“And what do you do for a living?”

The speaker was an elderly gentleman, seated next to me on a train. When I told him I was an historian, he beamed. “I love history!” he exclaimed. He proceeded to list his favorite historical books, movies, and television shows. The books included *No Ordinary Time*, by Doris Kearns Goodwin; *Band of Brothers*, by Stephen Ambrose; and *Theodore Rex*, by Edmund Morris. His preferred films were *Gladiator* (“Five stars!” he gushed) and *Braveheart*. He loved Ken Burns’ TV documentaries, especially *The Civil War* and *Baseball*. But his all-time favorite historian was David McCullough. He had recently completed McCullough’s massive biography of Harry Truman; he was just now starting the same author’s equally hefty tome on John Adams.¹

“And what do you think of McCullough?” my new friend asked.

I was embarrassed to admit that I had never read a word by David McCullough, whose Truman and Adams biographies both won Pulitzer Prizes. So did Goodwin’s *No Ordinary Time*, about Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, but I hadn’t read that either. I hadn’t seen *Gladiator* or *Braveheart*, even though each film earned a Best Picture award at the Oscars. I did attempt to watch an episode of Burns’ *Civil War* with my wife, several years ago, but we both fell asleep before it was over.

“And you call yourself an historian?” my friend asked.

Yes, I said, I do. But I’m a . . . what, exactly? An “expert”? A “professional”? Or, God forbid, an “academic”? I stuttered, searching in vain for just the right word. All I knew was that this kind, smart, and thoroughly engaged citizen would probably never read the type of history that I write. And that knowledge made me inescapably sad.

History is hot. History is big business. Millions of Americans consume it every day via museums, theme parks, and Web sites as well as books, movies, and television. For the most part, however, this enormous audience has eluded academic historians— that is, those of us who make our living at universities. We write almost exclusively for each other, not for general non-fiction readers, and the readers know it. We ignore them; they ignore us. It’s mutual.

It wasn’t always that way. From the birth of the modern profession during the Progressive era into the mid-twentieth century, many leading academic historians engaged a wide lay readership. After the 1950s, however, historians and readers drifted apart. Drawing upon new sources and theories, historians increasingly produced a “people’s history” of formerly slighted groups: women, immigrants, laborers and racial minorities. But the public
wanted traditional stories, focused mainly upon the great deeds of Great White Men. So an enormous industry
developed to satisfy this demand, dominated by so-called “amateur” or non-academic historians. Now and
again, a journalist like Taylor Branch or Anthony Lukas would produce a dense, sophisticated history that won
accolades from the profession. At the same time, a handful of Ph.D.-accredited historians—including Stephen
Ambrose, one of my train companion’s favorites—released grand, patriotic narratives for popular consumption.
But these authors were the exceptions that proved the rule. Professional and popular historians spoke past each
other, using separate languages to serve separate purposes.

Is this a problem? I think it is. In forsaking the general public, academic historians also forsook the
humanizing and reformist impulses that bathed the profession’s birth. Most historians still say that they want to
make the world a better place, through both their scholarship and their teaching. But our systems of evaluation
and promotion say otherwise, rewarding research that nobody reads and neglecting classroom instruction. To
reclaim a public audience, then, we must first design new incentives that encourage academic historians to
reach beyond the academy. We will also have to reform graduate training, insisting that new members of our
guild demonstrate the ability to cultivate readers outside of it. Most of all, we need to make a fresh and very
public case for the type of history that we do. The Man on the Train might listen to us, one day, but only if we can
convince him that our work matters in his world—not just in ours.

Before the Split

In 1931, Cornell historian Carl Becker became president of the American Historical Association. That year, in
his address to the AHA, Becker would give perhaps the most famous speech in the history of his profession.
Entitled “Everyman His Own Historian,” the speech argued that all people—not just historians—constructed
interpretations of the past; even more, these interpretations inevitably reflected the subjective concerns of the
present. “It should be a relief to us to renounce omniscience, to recognize that every generation, our own
included, will, must inevitably, understand the past and anticipate the future in light of its own restricted
experience,” Becker declared. It did not follow, he quickly cautioned, that all understandings were created equal.
Through a steady application of new information and theories, historians could help “Everyman” travel ever-
closer to The Truth—even if he never quite got there. Indeed, Becker warned, historians risked irrelevance unless
they enlisted the lay reader in this quest. “[R]esearch will be of little import except in so far as it is transmuted into
common knowledge,” Becker concluded. “The history that lies inert in unread books does no work in the world.”

Becker’s speech signaled a new theoretical sophistication among historians, who were busily jettisoning the
just-the-facts approach of their own professional forefathers. Born almost 50 years earlier, the AHA was initially
dominated by self-described “scientific” historians. Stressing the painstaking collection and assembly of primary documents, these scholars promised to render a precise, objective portrait of the past. Their view came under fire from a younger generation of “New Historians,” including Becker and Charles Beard, who insisted that the “noble dream” of objectivity was chimerical. Hardly an absolute or predictive science, history reflected the relative truths of the era in which it was produced. Therefore, historians should also strive to make the subject relevant to the present. The ambiguous, inexact nature of history did not absolve its practitioners from enlisting readers outside of the profession. Quite the contrary: because history was forged in the fulcrum of present-day public concerns, historians bore a special duty to engage the concerned public.

The most obvious way to do so was through public education. The “New History” of Becker and Beard coincided with an enormous boom in American high schools: although just seven percent of 14- to 17-year-olds attended school in 1890, this fraction skyrocketed to nearly 38 percent in 1920 and then to 65 percent by 1936. As many scholars have documented, the AHA took a leading role in shaping the high school history curriculum during these years. Less well known are the efforts of individual historians, who authored textbooks to serve the expanding school population. Charles Beard wrote or co-wrote five texts in the 1920s, selling over a quarter million copies of each one; thanks to the royalties on these texts, Beard enjoyed a comfortable affluence for the rest of his life. In the same year as his famous “Everyman” speech, meanwhile, Carl Becker published the first edition of what would become a best-selling high school textbook. The preface to the book, Modern History, echoed many of the themes in Becker’s AHA address: all people interpret the past, through the lens of the present; historians can widen this lens, by illuminating different periods and peoples; and only by studying these other eras can we hope to understand our own. Yet in practice, Becker realized, Americans’ historical knowledge derived mainly from public school teachers. Becker’s preface thanked two high school instructors as well as two professional scholars for their suggestions about the text, reflecting his close identification with history teachers in both settings. So did the book’s all-bold frontispiece:

TO ALL TEACHERS
OF WHATEVER RACE OR COUNTRY
OF WHATEVER PERSUASION
WHO WITH SINGLENESSES OF PURPOSE
HAVE ENDEAVERED TO INCREASE KNOWLEDGE
AND PROMOTE WISDOM IN THE WORLD
THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED.

As his own theories would have predicted, Becker’s textbook embodied the beliefs and biases of his time. Despite its title, Modern History focused only upon European history; indeed, its subtitle—“The Rise of a Democratic, Scientific, and Industrial Civilization”—suggested that other parts of the world did not have a past
that was worth recounting. Like Becker’s address to the AHA, however, the textbook also reflected his
generation’s commitment to public education and engagement. From the 1920s into the 1950s, many of the
leading lights in the historical profession published textbooks for the swelling high school audience and for a
smaller—but rising—college one. Wisconsin’s Merle Curti co-wrote a widely used secondary school text with a
colleague; at Yale, meanwhile, Ralph Gabriel teamed up with a high school teacher to author another one. The
most popular interwar textbook writer was Henry Steele Commager of Columbia, who co-wrote the leading
college text (with Harvard’s Samuel Eliot Morison) and several editions of a high school book. Commager also
wrote a regular column for Senior Scholastic, a magazine aimed at secondary school students and their
teachers.7

Meanwhile, many of these prominent historians wrote successful books for adult non-fiction readers. In the
late 1920s, only a third of rural Americans read even a single book in a year. But the burgeoning population of
educated cityfolk read an unprecedented amount, spurred by marketing innovations such as the Book-of-the-
Month Club. Works of history and biography proved especially popular. Between 1914 and 1925, published
history books tripled; even during the Great Depression, when overall book production plummeted, history
publishing continued to rise. Co-authored with his wife, Mary, Charles Beard’s Rise of American Civilization
(1927) sold 70,000 copies in its regular edition and another 62,000 via the Book-of-the-Month Club; to one New
York observer, watching trucks deliver copies of the Beards’ book, it seemed that all of Gotham would be
“buried” by it. Professional historians did not enjoy a monopoly on this market, which drew many so-called
“journalist-amateurs” like Frederick Lewis Allen, Bruce Catton, Bernard DeVoto, and Carl Sandburg. But
academics and amateurs reached a fairly peaceful modus vivendi during these years, belying the strains that
would divide them later.8

Within the discipline itself, however, tensions mounted. Despite their prominence in the profession, Becker
and Beard were hardly representative of its ranks. Most historians churned out narrow dissertations and
monographs that gathered dust on library bookshelves, untouched even by fellow specialists. “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?” asked historian John Spencer Bassett in 1926. Most members of the profession
answered “no,” producing ever-more-obscure studies and providing easy targets for satirists like H. L. Mencken.
(“The professor must be an obscurantist or he is nothing,” Mencken quipped. “He has a special unmatchable
talent for dullness.”) These same historians often cast a jaundiced eye on “popularizers” such as Beard and
Becker, who became pariahs in some parts of the profession. Beard would leave his academic post at Columbia
after an angry dispute over academic freedom with university president Nicholas Murray Butler; Becker remained inside the academy, if not always of it. Whatever their reception among colleagues, however, many leading members of the historical discipline continued to cultivate lay readers. Feared or maligned in certain precincts of the university, they found a ready audience beyond it. 9

Academic historians reached their widest readership in the wake of World War Two, when scholars such as Commager, Daniel Boorstin, and Oscar Handlin produced bestsellers. Many of these works echoed the flag-waving spirit of the Cold War, highlighting America’s free, democratic traditions in the face of its totalitarian, Communist foe. But some of the books diverged sharply from this consensus, demonstrating not just a deep unease in America but also a wide demand for books that criticized it. In The American Political Tradition, for example, Richard Hofstadter argued that the Founding Fathers feared democracy, that Abraham Lincoln was a crude opportunist, and that Theodore Roosevelt coddled up to big business. “I have no desire to add to a literature of hero-worship and national self-congratulation which is already large,” declared the preface to the book, which would sell over a million copies. “A democratic society, in any case, can more safely be overcritical than overindulgent in its attitude toward public leadership.” Hofstadter would go on to win Pulitzers for two more bestsellers, The Age of Reform and Anti-Intellectualism in American Life, each profoundly critical of America’s cultural and political milieu. Before he died, Hofstadter signed a contract to write a three-part history of the United States at $90,000 per volume—$425,000 per volume in today’s dollars. 10

To be sure, some jealous colleagues condemned authors like Hofstadter for pandering to an ignorant public. Others worried that journalists such as Sandburg and DeVoto would displace the academics, debasing history into “a gal-about-town on whom anybody with two bits worth of inclination in his pocket can lay claims,” as one historian fretted, only half in jest. Still others warned that any public engagement threatened to erode their tenuous authority, especially when they jolted readers’ cherished myths about the past. Protesters in the 1920s burned several school texts for their allegedly “pro-British” portraits of the American Revolution, which “New Historians” had reinterpreted as a clash of economic interests rather than as a simple morality tale of liberty versus tyranny; in the 1930s, Becker’s Modern History came under fire for its too-friendly account of the Bolshevik Revolution. Becker eventually substituted the phrase “so called ‘scientific’ socialism” for “Marxism” at several points in the text, which seemed to mollify his lay critics. But to anxious professionals, such episodes simply underscored the perils of engaging the public in the first place. 11

For their own part, finally, amateur historians sometimes blasted academics’ snobbery and insularity. The sharpest barbs came from Allan Nevins, who straddled both camps: a successful journalist-historian for several
decades, he eventually received a high-profile appointment at Columbia. But Nevins clashed repeatedly with his Ph.D.-minted colleagues, especially after the AHA rejected his 1938 proposal for a popular historical magazine. Professional historians were mostly “pedants,” Nevins charged, “dryasdust monographers” who “kill the vital spark” with their “barren discipline of footnotes and bibliography.” The profession needed “true historians” to write broad and sweeping narratives, Nevins maintained, which would “reconcile fact and art”—and capture the public imagination. Sadly, he warned, historical scholarship was moving in the opposite direction.

The Great Divide

Nevins was right. After World War Two, historians increasingly ignored lay audiences in favor of professional ones. The shift was part of a much broader trend in American intellectual life, as scholars across the humanities and social sciences spoke to a narrow set of peers rather than the wide spectrum of educated opinion. But the decline of “public intellectuals” was probably sharper among historians, precisely because of the broad influence they had formerly exerted. Newly available government and foundation grants freed historians from even considering a lay clientele; at the same time, donors’ preference for social-science modeling and quantification insured that few laypeople would read--much less comprehend--the funded research. Nor did historians evince much interest in younger audiences, withdrawing from high school textbook writing and discontinuing their sporadic efforts to influence state and local school curricula. In an era flush with research dollars as well as Red-baiting demagogues, the safest move was to pursue technical, circumscribed questions--and to avoid laypeople altogether. “The public be damned,” one historian wrote to a colleague, neatly capturing the mood of the time.

As the cautious 1950s gave way to the more tumultuous 1960s, some historians predicted that the discipline would rediscover its popular audience. Several factors gave them good grounds for optimism. The raw number of Ph.D. historians increased fivefold between 1940 and 1970, reflecting the overall explosion of American higher education. Growing numbers of these younger scholars came from immigrant or working class backgrounds, in 1962, indeed, the AHA’s president worried that too many new historians were “products of lower middle-class or foreign origins.” Meanwhile, a small but steady trickle of African-Americans and women eroded the profession’s longtime monochromatic veneer. These newcomers brought a fresh set of topics and interpretations to historical scholarship, focusing upon racial minorities, workers, and other formerly unknown Americans. Some practitioners called this approach “History From The Bottom Up,” to distinguish it from traditional “top-down” research; others simply labeled it the “New Social History.” From 1958 to 1978, the fraction of dissertations in social history rose from 6.8 to 27.1 percent. The trend was especially sharp in a single sub-
field, women's history. In 1966, America's leading historical journals devoted just one percent of their articles to women; fourteen years later, the fraction climbed to 12 percent.¹⁴

But these scholarly developments did not narrow the gap between academic historians and lay Americans; if anything, “people's history” moved the profession ever farther from the people themselves. Social historians found “power” almost everywhere they looked, from the shop floor and department store to the kitchen and the bedroom. But they neglected erstwhile government entities such as Congress and the White House, even as these institutions assumed unprecedented powers over Americans’ public and private lives. By the mid-1980s, as one scholar quipped, “the status of the political historian within the profession had sunk to somewhere between that of a faith healer and a chiropractor.” Nor did historians evince much interest in big business, another traditional focus for prewar scholars like Beard and Becker. The more that professional historians examined America’s “disadvantaged,” it seemed, the less they explored the individuals who took advantage of them.¹⁵

Into this breach stepped a new generation of journalists and other amateurs, eager to exploit the public’s long-standing fascination with the rich, famous, and powerful. From McCullough and Goodwin to Ron Chernow and Robert Caro, these authors produced grand, sweeping tales of the great men—or, less often, the great women—of the past.¹⁶ Most works in the “New Social History” lacked a clear storyline, which made them largely impenetrable to laypeople. But biographies possessed an obvious narrative arc, imposed by the contours of life itself: birth, youth, work, decline, and death. In an era suffused by voyeurism of every sort, moreover, these books provided precisely the type of private details that many readers craved. “Biographies are kind of like reality television,” one publisher explained in 2004. “They provide real-life snippets about larger-than-life people. Americans love nothing more than the inside scoop, even if, especially if, it’s just speculation.” They also loved books about war, which flourished after the World Trade Center attacks of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. “Talk about troops on the ground!” exclaimed an industry journalist in 2005, when the website Amazon.com listed more than 16,000 military-history titles. But that number was a measly “UN peacekeeping force” compared to Barnes and Noble’s “standing army” of 75,000 war-related books, the journalist added.¹⁷

Indeed, he continued, these twin emphases—war and biography—also marked the enormous burst of history on television. “War is TV’s ultimate reality show,” he quipped, borrowing the same metaphor that publishers favored. “On cable, military history is all over the place.” The boom actually began on public television, with Ken Burns’ 1990 documentary series on the Civil War. Drawing 14 million viewers for its first episode, Burns’ Civil
War would eventually reach more than 70 million Americans. Burns would strike paydirt again and again during the next decade, producing popular documentaries about baseball (1994), the American West (1996), Thomas Jefferson (1997), Lewis and Clark (1998), and jazz (2001). His success triggered a host of imitators on cable television, which provided documentary-makers with new opportunities to reach an ever-segmenting American audience. Fifteen different biographical programs crowded the dial by 1999, including A & E’s Biography, Lifetime’s Intimate Portrait, and C-SPAN’s American Presidents. Military themes loomed large on these shows and also on the History Channel, which ran so much World War II footage that critics dubbed it the “Hitler Channel.” At last count, 83 million viewers received the History Channel as part of their cable package; more remarkably, 54 percent of surveyed cable subscribers said that the channel was “very important to their TV viewing enjoyment,” second only to the Discovery Channel. Whereas the per-hour budget for a dramatic television episode averaged $1 million, historical documentaries cost just $500,000; only reality television was cheaper, at $300,000. No wonder so many new shows depicted long-forgotten battles of the past—or present-day battles of the sexes.18

Remarkably, this unprecedented explosion in popular history drew little participation—and even less attention—from professional historians. To be sure, a small set of scholars—including Ambrose, Joseph Ellis, and Douglas Brinkley—produced bestsellers for lay readers; others served as advisers or “talking heads” for Burns and other filmmakers. For the most part, however, historians pretended that the history boom never happened. In an increasingly tight job market, most scholars produced narrow case studies to please their peers in the academy—not broad syntheses to reach the interested public. On the rare occasions that historians took notice of popular history, meanwhile, they dismissed it as shallow, hagiographic, or simply inaccurate. Burns’ documentaries were long on anecdotes but short on analysis, historians said, leaving the most important questions—about causality, meaning, and legacy—for another day. Scholars reserved special disdain for so-called “Barnes and Noble” historians like McCullough and Ambrose, who allegedly forsook intellectual analysis and rigor for patriotic confidence or arrogance. One historian even posited a version of Gresham’s Law, whereby “the bad celebratory chronicle” drives out “sound, critical scholarship.” In the marketplace of American ideas, the argument went, only comforting or commonplace ideas could find a commercial market.19

To varying degrees, the critics were correct. Plenty of evidence suggested that Americans preferred “patriotic affirmation” to “historical research and argument,” as one scholar wrote in 1996. The previous year, under fire from war veterans, the Smithsonian Institution canceled an exhibition that deliberated America’s decision to drop atomic bombs on Japan; around the same time, the U.S. Senate voted 99-1 to condemn a new set of history...
standards that openly encouraged American students to analyze the nation's myths, meaning, and purpose. To be sure, some of these attacks took issue with the particular interpretations that the exhibition and standards put forth. But others denounced the idea of interpretation itself, insisting that schools and other institutions should teach a singular and glorious story about America's birth, growth, and destiny. According to a 1998 survey, roughly 90 percent of parents wanted schools to teach that "the United States is a unique country that stands for something special in the world." Unsurprisingly, many popular history books and films reflected a similar assumption. Steeped in a culture of critique and analysis, most professional historians simply could not abide by historical works that celebrated America instead of scrutinizing it.  

But these same historians often condemned the handful of popular histories that were critical and complex, suggesting that sour grapes--envy malice, and snobbery--were also at work. After Princeton historian James McPherson achieved rare commercial success with his Civil War epic *Battle Cry of Freedom*, which spent 16 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list, he noticed that scholars started to give him the cold shoulder. One historical conference abruptly canceled a panel about *Battle Cry*, on the dubious theory that "a book which had reached a large audience of nonprofessionals was not sufficiently weighty to merit a session at a professional meeting," as McPherson mused. Despite their scholarly attention to the "common" man or woman, it seemed, many historians automatically disdained anything that these commoners might care to read. Indeed, they imagined their own work as so complex and sophisticated that only the most educated minds could comprehend it. Quoting a former mentor, historian Patricia Limerick wryly compared her colleagues to people that nobody wanted to dance with in high school; as a defense mechanism, they pretended that they never wanted to dance in the first place. Such scholars embraced obscurity as a badge of honor: even if a popular audience were available for their books and articles, they would not stoop to enlist it.  

Nowhere was this arrogance more apparent than in the contempt and condescension that greeted "public history," the subfield devoted to museums, libraries, national parks, and other "applied" or "practical" forms of scholarship. Born amid the shrinking university job market of the 1970s and 1980s, public history now engages roughly one-third of Ph.D.-trained historians. But to snobbish academicians, these poor souls simply lacked the intellectual firepower to find "real" jobs--in the academy, of course. Fighting the good fight, some public historians struggled against their second-class status; but others came to accept it, an all-too-common by-product of professional marginalization. Indeed, the very designation "public history" spoke to the low priority that all historians assigned to public outreach and service. Our foreparents in the profession would have been confused--if not offended--by the term: from Becker and Beard to Commager and Hofstadter, they simply
presumed that scholars should engage and edify the lay citizenry. Today, however, most historians have forsaken this duty. "I believe you have failed and lost touch absolutely in the communication of history to the public and that it has fallen to the amateur historians, if you will, to try to rescue that history," Ken Burns told the *Journal of American History* in 1994. "I would hope that the academy could change course and join a swelling chorus of interest in history for everyone." The question is where we would sit in the chorus, which melody we would sing, whether anyone would listen—and what it would all mean.

**Bridging the Gap**

How can historians reconnect with a lay audience, but remain true to the canons of their discipline? They might start by focusing anew upon their captive audience: that is, the students in their classes. Although vast majorities of historians identify teaching as their prime motivation for entering the field, neither our practices nor our reward systems reflect this priority. According to a 2005 study, one-third of American history survey courses used a textbook as their only assigned reading; on the average, meanwhile, these courses assigned over two-thirds of their final grade to examinations. Neither method promises to give students any substantial understanding of our discipline, as a small but growing scholarship about teaching and learning (STL) confirms. Yet most historians have ignored the STL literature, preferring instead to follow George Bernard Shaw’s ironic maxim: I may be doing it wrong, but I am doing it in the proper and customary way. In our written work, we pay close attention to sources, evidence, and interpretation. But all of that goes out the window when we reach the classroom, where lecture and factual recall predominate. “History is real simple,” declared talk-show impresario Rush Limbaugh, during the 1994 controversy over history standards. “It’s what happened.” Given how crudely we teach our undergraduates, is it any wonder that many Americans agree?

The profession has always had its fair share of lazy and incompetent teachers, of course, particularly at top-echelon research universities. When historian John D. Hicks moved from the University of Nebraska to the higher-status University of California-Berkeley in 1942, for example, he was appalled at the low level of instruction he encountered. “Most classes aren’t worth attending,” Hicks wrote, “because the faculty won’t do their part.” Despite their paeans to an informed citizenry, meanwhile, many of the leading mid-century historians were notoriously poor teachers. Henry Steele Commager liked to leaf through the *New York Times* in class, looking up occasionally to disparage his startled students; Richard Hofstadter designed his lecture courses around whatever book he had most recently completed, reading directly on one occasion from his galley-proofs. (When Hofstadter finished reading the proofs, several weeks before the end of the term, he simply cancelled his remaining classes.) Whatever the quality of their undergraduate instruction, however, contemporary research
universities clearly place a smaller premium upon it than ever before. Faculty teaching loads have declined by half since the 1920s; to pick up the slack, meanwhile, universities delegate an increasing fraction of instruction to graduate students and to low-paid adjunct professors. Predictably enough, the amount of time that undergraduates report spending with a professor is inversely related to his or her scholarly output; and student dissatisfaction with faculty teaching is highest at the most elite, research-oriented institutions.24

At the graduate level, of course, students are more likely to receive a thorough exposure to the structure, methods, and dilemmas of our field. But they get almost no pedagogical preparation themselves, virtually guaranteeing that the next generation of college students learns history as poorly as the current one does. According to a 1999 survey of 595 graduate students in history, just 2.7 percent had access to any kind of pedagogical training. In the United Kingdom and other Western democracies, such instruction is often de rigueur for Ph.D. students and junior faculty; but in the United States, we tend to assume that anybody who gains sufficient knowledge will also know how to transmit it. Worst of all, perhaps, our compensation system encourages new scholars to neglect teaching. From “Research-One” universities to liberal arts colleges, the best predictor of a professor’s salary is the amount of time that she or he devotes to research. The more time you give to teaching, meanwhile, the worse your chances for tenure, promotion, and raises. If we want the public to learn more history, we will simply have to change the way that we evaluate, rank, and reward college-level instruction.25

We will also need to create new incentives to engage in so-called service or public-history projects: consulting with museums, advising filmmakers, writing op-ed pieces, and so on. Like teaching, such activities are already part of the tenure-and-promotion packages that most academic historians submit. Without a coherent intellectual standard for rewarding it, however, service will remain on the margins of the profession. Writing in 1990, Ernest Boyer famously called upon universities to “redefine” teaching and service as scholarship: that is, to create scholarly, peer-review systems to document and evaluate them. But when an American Historical Association committee endorsed this approach in 1993, it found few takers—and lots of skeptics—among the rank and file. Some scholars worried that peer-review would erode their independence in the classroom and in other public arenas, bringing both under the university’s bureaucratic heel. Especially at mid-level institutions, meanwhile, other critics worried that “redefining” scholarship would dilute the worth of traditional research—and diminish their chances of moving up the proverbial academic totem pole. “If you call a dog’s tail a leg, how many legs does a dog have?” asked three historians at SUNY-Brockport, quoting the famous quip attributed to Abraham Lincoln. “The answer, of course, is four. Calling a tail a leg does not make it
one.” Trained to produce peer-oriented research, scholars were understandably threatened by any academic reform that would require them to engage a lay public.  

But they might be forced to do so, anyway, thanks to developments in precisely the arena that academic historians have been taught to fear: the commercial marketplace. In the past, scholars could rest assured that a university publishing house would print work that their peers approved—no matter how many readers it could find. As library budgets shrink and Web-based products expand, however, university presses are behaving more like commercial ones: they look to the bottom line. No fewer than five university houses have created new lists in military history, for example, hoping to steal a share of this booming market from the larger publishers. Lest they lose ground to the upstart university presses, meanwhile, trade houses have also sought to enlist professional historians—if they can engage lay readers. “The authors we typically work with—academics—have difficulty writing for a trade audience,” one editor explained in 2002. “To retrain them to write for a wider audience can be quite excruciating.” Starting in graduate school, then, novice historians need to experiment with more popular, vernacular styles. They might find good reasons to bemoan this trend, but they buck it at their peril.  

Textbooks represent another profitable arena for public engagement, should historians care to exploit it. The postwar boom in higher education created a new demand for college texts; at the same time, the New Social History sparked calls for revising them. Cornell historian Mary Beth Norton served as lead author of the most influential textbook, *A People and a Nation*, which went through eight editions since 1982 and spawned a host of competitors. Today, many of the leading names in the profession—including Paul Boyer, Alan Brinkley, David Kennedy and Pauline Maier—have authored or co-authored college textbooks. As Norton and other text authors have confirmed, however, these books brought few accolades from their colleagues; if anything, a published textbook marked them as mere “synthesizers” or even “simplifiers,” who peddle their wares to unwary undergraduates. Least prestigious of all were high school texts, which academic historians largely abandoned. In part, scholars were scared off by the Byzantine state regulations—and the bizarre citizen complaints—that surround high school textbooks. But their choices also reflected the very real status hierarchies within their profession, which awarded the least recognition to books that were read the most—especially if the readers were children. For millions of Americans, however, the school text is the only history book they will ever encounter. If historians truly wish to reclaim a lay audience, textbooks might be the best place to start.  

Or they can turn to film and television, which have become the nation’s primary media for historical instruction and information. The typical American household has a television set turned on for over seven hours per day; by the age of 65, the average baby boomer will have spent nine full years watching TV. Like it or not, then, Ken
Burns and his emulators have become the pre-eminent teachers of history in the United States. For each year between 1986 and 2001, meanwhile, one or more of Hollywood’s Best Picture nominees featured an historical subject or story; in 12 of those 16 years, an historically-oriented movie won the award. Most remarkably, all five nominees in 1998—Elizabeth, Life is Beautiful, Saving Private Ryan, Shakespeare in Love, and Thin Red Line—bore historical themes. As with popular history books, most professional scholars have either ignored these cinematic productions or have condemned their inaccuracies. Yet by embracing the smug role of the scold or “historian-cop,” to quote film scholar Robert Sklar, historians conflate the standards of written and visual history. A film can contain dozens of improper details about an era but still capture a larger “truth,” because its styles of argument and persuasion differ radically from a printed text. Of course, it does not follow that all movies are equally true. Professional historians can play a vital part in advising and evaluating popular films, but only if they learn the distinct idioms and languages of the medium. Otherwise, we will miss a huge chance to influence the public’s understanding of history itself.29

Finally, the World Wide Web offers intriguing opportunities for exchange—and, even, for collaboration—between academic historians and a wide range of publics. Historians, of course, are not accustomed to collaborating with anyone: according to one recent estimate, only six percent of published historical scholarship has more than one author. But the Web has opened up new forms of collective history, allowing historians to connect (literally and figuratively) with interested laypeople across the nation—and around the globe. Crafted under the direction of University of Virginia historian Edward Ayers, the Valley of the Shadow Project website has lured three million visitors to its treasure-trove of records from two neighboring towns—one in the North, the other in the South—during the Civil War era. Another primary-document site, Do History, averaged 600,000 hits during its first 11 months of operation. Still other sites publish historical essays, but pitch them explicitly at lay readers. “Created to bridge the gap between what academic historians write and what the public wants to read, Common-place brings together historians and history buffs, high school teachers and archivists, collectors and college students, to explore and exchange ideas about American history,” declared one site’s initial press-kit. “It promises to change how Americans think about their past.”30

Whether it could do so, of course, was another question. Like other forms of popular history, the Web often highlighted contrasts—not commonalties—between professional and lay approaches. In theory, primary-document sites allow any user to become a “real” or academic historian: to frame new questions, to analyze new sources, and to test new theories. As best we can tell, however, most American history enthusiasts—on the Web, and elsewhere—want a personal and emotional link to the past, not a fresh intellectual approach to it. In a careful
telephone survey, Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen discovered that Americans of diverse backgrounds all crave intimate bonds with their backgrounds: that is, they desire direct, firsthand connections to their own families and communities. Despite media-fed “history wars” at the Smithsonian and elsewhere, the survey found little public support for jingoistic interpretations of national innocence and benevolence. At the same time, though, most respondents seemed uninterested in placing their own experience in any wider scheme of interpretation or explanation. Academic historians seek to understand change over time, exploring how—and, especially, why—the present differs from the past. The lay public is more likely to meld them together, forging immediate and personal attachments to prior eras and places. “The academic world looks for new evidence and new interpretations,” one historian recently surmised, “but the public craves and appreciates a sense of history, a feeling of connectedness to the past rather than a calibrated judgment of what went on.”

Most of all, it would seem, the public wants “facts.” Consider the 2006 law passed by the Florida state legislature, affirming that “American history shall be viewed as factual, not as constructed.” At one level, of course, the measure illustrated Americans’ appalling ignorance about what historians actually do. The facts of the past can never speak for themselves, as Carl Becker taught us 75 years ago; instead, human beings must select, order, and interpret them. At the same time, though, the law and its aftermath also revealed how historians themselves had neglected their duty to educate Becker’s “Everyman,” the lay American citizen. Most historians greeted the Florida measure with a mixture of shock and mirth, archly attributing it to the same right-wing Southern yahoos who helped elect President George W. Bush. (After all, critics were quick to point out, the measure was signed into law by the president’s own brother!) But the very charge of historical ignorance masked historians’ own responsibility for redressing it: if the public didn’t understand history, it was the public’s own darned fault. Most Americans continue to regard history as a storehouse of absolute knowledge, as one scholar recently surmised, while most historians view it as contingent, ever-changing, and—yes—constructed. So our job, quite simply, is to educate the public. The past is not just a matter of “facts,” no matter what people might think; but they will never think otherwise unless we take the trouble to teach them.

We might start by showing more humility about the present, especially in our politics. As our frequent barbs at President Bush suggest, the historical profession is dominated by liberal Democrats. In our membership and our subjects of study, of course, we “celebrate diversity”; but in our ideology, we conform to a fairly narrow spectrum of opinion. By the 1970s, Peter Novick has quipped, conservative historians were already about as common as GOP folksingers; in 2002, well before President Bush led the nation into war in Iraq, an informal poll of historians found that over 80 percent already considered his presidency a “failure.” The historians could have been right, of
course, but it was far too early to tell; and surely the past is full of judgments that would eventually prove naïve, misguided, or simply false. The point here is not that historians should refrain from politics; since the days of Becker and Beard, much of our best history has been motivated by contemporary political commitments. Rather, we need to be as tolerant and open-minded in our political judgments as we are in our historical ones. For if the past is murky and imprecise, surely the present—and the future—are even more so. How can we ask the public to embrace ambiguity and multiple interpretations in American history, even as we assume a doctrinaire patina of certainty about American politics? One day, we will all be wrong—about George Bush, the Iraq war, and everything else. So we might as well admit it, instead of pretending that we know—for sure—what is right.33

Most of all, academic historians need to frame a fresh case—in every possible venue—for the ongoing value of historical inquiry. The best place to begin would be at the academy itself, where history no longer carries the curricular prominence and prestige that it once possessed. Part of the reason lies in the overall decline of humanistic study and the rise of “practical” or professional majors, which now enlist over half of our undergraduates. But surely historians themselves bear some of the blame, too, for failing to articulate exactly why all students—indeed, all citizens—need historical knowledge and understanding. Our foreparents in the profession never doubted its potential to improve and transform our lives: as Jacques Barzun wrote, in a classic mid-century statement, a “sense of the past” is the “humanizing faculty par excellence.” From our comfortable multicultural armchairs, it is easy to show that these predecessors often privileged a certain sector of humanity—that is, white males—over everybody else. But their failure to embrace a truly universal vision and purpose for history cannot absolve us from the duty to imagine one. As my colleague Thomas Bender recently underlined, in his contribution to a volume about doctoral training, no discipline is an end in itself. So our own discipline needs to show the rest of the university—and, even more, the rest of the nation—why it needs our methods, analysis, and knowledge.34

Here we might face an easier task than the other humanities and social sciences, precisely because of our field’s intimate connection to nationhood. Ever since the rise of the modern nation-state, history has helped define its purpose, meaning, and identity. So ordinary citizens continue to believe that they “own” history and also that they can understand it, making it very different from, say, literary deconstruction or rational-choice theory. This feature of our work makes it a truly “dangerous occupation,” according to Arthur Schlesinger Jr., because the public feels both the right and the ability to judge what we do. But it also provides us with a unique opportunity to engage this same public, as Schlesinger’s own career illustrates. A distinguished academic and Pulitzer Prize winner, Schlesinger pitched all of his work at lay readers; at the time of his death in 2007, he was
editing a new series of books by eminent historians who would do the same. Following this example and several others, our discipline must now become more “populist” and more “elitist”: we need to cultivate broad public audiences for our distinct brand of intellectual work. All people are created equal, to be sure, but all histories are not; and it is up to historians to teach the difference. From genealogists and stamp collectors to antique automobile racers and Civil War re-enactors, Americans already care deeply about the past. Now we must get them to think deeply about it, too.

And who’s to say we don’t?” the Man on the Train asked.

Once more, I found myself struggling to reply. Sure, I said, everybody thinks about history, whether they encounter it in a book, a movie, or a museum. But academic historians think about it differently. Instead of simply asking “what happened,” they try to figure out why. And they are forever spinning new theories to explain the same episodes, in an endless cycle of investigation and revision.

“And what,” he asked, “is so important about that?”

Because, I said, it upsets our common-sense assumptions about the ways in which we live. It makes us imagine worlds other than our own. And it makes us wonder, over and over again, about the way we would want the world to be, if we could change it--and why.

“And don’t my books do that?” he inquired. He held up his half-read copy of David McCullough’s John Adams, already dog-eared with bookmarks and jottings.

I wasn’t sure, I told him, admitting again that I hadn’t read anything by McCullough. And surely, I continued, that was part of the problem. In writing off the lay public, academic historians also ignore the vast quantity of history that the public actually reads. In most cases, then, American historians know little to nothing about what Americans would like history to do. My uninformed impression, I said, was that historians want critique and analysis; laypeople, by contrast, want a good story.

“And why,” he asked, “can’t you have both?”

Why, indeed?
Notes


20. Paul Boyer, “Whose History is it Anyway? Memory, Politics, and Historical Scholarship,” in History Wars,


