

HISTORICALLY SPEAKING

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PRACTICE HISTORY?

ONE YEAR AGO, WE PUBLISHED MAUREEN OGLE'S WINSOME ACCOUNT OF LEAVING academic history to "go popular." Two issues later, the Historical Society's president, Eric Arnesen, himself a frequent writer of reviews for the Chicago Tribune, wrote an essay expressing concern that so-called popular historians do not make sufficient effort to incorporate the fruits of academic historical scholarship in their books. Arnesen selected two books to illustrate his concern. One of them was Adam Hochschild's *Bury the Chains*, on the abolition of the British slave trade and slavery. Hochschild, an accomplished writer and editor, responded to Arnesen with a thoughtful letter that we published in the November/December 2007 issue. He also suggested that he would welcome further discussion on the relationship between popular and academic history. We invited Hochschild to write a think-piece, "Practicing History without a License." Historically Speaking editor Donald A. Yerxa then recruited a good number of prominent historians and editors to respond to Hochschild. These include several authors of bestselling history books (one of whom won the Pulitzer Prize), editors of publications geared to general readers, and an editor of one of the world's leading academic presses (which also has a trade division). Hochschild then drafted a rejoinder.

PRACTICING HISTORY WITHOUT A LICENSE

Adam Hochschild

Being asked to write for the readers of *Historically Speaking* feels a bit like being a plumber who, by accident, has been invited to speak to a conference of heart surgeons. For I've had no graduate training, in history or anything else. And sometimes I encounter an assumption that writers of history for the general public (like me) and historians inside the academy belong, like plumbers and heart surgeons, to two separate professions; each with its place, perhaps, but with an unbridgeable gulf between us.

Writers of history for the public, the assumption goes, skip over complexities, prefer heroic subjects and, like Doris Kearns Goodwin or the late Stephen Ambrose, carelessly borrow others' words without attribution. Or they sometimes simply invent details or conversations, as did Edmund Morris in his biography of Ronald Reagan. Academic historians, on the other hand, deal in subtlety and paradox, and are meticulously careful, but their writing is always pedantic, dry as dust.

This assumption that there are two cultures of history writing surfaces in odd ways. Sometimes people presume that if a piece of writing is lively enough to draw them in, it has to be made up. From time to time I get letters or e-mails from readers telling me, in reference to one of my books, how much they enjoyed my novel. When I answer, I have to prune out the exclamation marks. "No!!!" I want to say. "There are more than 800 source notes! Look at the bibliography! I didn't invent anything!" Or, the nonspecialist reader browsing in a bookstore assumes, anything written by a professor of history must be deadly dull



"Sacred to Liberty, Justice, and Peace," an allegory illustrating the writing of the Constitution. Clio sitting, writing in open book, 1788. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USZ62-45513].

and not worth reading, and so "academic" becomes a term of opprobrium.

Not so long ago, of course, almost all history was written for the general public. The Greeks felt that historical writing should be of a piece with good writing generally, and so they had a Muse for history, Clio, who reigned over our field just as her fellow

goddesses reigned over such arts as music, tragedy, comedy, and epic poetry. Clio is often pictured with a trumpet, so she clearly expected us to broadcast history far and wide. She might blanch at some of today's monographs, but I think she'd be pleased that there's more Muse-worthy writing by university historians than by professors in any other academic field. If the Greeks were still inventing Muses today, I don't think they'd have one for economics or linguistics. And, with all of its talk of tropes and discourses and privileging essentialist paradigms, they certainly wouldn't have one for literary criticism.

The idea that the historian's craft includes outreach to a wider audience has lasted over the millennia. In the 18th century David Hume wrote, "The first quality of an historian is to be true and impartial; the next is to be interesting." The great American historians of the 19th century, like Francis Park-

man and Henry Adams, were certainly writing for an audience far beyond their own fellow scholars, who were few: even by 1895, there were only about one hundred full-time history teachers at U.S. colleges and universities. When Thomas Babington Macaulay was writing his history of England, he said he would only be satisfied if, for a few days, it displaced the latest novel from women's tables. It's only for a century or so that the United States has seen a parting of the ways between those writing history for the public and those writing for their fellow historians. This began, of course, when the number of historians who could write for each other mushroomed. In history, as in so many other fields that also followed the example of German universities, it was the last quarter of the 19th century and the first few years of the 20th that saw the founding of a professional society (the American Historical Association, 1884), an academic journal (the *American Historical Review*, 1895), the growth of the idea that there were certain standards to be followed, and a rapid expansion of Ph.D. programs.

Ever since, there have been periodic outbursts of concern about the resulting bifurcation of the audience for history. In 1920 the American Historical Association (AHA) appointed a committee to study the problem, being concerned by the "general protest of a large portion of the public against the heaviness of style characteristic of much of the history now being written." In one chapter of the resulting report, John Spencer Bassett of Smith College asked, "Can writers devoted to research and filled with the scientific spirit be true to their purposes, and at the same time write history that has the charm of literature?"¹

In the late 1930s the historian Allan Nevins (who, though a Columbia faculty member, came from the world of journalism) let loose a blast against the academic who writes only for other ac-

ademics. Such a person, he said, "at long intervals . . . prints an unreadable paper in some learned periodical. He may once in a decade excrete a slender, highly specialized, and . . . quite exhausting monograph. Apart from this his literary production is confined to an occasional spiteful review."² More such fusillades followed, even when Nevins, late in his life, was elected president of the AHA.

Peter Novick, in his *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*, traces a further "inward turn in the profession" in the years after World War II, when universities were expanding dramatically, more foundation grants were available, and so university historians no longer needed to earn extra money by writing or lecturing to the public. Those who

wrote history outside the academy, like William L. Shirer or Barbara Tuchman, were regarded by "most professional historians . . . as the equivalent of chiropractors and naturopaths."³

According to Walter Prescott Webb, another AHA president, too many academics believed that "there is something historically naughty about good writing."⁴

The most recent major salvo in the sniping between those who write history for the public and those who work in the academy was fired by someone with strong credentials in both camps: Sean Wilentz, a professor of history at Princeton who also has written for nonacademic venues from *Salon* to *Rolling Stone* to Bob Dylan's Web site. In the course of an excoriating 2001 *New Republic* essay⁵ attacking David McCullough's biography of John Adams, he took aim at many other targets. Among them were the "journalistic and sentimentally descriptive style of *American Heritage*," the "pleasantly weathered baritone" with which McCullough and others have narrated various superficial TV history shows, the "crushingly sentimental and vacuous" Ken Burns PBS series *The Civil War*, and PBS itself for staging the "egregious advent of the 'presidential historian,' a hitherto unknown scholarly species whose chief function is to offer television viewers anodyne tidbits of historical trivia." When it came to books, Wilentz blasted "costume-drama Americana," and biographies like those by McCullough, a "genre of spectatorial appreciation . . . a reliable source of edification and pleasant uplift" filled with "pieties."

What are we, plumbers and heart surgeons both, to make of all these years of accusations? Unfortunately, some of the charges fired in each direction are true. Whether they are more true now than fifty or sixty years ago I doubt, because the past saw plenty of overspecialized pedantry, on the one hand, and uplifting popular pieties, on the

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Cover image: A World War I-era advertisement for René Guichard chemical products. Georges Clemenceau standing over a German officer. Clemenceau holds a bottle of disinfectant over the officer's head. A Gallic roster stands atop the shackled German's helmet. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USZC2-4001].

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other. But let us take a quick look at the forces that push the two types of history writers in opposite directions.

Graduate students in history, it seems to me, are trained to write—unnecessarily—for a small audience. The aim in choosing one's subject for a Ph.D. thesis, for example, seems to be finding a topic so specialized or esoteric that no one has examined it before. Should that be the only criterion? Why not take up a subject that until now has been dealt with only by specialists writing for each other, but whose political or moral or intellectual significance merits a wider readership—and then write for that wider audience? Isn't that as worthy a challenge as looking at some angle of 19th-century tariff reform proposals which—perhaps for good reason—no one has studied before?

“To produce a mighty book,” Melville wrote in *Moby-Dick*, “you must choose a mighty theme. No great and enduring volume can ever be written on the flea, though many there be who have tried it.”⁶ Too often, the pressures in the academic world train historians in writing books about fleas, rather than in trying to harpoon a whale.

There are equivalent dangers in writing for the general public. If you want a lot of readers to pay attention, you usually have to write narrative history, and to do that you have to bring characters alive. But there is always the temptation to go overboard and imply that Abraham Lincoln single-handedly freed America's slaves, that Eisenhower alone won World War II, or that it was the wisdom of Washington and Jefferson that created the American nation and has guided us beneficently to the present day.

Similarly, the narrative needed to carry a reader through a story also has its fatal seductions, one of which is happy endings. It makes for a much better story if the history of some tyranny describes how after Nazism, South African apartheid, or American slavery came to an end, the surviving victims all lived happily ever after—or at least much more happily than they lived before. But that, of course, is seldom the case. Every system of oppression is tenacious, and all too often reorganizes itself into something similarly nasty under a different name, even if the form it takes is not one filled with barbed wire, prison cells, and slave chains. Lawrence Langer has written about the way many people, including the popular historian Sir Martin Gilbert, are eager to see the testimony of Holocaust survivors as showing “the triumph of the human spirit,” when their words, if listened to carefully, usually tell a much darker story.⁷

The greatest danger in writing history for the general public is a more hidden one: letting popular taste, or publishers' ideas of popular taste, determine your subject matter. This can bar the door to good writing even more firmly than the conventional image of what a Ph.D. thesis should be. Big publishers can be very small-minded. And writers are dependent on them, because earning a living by writing history outside the academy is extremely difficult.

When I was looking for a publisher for my book on the conquest of the Congo by King Leopold II of Belgium, nine out of the ten publishers who received the book proposal turned it down. African history? *Belgium*? Forget it! Bookstores and book clubs, they said, wouldn't be interested. If historians wrote for the public only on subjects with a strong record of popular interest, 90% of all such history books would be about the Civil War, World War II, or the founding fathers.

As it is, it sometimes seems that 90% of nonacademic history books already *are* about these Big Three subjects. The interlibrary electronic catalog lists more than 54,000 books on the Civil War; as Drew Gilpin Faust has pointed out, that's more than a book a day since Appomattox. The Big Three have been there for a long time; when Barbara Tuchman

There is no reason why most history can't be written in a way that offers thought-provoking analysis and, at the same time, reaches well beyond an audience of fellow scholars.

first tried to get her book on the Zimmermann Telegram published in 1955, an editor told her that this was the “wrong war”—the public only wanted the Civil War and World War II. Looking just now at the selections available on the History Book Club Web site, I note a total of 166 volumes on the Big Three subjects, compared to a mere 19 for all of Africa and the Middle East. It makes me want to demand a moratorium on new books about the Big Three.

But I will make exceptions to my moratorium for books that truly challenge our traditional picture of these events, such as Simon Schama's recent *Rough Crossings*, which makes the provocative case that many wavering white Southerners joined the rebel side in the American Revolution because Britain had so enraged them by granting some slaves their freedom. Or Giles MacDonogh's new *After the Reich*, with its disturbing revelations of brutal British and American treatment of German POWs at the end of World War II, in camps that make Guantánamo look like a health resort. But except for rare volumes like these, the torrents of books on the Big Three find so many readers mostly because they are reassuring: the founding fathers were brilliantly foresighted; the Civil War was tragic but the union held together; and the good guys of the “greatest generation” won World War II. It's no surprise that our most prolific interpreter of history for the public, the filmmaker Ken Burns, has exhaustively filmed two of the Big Three—all three, in fact, if you count his three-hour documentary on Thomas Jefferson. What a pity that such a talented man has not taken on bolder subjects.

If we put aside these pitfalls, both forms of history writing have tremendous merits. The craft of history inside the academy is immeasurably more rigorous, more accurate, and more thoughtful and wide-ranging than it was a century ago. It is no longer a history merely of presidents and kings, but of ordinary people, of women, of the dispossessed. It makes use of the tools of statistics, sociology, anthropology, and more. Refereed scholarly journals and university presses following the same model have produced an enormous wealth of sophisticated and reliable material that had few equivalents in 1870 or 1880.

At the same time, the writing of history for the general public has become, at its best, more sophisticated and careful as well. And more accurate: as any writer who has been through the process can testify, seeing an article go under the magnifying glass of the famous fact checking department at the *New Yorker* or its equivalents at a few other magazines is as potentially humbling an experience as many a hurdle on the path to a Ph.D. We know that if we write, “Marie Antoinette felt gloomy as she woke up that fateful morning,” we better be able to show the fact checker a diary entry that says, “feeling gloomy today.”

Now there are plenty of times when it is perfectly legitimate to write not for the public but for other historians, and such work can advance the field. But there clearly remain, outside the circle of professional practitioners of history, millions of men and women with an appetite for reading it. The continued existence of a magazine like *American Heritage*, despite its faults and recent hiatus in publication, testifies to this, as does that of its superior counterpart in England, *History Today*, and of similar magazines in France like *L'Histoire* and *Historia*. Academic historians ignore the audience beyond their institutions' walls at their peril. Because if they cannot at least some of the time write and speak about history in a way that reaches out to the non-specialist, they risk being poor teachers of undergraduates. And this, in turn, risks making the proportion of U.S. college students who major in history drop even farther than it already has—from some 5% to 2%—in the last thirty years.⁸

I am convinced that deep in the heart of many a historian in the academy is someone who would like to write for a wider audience—and who is more capable of doing so than he or she thinks. Here's a curious little example from my own experience. When I finished a draft of my most recent book, about the antislavery movement in the British Empire, I wrote to some half-dozen scholars in this field, whose work I had learned much from, to ask if they would be willing to read my manuscript. Despite my fears that they would resent an unlicensed interloper in territory they had been working in all their lives, almost all of them generously said yes.

But the interesting thing was that they did far more than what I had hoped for, which was to save me from dozens of factual errors. Even though these were people who hold university posts, write for academic journals, and for the most part do not,

I believe, think of themselves as addressing the general public, they knew that this was what I was doing—and they responded in that spirit. Several of them offered thoughtful literary critiques of my manuscript. “You make a lot of this particular character later on; don’t you think you should introduce him earlier?” Or: “It would be more suspenseful if you switched the order of chapters four and five.” These and other such suggestions were greatly helpful. To get valuable feedback in this realm, as well as those of accuracy and interpretation, somehow greatly touched me. It made me feel that university history departments are larded with people who are fully able to address the wider audience that Clio, with her trumpet, had in mind for us.

So what, then, is required for a synthesis of these two types of writing? To write in a way that reaches well beyond the academy’s walls, but at the same time has intellectual depth? To not discourage the general reader, but at the same time add to the body of human knowledge?

To reach that wider audience, I think, we have to wield the tools of those inspired by two of Clio’s fellow Muses, Melpomene and Thalia: the dramatists. The historian’s job is to use those classic narrative devices of plot, character, and scene-setting to tell the story—but without getting so seduced by the tools themselves that the story gets distorted. Like those who write for the stage, historians have to keep a close eye on the audience. “I am very conscious,” wrote Barbara Tuchman, “of the reader as a listener whose attention must be held if he is not to wander away. In my mind is a picture of Kipling’s itinerant storyteller of India, with his rice bowl, who tells tales . . . to a circle of villagers by firelight. If he sees figures drifting away from the edge of the circle in the darkness . . . he knows his rice bowl will be meagerly filled.”⁹

Beyond using the storyteller’s traditional tools skillfully, there’s one other thing we need to do to attract readers to that circle of firelight and keep them there. We need to pay more attention to Melville’s advice about writing about whales and not fleas.

For me, some of the most interesting moments in history are when there seems to be a sudden leap of empathy. Unexpectedly, mysteriously, whole new groups of people are looked at as human beings who had not been seen that way before. The late 1780s saw the birth of an amazingly vigorous antislavery movement in Britain. In fact, you can even pinpoint the very month this idea caught fire: February 1788, when, after decades in which the subject had seldom come up, suddenly half the debates staged by London debating societies had to do with slavery or the slave trade. Four years later, several hundred thousand Britons had signed petitions against the slave

trade and were boycotting slave-grown sugar from the Caribbean. Where did this upsurge of feeling come from, when there had been so few signs of it before? Why did it become a huge, lasting popular movement in Britain and not in any of the other half-dozen European countries with slave colonies in the Americas? I’m far from the first writer to ask those questions, and I don’t think any of us has figured out all the answers.

The general reader has an appetite for books on



A poster for the 1883 Civil War drama, *Her Atonement*, by Anson P. Pond. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USZ6-444].

subjects like this, which writers and publishers too often ignore. When I began researching my own book on this topic, I found a wealth of brilliant specialized scholarship, often with marvelous quotations or human details buried in the footnotes, but very little written for the wider public. The major exception was a raft of uncritically admiring biographies of William Wilberforce written by evangelicals.

As a writer, I am also attracted to those times when, with equal mystery, human empathy seems to shrink, something that has taken me to King Leopold’s Congo and Stalin’s Russia. How could Russia, which in the 19th century gave the world Tolstoy, Chekhov, Dostoyevsky, and Turgenev, in the 20th give us the gulag? Why were tens of millions of Russians, people who devoured the best poetry and fiction the way the rest of us breathe air, so quick to denounce friends, teachers, or co-workers as spies and saboteurs, when they knew it could lead to their being arrested in the middle of the night and never seen again? I’m not sure any of us has fully figured out that one either, but I’ve had no more riveting research experience than traveling across Siberia, walking through the snowy, desolate ruins of gulag camps, picking up skulls with bullet holes at a mass grave site, looking at long-hidden secret police interrogation transcripts, and interviewing survivors of the Stalin era, both victims and perpetrators.

There are plenty of other paths toward harpooning the whale as well, taken by first-rate writers

both inside and outside the academy. We still read Barbara Tuchman’s *The Guns of August* today not only because it is a beautifully written account of a major turning point, but also because it has echoes for our own time: it shows (even though the usual interpretation of the First World War’s beginnings has changed somewhat since she wrote the book) how countries can blithely slip into a devastating war. We read Taylor Branch and David J. Garrow on Martin Luther King, Jr. not just because he was a major figure in American history, but for clues about how social movements awaken a national conscience. We read Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs, and Steel* because (even though I don’t agree with his conclusions) he boldly goes after one of the biggest whales of all: the question of why some societies develop economically far more than others. Most unusually, by the way, he reached a huge audience with a book that is not a chronological or biographical narrative.

There is no reason why most history can’t be written in a way that offers thought-provoking analysis and, at the same time, reaches well beyond an audience of fellow scholars. Plenty of people span both worlds. Tuchman and Branch both came from my first trade, journalism; historians who write gracefully, like Schama of Columbia and Jill Lepore of Harvard, can be regularly found in the pages of the *New Yorker*. Lepore, incidentally, teaches one of the all-too-few university courses in the art of writing history.

These two types of history writing already nourish each other more than we might imagine. A group of historians from southern California universities gathers at the Huntington Library each month to talk about writing history as a craft, sometimes hearing from writers outside the academic world. And when I see some scholar tackling a subject I have written about, but with analytic insights that escaped me (something that happens dismayingly often), I vow to dig deeper next time.

The British historian Peter Burke, speaking of his wish to see these two ways of writing more closely combined, compares a lively account of the Indian Mutiny by Christopher Hibbert, probably the most widely read writer of popular history in England, with Eric Stokes’s trenchant collection of scholarly essays, *The Peasant and the Raj*. “If one reads the two books one immediately after each other,” he writes, “one may be haunted, as I was, by the ghost of a potential third book, which might integrate narrative and analysis.”¹⁰ He suggests that historians turn to novels and film for models of vivid storytelling, pointing out that the models to be found there don’t necessarily require oversimplification: narrative can have multiple viewpoints, as in *Rashomon*.

How many other such ghosts of potential books are there? I, too, have often imagined combining writers, and my recipe is usually the same as Burke’s:

one is someone who writes with a novelist's flair, one is an expert scholar. There are several such pairs of books on my shelves, each set of which I wish I could shred, mix well, and bake into one. In fact, in making such matches I'd take Burke at his word in his reference to fiction and combine a thoughtful academic historian with a novelist. Let Chinua Achebe and John Thornton write the history of Africa. Toni Morrison and David Brion Davis could do slavery and abolition. Pat Barker and Niall Ferguson could handle the First World War. We could use the superb British novelist Barry Unsworth, whose historical fiction is set in a wide variety of times and places, as a utility infielder, dispatching him as co-author as required to anywhere from ancient Greece to the Spanish Inquisition. The list could go on. The books I'm imagining are not hybrids of fact and fiction, but pure history, pathbreaking, opening up new vistas, where everything is documented. They are written, however, in such a way that the reader is absolutely

forced to turn the page. We can all imagine such books, and it is the job of all of us—plumbers and heart surgeons alike—to write them. It can be done. The tools are there for the using, and there are plenty of whales at sea that need harpooning.

Author of several award-winning books, Adam Hochschild teaches writing at the Graduate School of Journalism of the University of California at Berkeley. In 2005 he received a Lannan Literary Award for Nonfiction for the full body of his work.

¹ Jean Jules Jusserand et. al., *The Writing of History* (Scribner, 1926), quoted in Theodore S. Hamerow, *Reflections on History and Historians* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 49-50.

² "What's the Matter with History?" *The Saturday Review of Literature*, February 4, 1939, quoted in Hamerow, *Reflections*, 57.

³ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 372.

⁴ Barbara Tuchman, *Practicing History* (Knopf, 1981), 58.

⁵ Sean Wilentz, "America Made Easy," *The New Republic*, July 2, 2001.

⁶ Chapter 104.

⁷ Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies* (Yale University Press, 1991).

⁸ Anthony Grafton, "History's Postmodern Fates," *Deadalus* 135 (Spring 2006): 54.

⁹ Tuchman, *Practicing History*, 69.

¹⁰ Peter Burke, "History of Events and the Revival of Narrative," in Peter Burke, ed., *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 237.

JOHN DEMOS

Adam Hochschild has given us a wonderfully thoughtful little manifesto on “practicing history without a license.” Along the way he has spotlighted both opportunities and difficulties that surround the sometimes tendentious relationship between “writers of history for the general public” and “historians inside the academy.”

The thrust of his piece goes toward tolerance, mutual respect, even joining. My own inclinations run in a similar direction. He is right, for example, to suspect that many academic historians nowadays aspire to reach a “general audience”; indeed that trend has been building for some time. Fifteen years ago, when I first introduced a course on historical writing as part of the doctoral curriculum at my own university, I could not learn of anything similar being offered elsewhere. By now such courses are commonplace. Moreover, the results—again in the case of my own teaching—have been remarkable. Graduate students are extremely responsive; in some years the course has had to be taught in double-section. Often, enough interest is matched by fine talent. Many of these student historians have discovered writing gifts unrevealed in their previous, more conventional coursework. The best of their essays—at least of few—might well deserve a toss over the transom at the *New Yorker*.

Hochschild declares that most historical writing for a general audience should take a narrative form and quotes Peter Burke on the need to “integrate narrative and analysis.” This last, I believe, is key. Narrative for its own sake may not be enough; the challenge is to embed analysis within it. We might remember here the old saw about the difference between “showing and telling”; clearly, our goal as analytically minded narrators must be the former. The issue, of course, is how best to make this happen? Historians have, in fact, been trying out a variety of

strategies. Some examples: Linda Gordon’s *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction* alternates narrative with interpretive chapters; the two modes are fully set apart. Patricia Cline Cohen’s *The Murder of Helen Jewett* moves back and forth between them without explicit separation. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s *A Midwife’s Tale* blends them so skillfully that the distinction becomes almost imperceptible.

Hochschild also urges that historians set their sights on “whales” rather “fleas.” This seems reasonable, and important, but he does not directly tell us what constitutes a whale of a topic. A “mighty theme” (in Melville’s words): that seems fair enough. But I’d like to add something more. Writers of history are well advised to seek a level of generic meaning in our various choices of topic. Though grounded always in carefully specified particulars—this time, that place, these events—our work can also embrace themes of (how else to put it?) deeply existential significance. Love, death, separation; integrity, trust, autonomy, identity: such matters need not be left to novelists, poets, and philosophers. Hochschild himself implies as much in calling attention to historical “moments” when empathy seems either to leap or to shrink: surely these have a generic dimension. But too often, I think, we settle for a good deal less. In doing so, we sell ourselves—and

our readers—short.

There are, however, pitfalls to be avoided here. I feel wary of projects that appeal because they seem to manifest “echoes for our own time.” Insofar as such echoes involve allegedly parallel constructions of particular events (something quite different from generic connections) they may easily become a snare and a delusion. A recent book on the founding and early history of New York makes an unfortunate example. Produced by a writer of recognized accomplish-

ment (though unlicensed as a historian), this work infuses its subject with thunderous echoes of the present-day Big Apple: multiculturalism, social tolerance, democratic politics—all of them sheer nonsense in the context of the 17th century. Other works in the same vein of “founders’ chic”—about the movement toward national independence, for instance, or the writing of the Constitution, or the settlement of the places like Plymouth and Jamestown—run a similar risk. The notion of echoes to and from such crucial beginnings is hard to resist, but can sometimes slide into feel-good pandering.

Perhaps the most interesting, and successful, of the unlicensed historians nowadays are those who write fiction. Hochschild acknowledges this by imagining a variety of one-to-one collaborations between novelists and scholars. Yet it is not at all clear that the novelists in question need any (scholarly) help; some have done astonishingly well on their own. As far back as the 1970s authors like William Styron and Wallace Stegner were eliding the boundaries between history and fiction to quite wonderful effect. (Is there a better way to enter the inner world of slavery than through Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner*? And can one find, in the large academic literature on family history, a more compelling por-



A Nürnberg print of North America and New York, 1778. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USZ62-46068].

trayal than Stegner's *Angle of Repose*?) Historians, both inside and outside the academy, might well take note. In fact, some already have. Robert Rosenstone, a fully licensed scholar best known for his excellent biography of John Reed, has recently published two fictional works on historical subjects. And just now the book trade is abuzz with anticipation of a forthcoming novel co-authored by a pair of uncommonly gifted young historians, Jane Kamensky and Jill Lepore. (Call it "practicing fiction without a license"!)

Indeed, the notion of licensing seems obsolete. History is a playing field where many may enter: professional scholars, nonfiction writers, novelists, and—why not?—even poets and playwrights. (Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* remains, in some respects, the most powerful possible evocation of the notorious witch hunt in 17th-century Salem, Massachusetts, even as it simultaneously riffs on 20th-century Red Scares.) There are no fences surrounding our field and no gates for checking credentials. There

are shared goals and standards, to be sure, but innumerable ways of reaching them. Welcome to all.

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JOSEPH J. ELLIS

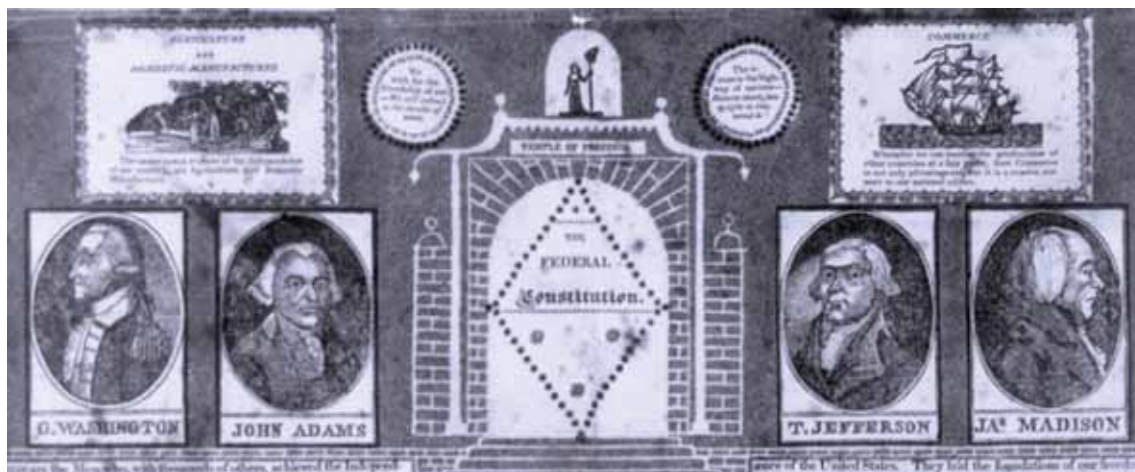
I tend to agree with the general thrust of Adam Hochschild's argument, though I don't think of him as a plumber or myself as a heart surgeon. Nor am I quite so optimistic that the current gap between academic and popular history is likely to be bridged any time soon, for reasons deeply imbedded and thoroughly institutionalized within the academy.

My own views on the host of questions he raises are invariably the product of my own experience. Perhaps my story is weird and therefore irrelevant for the larger picture. But, in the proverbial nutshell, here it is.

When I decided to become a professional historian, I did so in order to engage undergraduates with the ironies and paradoxes of American history and to write books that fellow scholars would find interesting and educated readers would find accessible. Three books written by distinguished historians set my sights: *The American Political Tradition* by Richard Hofstadter; *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* by C. Vann Woodward; and *The Puritan Dilemma* by Edmund Morgan.

Woodward and Morgan were both at Yale, so I applied and got in. They became my mentors and encouraged me to embrace my core assumption that historians were supposed to write books that were read beyond the groves of academe. I received my Ph.D., was hired by Mount Holyoke College, taught (and still teach) very smart students (few of whom have wished to become professional historians), and tried to generate a dialogue in the classroom about the intellectual questions buzzing in my mind (i.e., what did Jefferson mean by "pursuit of happiness"?). These conversations became rehearsals for book proposals, then books.

So far there have been eight books, some of



A broadside entitled "The first great Western empire: or, the United States of America," 1812. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USZ62-40915].

which have enjoyed considerable commercial success, won prizes, and significantly supplemented my academic salary. It never occurred to me that I was doing something bold or unusual. I was doing what I always wanted to do, had been encouraged by some of the best historians in the business to believe I was supposed to do, and was lucky enough to get paid for doing. So my teaching and my writing are complimentary rather than competitive dimensions of my professional identity as a historian. And my straddling of the gap between academic and popular history feels like a wholly natural, not awkward, act. In fact, I'm not sure the distinction itself makes much intellectual sense.

My experience with publishers does not fit Hochschild's description. Neither the editors at W.W. Norton nor Alfred J. Knopf have ever asked me to "dumb down" the writing or select subjects on the basis of their popular appeal. I select my own topics and send drafts of chapters to fellow scholars in the field, who invariably catch multiple gaffs and argue with me about interpretive emphasis. But by the time I submit the final draft, Ash Green at Knopf only tends to push me on chapter titles, adverbs, and semicolons.

It's true that my primary focus as a writer is on what Hochschild calls one of the "Big Three," namely the Revolutionary generation, otherwise cap-

italized and mythologized as the Founding Fathers. But I began writing about them before they became fashionable, and before the marketplace rewarded authors who wrote about them.

My chief reason for selecting this subject was akin to Willy Sutton's reason for robbing banks. As Willy put it so eloquently, that's where they keep the money. The late 18th century framed the political argu-

ments we are still having. In that sense it was the Mother Lode. It also seemed to me that a veritable treasure trove of documentary evidence had been generated over the past fifty years by the massive editorial projects on the founders, evidence that was not being fully exploited by professional historians because of methodological and ideological preferences for the inarticulate and the ordinary.

End of story, or at least my story, which suggests that it is perfectly possible to be, in Hochschild's terms, both a plumber and a heart surgeon without having an identity crisis. Nor do I think that my experience is wholly singular. In the field that I know best there are three historians, all of whom happen to be women, who seem to be able to straddle the great divide with uncommon grace: Catharine Allgor at Riverside, Jill Lepore at Harvard, and Joanne Freeman at Yale. The chasm is not inherently unbridgeable.

But—and here comes the bad part—there are deep-seated reasons why very few academic historians will ever reach a larger readership. Hochschild seems to recognize this point in a half-hearted way, but because he has never lived the academic life in a college or university, he lacks a palpable sense of the professional pressures that drive otherwise intelligent people into hermetically sealed intellectual al-

coves where specialists carry on a conversation designed to be inaccessible to outsiders.

It's really the Willy Sutton principle again, this time applied to academic culture. In this case the academic version of the bank is the tenure and promotion system, with its attendant promise of job security and salary; the scholarly journals and professional conferences, where merit is displayed and evaluated; and the peer review system, which imposes an admirable form of detached rigor, but all within the most insulated, jargon-choked language imaginable.

Let me put it more simply. The major reason most academic historians write only to each other is that the incentives of the profession have been designed to reward such cloistered conversations. If you gave them a copy of *Lucky Jim*, they would not recognize themselves. If you asked them to submit a publishable essay to the *New Yorker* or the *Atlantic Monthly*, they could not do it. And why should they try, since even a successful effort would have no appreciable bearing on their academic status?

My sense is that Hochschild is right to suggest that a surprising number of academic historians, most especially those who are securely tenured, harbor a secret and suppressed desire to write for a larger audience. But the psychological machinations within this group are strange. They are like members

of a tribe who have achieved success within the tribal culture, want to break out, but don't know how to do it without acknowledging the narrow compass of their current bailiwick. They tend to claim that writing for a larger audience is much easier and less demanding than writing for their professional peers, but somehow very few of them can do it well. In a sense, they have been trained not to do it.

One recent and wholly admirable effort to address the problem only served to expose how ingrained it is. In 2006 the Organization of American Historians announced a new initiative to identify the ten best-written scholarly articles on American history and publish them as a separate volume. (Full disclosure: one of my essays was selected.) If you gave this volume to a group of well-educated and well-read non-scholars, the vast majority would judge it to be a lifeless piece of pedantry, unworthy of their extended attention. The rules of the scholarly game as most historians understand and practice them are apparently incompatible with cogent and vibrant prose.

For this reason, Hochschild's idea of combining novelistic writers with expert scholars to create some kind of hybrid historian strikes me as the kind of happy-talk that he earlier criticizes as a congenital flaw in most popular history. (By the way, I don't think his criticism applies to most of the recent

books on the founders, which reject filiopietistic celebrations in favor of warts-and-all portraits of "flawed founders.")

I hope I am not engaging in the same kind of happy-talk by ending on an upbeat note. The surprising number of serious works of history that have found their way to the *New York Times* bestseller list over the past decade or so is incontrovertible evidence that there is a substantial readership out there eager to purchase books about the past. The fact that most of the successful authors are not card-carrying historians strikes me as a professional embarrassment. If you take the calling of Clio seriously, addressing the public instead of the professoriate is not a sellout but a deliverance. And those historians interested in recovering the voices and lives of ordinary people in the past should be in the vanguard of scholars writing for ordinary readers in the present.

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JOYCE SELTZER

As a university press book editor, I've never met the historian who did not want to write well and reach beyond a specialist audience. After years of research on a particular subject, the academically trained historian wants to disseminate findings widely. However, his or her main goal is not necessarily to entertain people, but to enlighten them. It's nice when one can do both, but it's not always possible and, when it isn't, entertainment must be sacrificed.

If history is to help us see the past in a way that illuminates our present condition, then we

must acknowledge a more profound obligation than storytelling and colorful characterization. That

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obligation is to read deeply into all primary and secondary sources available and then, using intelli-

gence, imagination, and integrity, give meaning and form to the evidence. One can use narrative and literary devices to achieve this, but they must be subordinated to the larger goal of interpreting the past in as true a light as the scholarship allows. Borrowing too heavily from literature might constrain the inquiry and preclude possible alternative interpretations. Rigorous analysis and the exploration of ideas may not easily fit within a plot or a character. And ambiguous or contradictory elements may clash with a linear or unified narrative.

I, too, wish with Adam Hochschild that more

history might “integrate narrative and analysis,” be “pure history, path-breaking, opening up new vistas, where everything is documented,” and appeal to general audiences. Unfortunately, that sets the bar rather high for most practitioners. Historians are more likely to base their choices as to subject, aim, and scope on their particular research interests, and this will determine the appeal and audience for their work. Sometimes they might believe that the “flea” will reveal more about a subject than the “whale,” even if the former indicates a smaller scale and less dramatic protagonist. In any case, their primary consideration must follow Hume’s imperative “to be true and impartial” to past human experience.

In order to capture the complexity and challenge of the human condition in other times and places, the historian needs to know his or her discipline’s methods and literature. This is what the academic historian has hopefully accomplished in graduate studies. Thus when one begins doing history, there is an awareness of the depth and breadth of the historiography on any particular subject and of the many exemplars who have carved earlier paths to understanding it. Nonacademic historians might also immerse themselves in the historiography and the thorny issues it reveals, but they are more likely to focus on finding the dramatic and engaging tale than on making a significant and original contribution to a field of

study. This is especially true today when substantial financial incentives from commercial publishers are involved.

Of course, one doesn’t need a license to do history, but one does need a powerful professional commitment to use history as honestly as possible. If we all agree on that, we can rejoice in the fact that so many people continue to explore the past fully and deeply in hopes of better understanding the present.

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DO YOU NEED A LICENSE TO PRACTICE HISTORY?