

# IN THE PAST LANE

**HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON AMERICAN CULTURE**



**M I C H A E L      K A M M E N**

IN THE  
PAST  
LANE

ALSO BY MICHAEL KAMMEN

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# IN THE PAST LANE

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MICHAEL KAMMEN

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For  
Bamidele Fayemi Kammen  
and  
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and  
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Volumes and vectors . . . angles and directions  
*Alexander Calder*



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# Introduction

**D**uring the past decade readers and writers of history have been intrigued, to an unprecedented degree, by three large and perplexing issues. One involves the nature of historians' personal commitments or concerns, and consequently the possible limits of their objectivity in reconstructing and understanding the past, especially in the realm of motives, beliefs, and modes of behavior.<sup>1</sup>

A second problematic issue has engaged legislators and policy makers at several levels along with people who manage cultural institutions and those who mobilize perceptions of the past for commercial or political purposes: What is the appropriate role of cultural programs in the civic sector and the relative responsibility of government, if any, to support or enhance cultural agendas and activities for the public?

A third problematic issue has generated an extraordinary range of publications during the 1990s. It concerns the nature and functions of collective (or social) memory in American life, particularly given the traditional propensity of this society for being present-minded and having an unreliable attention span—indeed, having a clear penchant for reconfiguring the past in order to make it comfortably congruent with contemporary needs and assumptions.<sup>2</sup>

The essays that constitute this volume address such issues from a perspective shaped by more than three decades of writing, teaching, and especially serving on the advisory boards of various history-oriented museums and organizations. The focus and emphases of my tripartite schematization in this book correspond directly to the three major issues outlined above. This is a work about the historian's vocation, about history and culture in American public life, and about changing perceptions of the past in the United States over a significant span of generations.

Such issues cannot be fully comprehended in a vacuum. Not only does

their meaning involve contextual interdependence, it also requires comparison with the same matters when they are manifest in other societies. In addition to making such comparisons where it seems appropriate and whenever comparable information is available, Chapter 7 is entirely devoted to what I call the “problem of American exceptionalism.” In my view that phrase does not mean superiority. It can and has implied, in a word, difference; but, above all, it has meant the *perception* that American culture is different, a perception long shared by residents of the United States and by foreigners alike—yet a perception that has been challenged and become controversial in the past fifteen years or so.

These essays have four interconnected themes. The first, exemplified in Part I, is that the history we read can best be understood if we have intimate knowledge of the people who wrote it. I am engaged by an observation made by Erik H. Erikson in the 1960s: “Everything that is new and worth saying (or worth saying in a new way) has a highly personal aspect. The question is only whether it is also generally significant for one’s contemporaries.”<sup>3</sup>

The second theme arises from my strong belief that historiography (knowledge of historical inquiry, broadly conceived) supplies important signs and clues that can enhance our understanding of culture generally. Because most of the chapters that follow are concerned with culture in one way or another, I feel an obligation to provide a definitional context—especially since E. P. Thompson warned not long before he died that “culture” was in danger of becoming a historical “catch-all.” It is amusing to look back a century to someone like Charles W. Eliot, the president of Harvard (trained as a chemist), who regarded culture as marginally useful. He designated all courses lacking practical utility as “culture courses.”<sup>4</sup>

For two decades now, historians of American culture have been reasonably careful in defining their subject. In essence, their common denominator declares that cultural history deals with human values, customs, practices, and their meaning understood in concrete historical contexts.<sup>5</sup> Raymond Williams shrewdly explained that during the nineteenth century the concept of culture came to be identified with high culture because of a desire by elites to separate certain moral and intellectual activities from society as a whole that was rapidly industrializing and (seemingly) becoming vulgar. As a socialist Williams insisted upon his own view that “culture is ordinary,” by which he meant that its qualities were inclusive—aspects of everyday life that belonged to no one in particular because they were a common possession, a shared though shifting heritage.<sup>6</sup>

Ralph Waldo Emerson partially anticipated Williams in his famous “American Scholar” essay (1837) where he referred to a revolutionary

process, “the gradual domestication of the idea of Culture.” For purposes of the work gathered in this volume, which deals with public as well as personal manifestations of the past, I am especially obliged to various historians and anthropologists who acknowledge that cultural history can be persuasive, even compelling, despite its inability to be scientific or precise. As one practitioner has put it, the cultural historian must ultimately rely on “the gift of seeing a quantity of fine points in a given relation without ever being able to demonstrate it.”<sup>7</sup>

Because quite a few of my essays concern recent trends and configurations, it may be helpful to differentiate between our contemporary, living culture, which cannot be perceived in its entirety because it is in process, and the historically cultural settings that also oblige us to perceive them selectively since all facts, tendencies, and patterns of meaning are not equally consequential. Because Americans are a heterogeneous people, moreover, we have a shared historical past that is political and constitutional at its core; yet we also have diverse particular pasts that tend to be ethnic, religious, and racial—in essence, cultural. Hence the continuing relevance of a remark made decades ago in a classic essay by Johan Huizinga:

Cultural history has for the moment more than enough to do in determining the specific forms of historical life. Its task is to determine a morphology of the particular, before it can make bold to consider the general. There is time enough for description of whole cultures around one central concept. Let us for the time being be pluralists above all.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, a number of these essays do, indeed, assume that a distinctive culture has developed historically in the United States, just as distinctive cultures have developed elsewhere. Some observers are disposed to skepticism on that score, for assorted reasons and because of certain universalizing predilections that are now fashionable. I can only say in response that foreign visitors have been noticing our distinctive configuration for generations if not for centuries. Ruth Benedict, an astute American anthropologist, never doubted that particular constellations of ideas and values gave a people a sense of sharing a culture and being different from those of other nations and societies. John King Fairbank, an American who devoted a lifetime to studying China and the Chinese, offered this assertion in 1971: “just as man is a creature of habit, so nations are creatures of history. One way to foresee their future conduct is to look at how they have behaved in the past.”<sup>9</sup>

Readers will find that the third interconnecting theme in this volume, attention to collective memory (especially in Chapters 4–6, 8, and 9) emphasizes selective memory, distorted memories, and even amnesia.<sup>10</sup> The

reasons why recollections are refracted or distorted have often been political and self-serving or else social and self-perpetuating in terms of cultural dominance. I have been especially concerned in recent years to explain a major cultural paradox: historical amnesia amidst so much apparent interest in the past displayed at museums, historic sites, and thematic historical places. These are not necessarily aberrations and they are significant even when they become national embarrassments. As William Faulkner once remarked, “we shall be judged by the splendor of our failures.”

Because I use the phrase “collective memory” with some frequency, especially in Part III, a brief clarification of my meaning may be helpful here. I have in mind what might be called the publicly presented past: in speeches and sermons, editorials and school textbooks, museum exhibitions, historic sites, and widely noticed historical art, ranging from oil paintings to public sculpture and commemorative monuments.

Needless to say, collective memory is not merely fallible; it is also divisible. The more recent the memories, the more likely they are to become controversial when a provocation arises. Witness the contretemps over the Enola Gay exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution in 1994–95. A person who works in the past lane but lives in the present is well advised to recall two sentences from Finley Peter Dunne’s *Mr. Dooley*: “Th’ further ye get away fr’ m anny peeryod th’ betther ye can write about it. Ye are not subject to interruptions be people that were there.”

Readers will find a fair amount of attention to iconography here, the fourth connecting theme, mainly historical art along with symbols placed on public buildings (Chapters 3 and 6). This represents a steadily growing engagement on my part for almost two decades now—one that will be even more evident in the years immediately ahead. I first began to “cultivate” an enthusiasm for art while in college. It then remained dormant for a considerable period of time; yet consistent with the beliefs of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, my love of museums has not just been a purely aesthetic or instinctive experience. Rather, it has long since become a “trained pleasure,” an “achieved aesthetic” that developed from a lengthy apprenticeship as a cultural historian.<sup>11</sup>

I am also tempted to say that readers will find in these pages varied approaches to the history of culture in the United States. More than half a century ago, however, Jacques Barzun casually mentioned in a brief essay that he had just read a half-baked report on “approaches to history.” That prompted a chortling query from Charles Beard. “I am wondering whether you could let me know who is working on ‘approaches to history’? I hope that it is some person who has studied a little history and tried to write a little also. I especially loved that blessed word ‘approach.’ Conceivably one

could approach from any direction and on horse, on foot, or by plane!"<sup>12</sup>

The fact remains, though, that people who write about the past really do utilize numerous and varied approaches, not to mention having diverse intellectual dispositions. Although these essays offer many assertions and opinions, this is not a polemical book, not what the French would designate as a *livre à thèse*. I am fond of E. P. Thompson's maxim that "spleen is not a particularly effective cutting instrument," and I cherish the response to argumentation of Nathaniel Ward, a New England Puritan who was the very first public humorist in British North America. Writing as the "Simple Cobbler of Aggawam," Ward found it

a most toylesome task to run the wild-goose chase after a well-breath'd Opinionist: they delight in vitiligation: it is an itch that loves a life to be scrub'd: they desire not satisfaction, whereof themselves must be judges: yet in new eruptions of error with new objections, silence is sinful.

Several of the pieces that follow started out as oral presentations. All of them have been reworked into a form better suited to the eye than the ear, though I have not attempted to conceal the personal tone that some of them convey. The rationale for doing so will become evident in Chapter 1 (previously unpublished). Because each essay is of such recent vintage, there has not yet been time for new literature to emerge. So they are not yet dated, merely (in the case of some assertions, perhaps) unproved.

Certain kinds of ideas resist being readily tested or proved. As Henry Adams quipped in his *Education*: "the theory offered difficulties in measurement." I do not have many theories, actually, and even fewer measurements. My professional life has mainly been spent in the past lane. Where I have ventured an occasional prediction, or speculated about what lies ahead, only time will tell whether I hit the target. But I find solace in a sentence written by Thomas Reed Powell, a witty and wise constitutional lawyer from Harvard via Vermont. He said the following about Charles A. Beard in a book review: "Quite obviously Beard is not so well informed about the future as about the past. This will disappoint those whose assurances run along different chronological lines."<sup>13</sup> That's not a bad epitaph for those of us who have lived in the past lane.



In 1928 two artisans were asked to repair the official yet well-used president's chair at Cornell University. In the small circular space behind a medallion displaying the carved bust of Ezra Cornell (located at the top of the chair, on the back), they discovered a closely folded slip of paper

wrapped in tin-foil and tied with coarse thread. Translated from German, a single didactic sentence, written in script in 1868 when Cornell opened its doors to students, declared: "Go out into all the world and testify to what is born, even in prison walls, from strength, from patience, and from loving toil." The chair had been built on commission in a Prussian jail.

The writing of history has often come from the combined circumstances of confinement, patience, and compulsive affection for the historian's vocation. The most extreme cases are certainly memorable. Sir Walter Raleigh wrote his *History of the World* while confined for twelve years to a small room in the Tower of London. Napoleon wrote an *Outline of the Wars of Caesar* while a prisoner at St. Helena. William Smith, Jr., the last Chief Justice of colonial New York, completed volume two of his *History of the Province of New-York* while under house arrest in West Haverstraw (on the Hudson) during the American Revolution.<sup>14</sup>

During World War I the great Belgian historian Henri Pirenne was interned by the Germans at two successive prison camps. He passed the time by composing, entirely from memory, a stylish gem, his *Histoire de l'Europe des invasions au XVI siècle*, published posthumously in 1936. Lucien Febvre, cofounder of the Annales school in France, wrote his study of Rabelais while confined by the Nazis to his country house in 1942-44. Fernand Braudel, incarcerated by the Germans for four years during World War II, used his "enforced leisure" to compose (without access to notes) his masterpiece, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1949). As Braudel recalled many years later, "it was in captivity that I wrote that enormous work, sending school copy book after school copy book to Lucien Febvre [his mentor]. Only my memory permitted this tour de force. Had it not been for my imprisonment, I would surely have written quite a different book."<sup>15</sup>

Historical projects composed under such vexed and inauspicious circumstances are virtually unknown in the United States. It might seem a stretch to suggest that my own pursuit of the past has meant a life of self-incarceration. The extraordinary freedom that I have enjoyed to pursue my own interests, however, has had its hostage-like obverse: the confining nonfreedom created by an enduring compulsion to compose historical essays about the American past. I recognize full well that I have shared that compulsion with many of my contemporaries.<sup>16</sup>

What truly separates us from those prisoners of the past cited above is that we enjoy remarkable networks of institutional and collegial support. Informational aids and modes of information retrieval have been revolutionized as our professional careers have occurred. Support from cultural foundations and from the government has increased dramatically since

1965. So, too, has public interest in the past despite our growing recognition of occasional public misperceptions and even ignorance of the past. As I try to suggest in Part I of this book, a period of enhanced professional freedom has been accompanied by an increase in personal candor about the historian's values in relation to the historian's vocation. Explanations of the American past have been presented to the public during the past generation accompanied by refreshingly candid assumptions about normative connections between the historian's commitments and the historian's craft.

Connections and commitments inevitably involve assistance, indeed patient support from friends and foundations. I am glad to acknowledge the debts that have been incurred in the process of producing these explorations.

I wish to express particular appreciation to colleagues who gave me constructive responses to chapter one: W. W. Abbot, David Brion Davis, Mary Maples Dunn, Jane Garrett, John Higham, James A. Hijiya, Linda K. Kerber, Walter LaFeber, and Paul K. Longmore. For the opportunity to write most of it under idyllic circumstances during the summer of 1995, I am indebted to the Rockefeller Foundation for a four-week "residency" at the Villa Serbelloni in Bellagio. Arthur Cameron Smith, then a Cornell undergraduate, helped me with research that summer.

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Michael A. Bellesiles of Emory University made a concerted effort to obtain for me the photograph of the Henry Grady statue in Atlanta, *History and Memory*; Paul S. Boyer and Stanley I. Kutler the photograph of Merle Curti; and Emmet Larkin the picture of Bessie Louise Pierce.

Jennifer DeMass, Jackie Hubble, and Yvonne Sims patiently prepared these essays for publication, often seeing more revisions than they wanted or needed to tolerate.

Sheldon Meyer at Oxford has once again been a wise, supportive, and generous senior editor. I am fortunate indeed to have had his counsel on this project prior to his retirement at the close of 1996. His assistant, Brandon Trissler, was always ready to help with matters of detail. Stephanie Sakson



edited the manuscript with meticulous care. Helen B. Mules expedited the process of production at Oxford with her customary grace and good cheer.

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Carol Kammen read each of these essays when it first emerged and provided candid, constructive suggestions. She also listened to several of them when they had their oral genesis. And she has graced a partnership, enriched by our mutual enthusiasm for life in the past lane, that began almost forty years ago. It has been a blessed partnership for me—a shared life in which the past has always been a vital and meaningful presence. This book is dedicated with love to three junior partners who joined us along the way.

*Above Cayuga's Waters*  
*January 1997*

M. K.



# PART I

## The Personal and the Professional

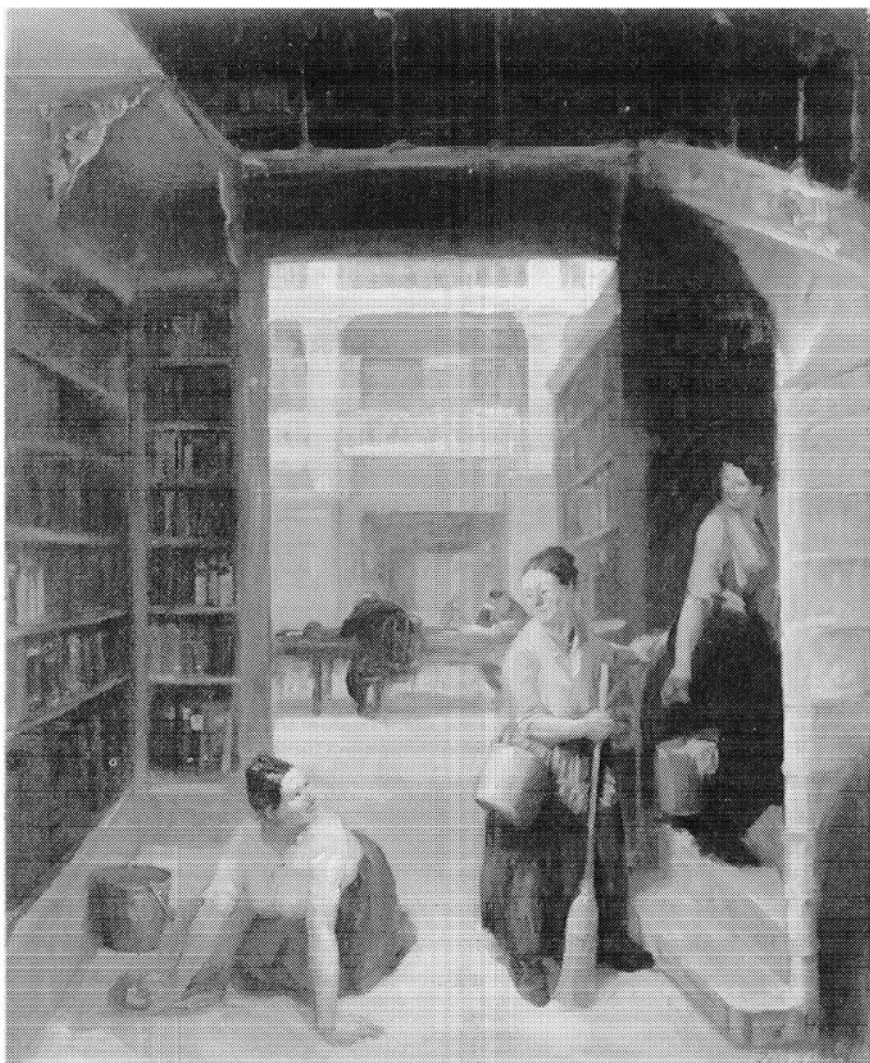


Fig. 1.1 John Sloan (1871–1951), *Scrubwomen, Astor Library* (ca. 1910–11). Courtesy of the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica, New York.

# 1

## Personal Identity and the Historian's Vocation

### The Personal and the Professional: A Generational Approach

Perhaps I personify a curious paradox. Many years ago I developed a strong admiration for such distinguished historians as Carl Becker and Johan Huizinga, and noticed that, among other qualities, they were notable for their intellectual detachment. Yet for decades now I have also been a fascinated reader of historians' biographies and autobiographies, their correspondence, interviews conducted with them, and lengthy necrologies. Consequently I feel something more than empathy with an observation made by one senior historian (who has written an autobiography) and is quoted approvingly by another, C. Vann Woodward, in his semiautobiographical essay. "Unless there is some emotional tie," H. Stuart Hughes declared, "some elective affinity linking the student to his subject, the results will be pedantic and perfunctory."<sup>1</sup>

That sentiment might appear, at least on the surface, to be somewhat at odds with the professional goal of detachment. Could it be that the mind and heart of this historian are not entirely in sync, that my vocational

practice does not coincide with my avocational pleasure? While seeking detachment in my own work without self-conscious effort, I have nonetheless wanted to know what makes other historians tick. I have assumed that in order to find answers one had to learn something about their subjective selves as three-dimensional people. I have never doubted that behind each historical text there is a flesh and blood person replete with “attitudes” waiting to be discovered. I feel somewhat reassured, therefore, by a recent pulsing of interest in notions of the “self” shown by historians of culture and literature, along with scholars in psychology and other disciplines.<sup>2</sup>

In the introduction to *That Noble Dream*, historian Peter Novick observed that “except with very good friends, it is considered tactless and discourteous to suggest that someone’s views are a reflection of his or her background, prejudices, or psychic needs.”<sup>3</sup> I do not wish to be either tactless or discourteous, but it seems to me that the key question is not whether personal concerns affect the historian’s vocation. Of course they do, although in diverse ways and to varying degrees. The critical issue, in my view, is whether they are sufficiently important to warrant our close attention, and whether there are significant patterns that tell us something about the nature of history as a discipline and its intellectual dynamics.

My project here, consequently, is to pursue what one observer has referred to as “the reciprocity between the personal and the professional.” When Pablo Picasso painted his portraits of weeping women in 1937–38, he linked the personal with the political. He was working on the *Guernica* at the time, his anguished response to brutal bombing in the Basque country by pro-Franco forces. But in the pictures of weeping women Picasso was also recording his intimate relationship with Dora Maar and *her* anguish at the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia. Consequently the personal, the political, and the professional became intertwined, a dominant motif in Picasso’s art during a pivotal phase of its development. I wholeheartedly accept the feminist insistence that “the personal is political,” and I agree that that perspective has helped to redefine the “private” as a realm of experience that should, in certain instances, at least, be subject to public inquiry.<sup>4</sup>

I do not for a minute deny that some historians have been exceedingly private—seemingly programmed, like Charles and Mary Beard, to destroy their papers so that subsequent snoops like myself would not be able to make such connections. The Beards, however, were rather extreme in their dogged determination to distance their professional work from their personal lives.<sup>5</sup>

Somewhat more representative, perhaps, is the response that David M. Potter made when he was invited to contribute an essay concerning professional autobiography to a fascinating collection of such essays that

appeared in 1970 under the title *The Historian's Workshop*. Potter declined the invitation with this explanation: "I think my writing, like my metabolism, is something which I do not understand anyway, and I will make you the discouraging prediction that you will find this true of a number of contributors."<sup>6</sup>

The life of cultural historian Vernon L. Parrington is instructive for my purposes because he underwent a change that, ultimately, led him to anticipate a perspective I find more common in the quarter-century since 1970 than in the five decades preceding that time. According to Parrington's biographer, he initially sought to maintain a sharp separation between his private and his professional life. After he had been to Europe in 1903–04, however, a "consolidation of identity" occurred. In 1918 Parrington wrote an "Autobiographical Sketch," partially to explain and partially to assist the process of clarifying as well as consolidating his identity. He remarked at the time on the way historians do more than just inscribe themselves in their work. "We read the present into the past," he declared, "we guess at the lost facts, we seek to restore lifelikeness to the dimmed features; and we end by painting our own portrait."<sup>7</sup>

I have encountered endless actualizations of that theme. When Fawn Brodie agonized over her deeply skeptical biography of Joseph Smith, historian Dale Morgan, a remarkable man who served as advisor and alter ego to several Mormon historians—lapsed as well as faithful—explained why Brodie (a niece of David O. McKay, one-time president of the Church of Latter-day Saints) felt compelled to undertake such a controversial project: "the desire to interpret her own origins to herself."<sup>8</sup>

Wilbur R. Jacobs, who became a historian of the American West and of Indian–white relations, was born in Chicago but drove west with his family to California where he attended Pasadena schools and received his training at UCLA. Jacobs has acknowledged that his view of Western history is based upon "what has been called the development of 'self' in a lifetime of research and writing." Similarly, in a recent interview John Demos declared that his "personal experience, which clearly involved both family history and American history, has come together in some of my recent work." His advice to younger scholars? "Don't be afraid to use yourself as you study history."<sup>9</sup>

Now, at a fairly fundamental yet simplistic level, it is fair to say that historians—or at least some historians—have long acknowledged that link between the circumstances of personal identity and the nature of their professional vocation. Here is a representative extract from a letter left by the popular writer Bruce Catton in 1968:

About my early interest in the Civil War . . . I grew up amidst a regular flowerbed of Civil War veterans. In the small town that I infested as a lad [Benzonia, Michigan] I used to hear the old gentlemen tell war stories until I felt as if the whole affair had taken place in the next county just a few years ago. I remember especially, and maybe this is where the parade thing comes in, on Memorial Day when I was small there'd always be a meeting in the town hall, with the G A R veterans on the platform, with songs and speeches: then everyone would troop out to the village cemetery, to lay lilacs on the graves of the departed veterans. . . . I mention the whole business just to indicate how pervasive the Civil War thing was, in a small town 50 or 60 years ago.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly Robert G. Athearn, an influential historian of the intermountain West, published an autobiographical essay that made it seem virtually inevitable that he would one day become a historian of the United States beyond the 100th meridian. Athearn grew up near the engaging artist Charlie Russell and knew him: "the fact that he told stories of an earlier West with his brush left an impression."<sup>11</sup>

Thus far I have drawn illustrations from historians representing an array of sub-disciplines and originating in diverse regions of the United States. Moreover, I have not yet made crisp chronological distinctions. We have, therefore, in a sense, telescoped three generations, from Parrington and the Beards to John Demos, without qualification. We now must differentiate, however, for as Martin Duberman noted in 1969, "the way I have come to regard history as a profession is due at least as much . . . to my personal history as to my shared membership in a particular generation."<sup>12</sup>

I shall use Duberman, John D'Emilio, and Christopher Lasch to illuminate generational differences along two distinct lines. The first concerns motives and assumptions underlying the decision to become a historian. In two separate interviews conducted during the year before he died, Christopher Lasch (1932–94) remembered his apolitical life as a graduate student at Columbia during the 1950s. He recalled having no conversations with anyone about politics or international affairs. The history department that Lasch described was "very professionalized and all we ever really talked about was history, without much sense of its application to the present. . . . I was too busy with my studies to pay much attention to politics. . . . We were too preoccupied with the ordeal of the orals." Contrast those comments with the experience of John D'Emilio, also a Columbia Ph.D., also a student of William E. Leuchtenburg, but one passionately committed to history as an Archimedean lever. "I started graduate school in 1971," D'Emilio writes, "not to enter a profession, but to change the world." Developing the new subfield of gay history, he adds, appeared "inherently political."<sup>13</sup>

A second striking contrast involves the paths that brought Duberman and D'Emilio to the history of sexuality as a scholarly endeavor. Combining several autobiographical memoirs and interviews that Duberman has given, it becomes clear that his first major projects, biographies of Charles Francis Adams and James Russell Lowell, may have been remote from his private life as a closeted gay man, but they led him rather gradually and tentatively to a historical topic that really mattered to him: the antislavery movement and the history of racism in the United States. Only with the benefit of hindsight in 1991 could Duberman see that his interest in Lowell's opposition to slavery was "serving as a channel (not a substitute) for working my way into an awareness of my own oppression."<sup>14</sup>

Although D'Emilio initially felt that both he and gay history were professionally marginalized, he acknowledges that work on gay or lesbian topics is commonly treated as a de facto statement of identity. Despite the reality that Duberman and D'Emilio each passed through periods of disillusionment with the historical profession, in D'Emilio's case his sexual and vocational identities have always been fused, whereas Duberman endured decades of intensely difficult bifurcation. Duberman's history of Black Mountain, a personalized book in which he first "came out" publicly, was not very well received in 1972. D'Emilio's work, in contrast, has not been subjected to that kind of hostility, and the changing circumstances during the intervening years are highly instructive.<sup>15</sup>

Despite criticisms that were provoked by the overtly subjective aspects of Duberman's *Black Mountain*, and perhaps even because of them, during the last twenty years we have witnessed a dramatic transformation in what is regarded as acceptable or even, perhaps, as desirable. In 1975 when Henry F. May wrote the introduction to his innovative work on *The Enlightenment in America*, he concluded with these words of disclosure:

One thing that has been forced on university teachers by their students in recent years is that they abandon the comforting pose of academic impartiality and declare their allegiances, even—contrary to all their training—admit their emotions. I am glad to try to do this, but in relation to this topic I find it simply impossible to escape a congenital ambivalence. . . . My sympathies are with those who are not sure that they understand themselves and the universe rather than with those who make hard things easy.<sup>16</sup>

The resonance of such candor, more commonly heard during the 1980s, has become a powerful cadenza in the '90s. "One of the things I'm trying to do in my writing now," Joan Jensen remarked in a 1994 interview, "is to talk more about myself, because it's important for historians and other scholars to let people know how their background might influence what they



write.”<sup>17</sup> I am astonished at the array of books by respected historians, published during the past decade, that begin with substantial (and sometimes deeply personal) autobiographical introductions. I find them utterly fascinating, and the roll call includes William Cronon, Anne Firor Scott, Christopher Lasch, August Meier, William M. Tuttle, Jr., Sacvan Bercovitch, Patrick H. Hutton, and Michael Zuckerman.<sup>18</sup> This simply was not done 25 or 30 years ago, and we can gauge the transformation in many ways.

Let's start with subjectivity. In 1933 when Charles A. Beard sought to explain to the American Historical Association that the historian's vocation was inevitably subjective—a belief that Mary Beard had already articulated two years earlier—his point was not very well received. Ten years later when Dixon Ryan Fox (formerly professor of American History at Columbia and then president of Union College) told Julian P. Boyd that “history more or less inevitably is subjective,” he did so reluctantly and with a sense of disquiet. By 1970, however, the psychohistorian Robert Jay Lifton could speak positively of his field as “disciplined subjectivity [which] involves an ever expanding use of the self as one's research instrument.” There were latter-day dissenters, to be sure, such as Jacques Barzun, but Lifton's comment hardly seemed heretical.<sup>19</sup>

It is essential for us to pause long enough to recognize the diversity of views among Beard's contemporaries about the practice of history. Otherwise my contrast between professional tendencies before and after 1970 (give or take a few years) melts down to a reductive distortion of the range of views held during the earlier twentieth century. Carl Becker, for example, believed that the value of history was ultimately moral. “Knowledge of history cannot be . . . practically applied,” he insisted, “and is therefore worthless except to those who have made it . . . a personal possession. The value of history is indeed, not scientific but moral. . . . [It] enables us to control, not society but ourselves. . . .” W. E. B. Du Bois, writing from a different perspective, defined history as “an art using the results of science.”<sup>20</sup>

Few among us would deny that members of that generation had opinions and biases, not to mention personal lives that shaped the histories they wrote. Based upon the research that sustains this project, however, I am persuaded that many among us have underestimated the extent to which they concealed or repressed personal concerns that today would be more openly acknowledged and expressed. Women historians like Bessie Louise Pierce of the University of Chicago who conveyed bitter resentment in personal correspondence and conversations about their shabby treatment by male colleagues rarely emphasized or discussed gender in their scholarship. On the basis of their published work alone, moreover, you would not have a

clue that Charles S. Sydnor was a segregationist and a deeply committed Christian, or that Richard Hofstadter felt alienated from liberal democracy through the 1940s, or that F. O. Matthiessen was gay.<sup>21</sup>

In 1944 the young Hofstadter sent Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., a copy of his recently published essay, "U. B. Phillips and the Plantation Legend." One sentence from Schlesinger's response speaks volumes about the professional norms of Phillips's generation as well as Hofstadter's own cohort: "A whole series ought to be done on the concealed social presuppositions of our recent American historians as these presuppositions come out in the history." Four years ago, when I told Merle Curti (1897–1996) about the subject of this inquiry, he replied that "before identity and role had become as common in discourse and everyday language as is currently true, few historians among my contemporaries ever seriously verbalized these concerns."<sup>22</sup>

I am convinced that this commitment to discretion explains the incredible blandness of that first wave of book-length autobiographies written by historians of the United States late in their lives during the 1960s and 1970s. For Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., John D. Hicks, Roy F. Nichols, Dexter Perkins, and Thomas A. Bailey the watchword seems to have been, quite literally, don't bother to ask because I am not going to tell you anything truly revealing.<sup>23</sup>

It is highly symptomatic, I believe, that when Gilbert C. Fite (born in 1915) gave his presidential address to the Western Historical Association in 1986, he chronicled the dramatic failures of a South Dakota farm family living on the frontier many decades earlier. Only at the very end, and rather reluctantly, did Fite acknowledge that he had been describing his mother's family. Although Fite received his professional training at a time when detachment was considered a primary objective, at the age of 75 he conceded that he had written agricultural history in a particular way "because of my earlier years growing up on or near farms in South Dakota during the depression. . . . My personal involvement with the ups and downs of U.S. farming has contributed significantly to my work."<sup>24</sup>

Allan Nevins, on the other hand, rejected his personal origins in order to achieve professional objectives and a more congenial lifestyle. As he wrote to a colleague in 1928 when he decided to leave Cornell for Columbia, "after a laborious farm boyhood, I belong to the city, and not to the country."<sup>25</sup> (Cornell University, located on the site of Ezra Cornell's working farm, was even more pastoral in 1928 than it is today.)

One of the observations most readily remembered from Richard Hofstadter's last complete book, *The Progressive Historians* (1968), is summed up in this sentence. "If there is a single way of characterizing what has

happened in our historical writing since the 1950's, it must be, I believe, the rediscovery of complexity in American history: an engaging and moving simplicity . . . has given way to a new awareness of the multiplicity of forces."<sup>26</sup> Although I believe Hofstadter was correct, that judgment has a misleading side effect: namely, the tendency to feel that historians active during the first half of the twentieth century were less complex people than ourselves. There is an inclination to assume, when we think about the issue at all, that it must have been easier and simpler to "do" history in those days. Having read their correspondence, their diaries, and their unpublished memoirs, I am not persuaded of that. In addition to feeling profound ambivalence, even uncertainty, about the relationship between their personal identities and their vocational productions, they suffered from a range of anxieties—sometimes verging upon despair—just as we often do.

Let me illustrate that point with instances from two prominent historians as different from one another as they could possibly be. Listen to the tones of blockage and frustration mingled with hope. The point, of course, is not

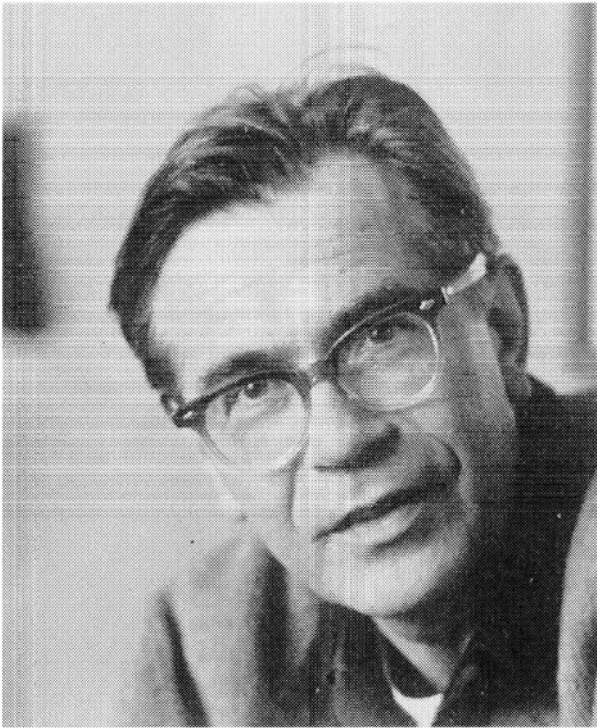


Fig. 1.2     Richard Hofstadter (1916–70). Photograph by Dwight W. Webb, courtesy of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

that these sentiments are unusual, only that we do not customarily connect them to the historian's vocation and sense of self two generations ago.

- Having read hither and yon in New England theology during 1935, Perry Miller reached the point where "I felt I no longer understood it because I had nothing that Henry James would have called a 'point of reference.'" Consequently for several weeks "I have been quietly reading St. Thomas Aquinas, with a sense of magnificent vistas opening before me, and a feeling that if I can get the time I shall, in the next five years, write really a great book on early New England."<sup>27</sup>
- "I no longer feel that I have anything urgent to say and that it makes very little difference to me or the world at large whether my books get written or not. No doubt this is a passing mood, but if you know how one makes such moods pass, do let me know." Richard Hofstadter.<sup>28</sup>

It seems highly appropriate here to quote a remark once made by Louis I. Kahn, the great architect: "No one ever really paid the price of a book, only the price of printing it."<sup>29</sup> And as historian Jonathan Spence has observed in an interview, each of his books "was written in response to a certain moment in my life. I don't know which was changing what. I'm never the same after a book. . . . I think I've been changed profoundly by each book."<sup>30</sup>

As provocative and as meaningful as those comments may sound—they make sense and they speak to us as authors—there is also a flip side, both literally as well as figuratively. T. S. Eliot once voiced its essence with penetrating charm:

In our time, we read too many new books, or are oppressed by the thought of the new books which we are neglecting to read. . . . We are encumbered not only with too many new books: we are further embarrassed by too many periodicals, reports and privately circulated memoranda. In the endeavor to keep up with the most intelligent of these publications we may sacrifice the three permanent reasons for reading: the acquisition of wisdom, the enjoyment of art, and the pleasure of entertainment.<sup>31</sup>

Amongst all the extracts that I offer in this essay, that one, I believe, most nearly approaches being timeless.

I shall return, momentarily, to what we might call the complexity of so-called simpler times in the evolution of history as a profession, but first I want to draw attention to one more intergenerational contrast I find striking. Although it will not come as a major surprise, it needs to be noticed in this context. R. W. Southern, a distinguished English medievalist, offered the following observation in a presidential address to the Royal Historical Society in 1973: "So far as there is a central tradition in our historical

writing, it arises from this recurrent need to understand and stabilize the present by reviving the experience of the past.” If that sounded wise, or simply unexceptionable 24 years ago, it surely has become passé in our own time because currently we tend to speak of “an unstable past,” not merely because we recognize the instability that existed in times past—as did Richard Southern’s generation of historians—but because we also recognize, to a greater degree than our predecessors I believe, that the past is hotly contested in the present, and consequently that new knowledge and fresh interpretations of the past are more likely to throw our culture off stride rather than stabilize it.<sup>32</sup>

Although the past can, indeed, serve us as a compass, it is just as likely to lead us into dangerous shoals as it is likely to lead us beside still waters. Knowledge of the past may be precious, but it most certainly cannot assure stability. In Edward Albee’s play, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), there is a moment of hysteria when George, an associate professor of history at a small college, exclaims: “Read history. I know something about history.”<sup>33</sup> The actual utility of his knowledge is unclear and unfocused. But it surely is not a source of stability for George, his wife, or his collegiate community. There is nothing inherently stabilizing about the past.

### Religion, Ideology, and the Historian’s Vocation

Throughout this essay I shall continue to make comparisons between historians’ personal identities and their vocational practices before and after circa 1970. Although I am more impressed by the changes than by continuities, the latter most certainly exist and must not be minimized. I shall try not to. I also intend to suggest that the notion of simpler times when doing history was less complex—in the half-century prior to 1970, let’s say—reveals a lack of perspective on our part based upon insufficient information. For professional people whose expertise is supposed to be the past, we live in a time-warp with some weird notions about our predecessors. Perhaps all that that means is that we are, after all, historians rather than genealogists. Most of us do not pursue the problematic nature of our work-related pedigrees.

In calling attention to the complexity of so-called simpler times, I will look first at the roles of religion and ideology. Then, in the third section, I will turn to other aspects of human experience in order to show how historians come to terms with the personal and attempt to resolve intimate concerns that affect their work. In the process we will look at race and racism, at gender-related discrimination, at sexual orientation, and at physical disabilities. In the fourth section we will turn to graduate and

undergraduate teaching (the former involving ambivalent relationships more often than we recognize), and in the fifth section some of the ways historians have dealt with critical "feedback." I find this last category especially fascinating because intellectual contestation can be immensely stimulating and constructive, but also depressing and sometimes even dreadfully destructive. If I may post a roadsign here: Parables ahead, proceed with caution.

### *Religion*

Richard W. Southern suggested many years ago that history attained stature as an academic field in the middle of the nineteenth century "on a wave of opposition to theological dogmatism and impatience with ancient restrictions, without anyone being clear whether the subject had a method, or a public, or indeed whether it was a recognizable subject at all." Not everyone, by any means, but many people turned to history because they grew weary of religious disputes.<sup>34</sup> So faith, or at least theology as a mode of understanding, came to be at least partially supplanted by history as a significant way of knowing.

That pattern of change carried over to the United States during the first half of the twentieth century in several ways, one of them being an initial but subsequently abandoned desire on the part of many historians, such as Parrington, John D. Hicks, and Thomas A. Bailey, to pursue the ministry as a calling. Among the documents that survive from Parrington's pioneering years at the University of Oklahoma is a small notebook labeled "Notes on the Old Testament" (dated 1901). Hicks wanted to be a Methodist preacher (his desire perhaps prompted by immense pressure from his parents), and as a Stanford undergraduate Bailey wanted to be a Baptist preacher. All of them eventually put fundamentalism behind them in favor of American history: cultural, political, and diplomatic. It may not be unfair to say that each young man replaced one kind of gospel with another.<sup>35</sup>

It is fairly dangerous to generalize in too facile a manner about the so-called crisis of faith during the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth century. Leopold von Ranke was a fervent believer and wrote that every age was "immediate to God." Many of his admirers subscribed to those sentiments. Cornell's first president, however, Andrew Dickson White, a founder of the American Historical Association, always felt torn between faith and doubt. Hence the stimulus for his best-known work, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896, two volumes).<sup>36</sup>

One legacy of White's outlook, which was shared by many others, is that the history of religion came to be strikingly marginalized in the curricula of