. Moreover, the knowledge and skills of a profession’s members are ideally supposed to be employed altruistically, even when compensated, within a kind of compact with society, for which the professionals are granted by society the liberty to police themselves. An additional consequence of that liberty is that professionals are expected to adhere to the particular norms of their professions.

Increasingly, training as a historian and adherence to particular norms do not point to a single profession. Indeed, professional historians – people who make their living in the discipline of history – can today be and are academics, book publishers and editors, consultants, filmmakers, independent writers, or archivists, to name only a few endeavors in which historians serve as historians. Because there are many academic disciplines but only one academic profession, academic historians are professional historians, but professional historians are not all academics.<sup>3</sup> We can see the difference when we consider that, while the American Historical Association (AHA) admits all those who associate themselves with the discipline of history, academic faculties, like archives or museums, are more discriminating. One does not join a faculty by approaching its doors and paying a fee, as one does a scholarly or professional association; instead, an applicant to an academic faculty has to meet its entrance requirements. One is admitted to an academic history faculty by historian peers who, in evaluating applicants, are concerned as much with the quality of those applicants’ training, their promise as teachers and scholars, their collegiality, and even their ability or willingness to administer departments as with their command of knowledge.

A profession, as distinct from a discipline, also maintains, because it can maintain, different roles for members and nonmembers, for insiders and outsiders. Academic and public historians, for instance, are historians together, but each group has a distinct sense of its own professional identity and distinct professional values, also to some degree distinct professional languages. Therefore, one can be an archivist or an editor of

<sup>3</sup> I use the noun “academic” rather than “academician” to designate a member of a college or university faculty throughout this book because the former seems more appropriate in denoting someone who holds appointment at a college or university, whereas the latter, more European in connotation, implies someone who holds appointment in an academy – an institution generally without instructional functions. Also, contrary to conventional usage, I use the word “faculty” as a collective noun meaning the people who constitute the faculty of any school, college, or university and the term “faculty member” to refer to an individual member of such a faculty.

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scholarly books without being a member of a discipline, just as one can be a historian without holding membership in a profession. To speak of “the history profession” is to speak of no profession at all.<sup>4</sup>

To further complicate matters, none of these distinctions have anything to do with professional conduct or bearing. One can of course be consummately “professional” in any endeavor, not just a clearly professional one. People are “professional” carpenters and “professional” police officers without, strictly speaking, being members of a profession or working within a discipline. In this sense, professionalism has to do with competence, bearing, and ethics, not with occupation; and in this sense most historians are professionals. If, as Thomas L. Haskell writes, professionalization must be understood “to be a measure not of quality, but of community,” then the universe in which all historians reside is their discipline, and they practice this discipline within distinct professional communities, each with its own collective activities and traditions, as academics, museum curators, consultants, and the like. What links these historians is that they share intellectual bonds and commitments within the same community of thought and are historians by virtue of that fact.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The difficulties of defining a profession are legion. A concise and cautionary review of them is to be found in Lawrence Veysey, “The Plural Organized Worlds of the Humanities,” in Alexandra Oleson and John Voss (eds.), *The Organization of Knowledge in Modern America, 1860–1920* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 31–106, esp. 57–62. Veysey here points to the problems inherent in trying to make fast distinctions between professions and other kinds of occupational work, not between professions and disciplines. A brief, solid introduction to a large sociological literature on professions is Howard S. Becker, “The Nature of a Profession,” in Nelson B. Henry (ed.), *Education for the Professions* (Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education, 1962), 27–46, and an introduction to some of the problems of the concept is Harold Wilensky, “The Professionalization of Everyone,” *American Journal of Sociology* 70 (1964): 137–158. Historical works on specific professions, works that confront many of the difficulties with the concept, include Daniel H. Calhoun, *The American Civil Engineer: Origins and Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); Anton-Hermann Chroust, *The Rise of the Legal Profession in America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965); Mary O. Furner, *Advocacy and Objectivity: A Crisis in the Professionalization of American Social Science, 1865–1905* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1975); Thomas L. Haskell, *The Emergence of Professional Social Science: The American Social Science Association and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Authority* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977); Joseph F. Kett, *The Formation of the American Medical Profession: The Role of Institutions, 1780–1860* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968); and Raymond H. Merritt, *Engineering in American Society, 1850–1875* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1969).

<sup>5</sup> Haskell, *Emergence of Professional Social Science*, 18.

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Any useful history of history – any history that is to be an applicable, as well as an accurate, guide for historians – must take into account the long process by which history became a discipline and then one practiced, as it is now and long has been, in many professions. And that history must today reckon with the rust of past decades, which obscures the underlying record on which a contemporary, relevant, and serviceable history, one that better guides us than the one that has long been told, must be based. While that history must start from a time beyond accurate knowledge, when history was oral chronicle, history of a kind more familiar to us – a means of securely recording and formally trying to understand the results of human agency in the past free from myth and fiction – originated in the era of Herodotus and Thucydides. But as a discipline – a distinct branch of knowledge possessing an agreed-on general subject matter, particular methods of inquiry and presentation, and specific canons of evaluation – history’s beginnings belong to the nineteenth century. A few people – David Hume, William Robertson, and Edward Gibbon chief among them – were pursuing historical inquiry in a manner recognizably like our own, with its now established practices of empirical research in original materials and of argument based on cited sources, before 1800. But it was not until the early nineteenth century, principally although not exclusively in Germany, that those who wrote history began to develop the self-conscious methods and standards by which history would gradually distinguish itself from other intellectual pursuits as a separate domain of inquiry, one possessing its own more or less clearly defined range of questions and the conventions of competence that mark off its practitioners as composing a discrete community distinct from other intellectuals and professionals. And it was not until the late nineteenth century that the discipline, having gained its general intellectual and methodological definition, took up enduring residence in the academy.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Probably the best general histories of historical thought are now Donald R. Kelley’s three volumes: *Faces of History: Historical Inquiry from Herodotus to Herder* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), *Fortunes of History: Historical Thought from Herder to Huizinga* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), and the capstone *Frontiers of History: Historical Inquiry in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). Kelley’s approach is a rejoinder to Hayden V. White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). Two other general surveys of historiography, each distinctively different from the other, are Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval and Modern*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), and John Burrow, *A History of Histories: Epics, Chronicles and Inquiries from Herodotus and Thucydides to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008). A corrective to the hard-held view that post-Enlightenment historiographical thought was born in

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Until the final third of that century in the United States, historical study and reflection were part of the larger world of humane letters, including literature, philology, theology, philosophy, and political economy. Pursued by patrician Anglo-American men and women of independent means (themselves following the colonial founders of American historiography), often taught at American colleges and universities by those who came by their knowledge informally, and commonly presented within a nationalistic and religious framework, historical knowledge in the United States long remained bound to its origins in moral and political philosophy and the classics. As such, it was offered as a set of lessons, either gratifying or cautionary, about human affairs and the advance of civilization over barbarism and irreligion.

It was the German historian Leopold von Ranke and his successors who, with avowed purpose, liberated history from philosophy and theology and firmly bound it to the dispassionate, empirical study of documents and other evidence. They did so by yoking historical study to the emergence of nation-states and by lowering history from the celestial realms of universality to the more confined ground of particular times and places. What most distinguished humans from one another, these historians believed, was their distinct national cultures, each forged out of *Volkswanderungen*, politics, and wars – subjects that, befitting the nineteenth century's romantic nationalism, became the grand themes of that century's historiography. With that historiography every history produced since then has had to come to terms either by accepting its fundamental grounds or by endeavoring to escape from them. Our own time constitutes the era in which history has broken farthest away from the nationalistic and patriotic soil in which its nineteenth-century founders set its roots, and the consequences of that escape constitute what is arguably the most profound challenge facing historical understanding since its emergence 2,500 years ago.<sup>7</sup>

Germany and nurtured only by academics is Jonathan Dewald, “‘A la Table de Magny’: Nineteenth-Century French Men of Letters and Sources of Modern Historical Thought,” *American Historical Review* 108 (October 2003): 1009–1033.

<sup>7</sup> The most powerful statement of this challenge is now Thomas Bender, *A Nation Among Nations: America's Place in World History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006). An earlier statement of Bender's position, plus other reflections on the entire range of intellectual challenges posed by the effort to transcend national historiographies, is to be found in the essays in Thomas Bender (ed.), *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). While both books' subject is ostensibly the history of the United States, their contents and implications actually extend far more widely. A summary of the role of the historical imagination in forming a sense of the American

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In addition to setting the agenda for historical research and practice for a century, Ranke and his successors, spurred by the emergence of the modern physical and natural sciences, adopted an Enlightenment ideal of scientific, objective history arrived at through the application of evidence-based reasoning. Our current debates about the very nature of historical knowledge, debates more fundamental, widespread, and consequential than at any other time in the discipline's history since Ranke's era, are inconceivable without their emergence from the particulars of nineteenth-century national and cultural history and that history's claims to objectivity. Nineteenth-century historians bequeathed to every succeeding generation until our own the conviction that it was possible to approach, if not fully to achieve, full and agreed-on knowledge of every human act, creation, institution, and idea about which evidence remained. While the incompleteness of that evidence and limitations on human intelligence might put boundaries around historical understanding, these historians believed that some asymptotic proximity to knowledge of what had actually happened might be gained and a kind of detached, unbiased understanding achieved.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, and by no means any less significant than creating historical study as a separate discipline and binding it to norms of objectivity, the early professional historians of Germany made historical work a vocation. By establishing the standards and process by which historians would be trained and by creating the recognized, compensated occupation of "historian," however the definition of that occupation might change, they enabled future historians to chart their paths of professional work. Whether for those summoned by some mysterious inclination to history as a calling or for those with a more purely intellectual, even careerist interest in study of the past, the founders of vocational history made possible the pursuit of lifelong careers within the discipline.

nation is Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), chap. 3.

<sup>8</sup> The classic work on the history of the objectivity ideal in American historiography is Novick, *That Noble Dream*. Cf. E. H. Carr's characteristically witty comments on Ranke and his epigone in his enduring *What Is History?* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), 5, in which Carr calls Ranke's celebrated statement that historians should present the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen* "not very profound" and writes that "three generations of German, British, and even French historians marched into battle intoning the magic words, '*wie es eigentlich gewesen*' like an incantation – designed, like most incantations, to save them from the tiresome obligation to think for themselves."

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The transition from history produced by gentlemanly amateurs (the adjective being appropriate because men greatly outnumbered women among them) to that produced by academic historians, from historical study undertaken for the edification of readers and the creation of national states to history directed to the discovery and understanding of what actually took place in the past, required decades to accomplish and has never been fully completed.<sup>9</sup> In the United States as elsewhere, islands of creative amateurism – of history produced by men and women without formal graduate training who support themselves by writing, not actively teaching, history – have always remained to offer inspiration and reassurance to those who do not choose to become academic or other salaried historians. History with a philosophical, teleological, inspirational, and admonitory bent has continued to attract audiences, even though historians, some of whom used to think of themselves as moral philosophers, have now ceded much of that role to novelists, poets, and dramatists. And the status of no single historian, whether a university professor or a journalist undertaking historical research and writing, is left uncontested by people who challenge that historian's values, intentions, and competence. Yet by the early decades of the twentieth century, academic history

<sup>9</sup> The story of the capture of historiography by men, how the possibility of feminine historiography was dashed in the revolutionary era of the late eighteenth century, and how the professionalization of history in the nineteenth century was carried out on thoroughly masculine ground, see Bonnie G. Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). Smith shows how white-male-dominated historiography linked itself to the nation-state and its central attributes – government, institutions, war, and politics – while female historiography was left with biography, travel, and culture and made to seem amateur thereby. A related study is Julie Des Jardins, *Women and the Historical Enterprise in America: Gender, Race, and the Politics of Memory, 1880–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), whose value lies in its excavation of the careers and struggles of particular women historians, many of whose works and contributions have been lost to the central narrative of the history of history in the United States. Also apposite is Ellen Fitzpatrick, *History's Memory: Writing America's Past, 1880–1980* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), which regains much of the American historiographical past and shows how a good proportion of what was taken to be new history starting in the 1960s was rooted in many older histories, whose authors are forgotten at our peril. Her chapter on the historiography of Native Americans is alone a revelation. A large gap in these studies is filled by Stephen G. Hall's *A Faithful Account of the Race: African-American Historical Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). Hall exhumes the works of amateur as well as serious intellectual and professional African American historians all but forgotten now in the shadows of W. E. B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson and reveals how they, like long-overlooked women and Native American scholars and writers, greatly enriched the nation's historical understanding of itself.