

Book Review

History's Babel: Scholarship, Professionalization, and the Historical Enterprise in the United States, 1880-1940

Robert B. Townsend

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History's Babel: Scholarship, Professionalization, and the Historical Enterprise in the United States, 1880-1940 is an attempt by Robert B. Townsend to address the widespread problems of professionalization of the historical enterprise, which include the shaping of professional identity and evolution of the infrastructure of the intellectual life of a nation. For Townsend, these issues are fundamental for the shaping of historians' intellectual life and for formation of a national identity. The book addresses the social importance of professionalization of the activities of historians, such as teaching and archive management, as a source of better understanding of the past and of public interest in history. A particular accent is placed on systematization as an essential part of professionalization. Systematization would involve creation of tools and methods for categorization of historical knowledge at the beginning of the existence of history as an autonomous discipline governed by professionals.

The first chapter, *Establishing a Framework for Scientific History Scholarship*, concentrates on the development of modern academic research practices and the establishment of new disciplinary networks for publishing and scholarly association. The first steps toward establishing a history profession involved the American Historical Association (AHA). The AHA promoted a new set of standards for historical research and writing, an issue treated in Charles Kendall Adams' monograph, *A Manual of Historical Literature: Comprising Brief Descriptions of the Most Important Histories in English, French and German, Together With Practical Suggestions as to Methods and Courses of Historical Study* (1882). The establishment of history as an academic discipline was also linked to basic factors such as the creation of systems of training and certification and of institutional mechanisms for disseminating the results of new scholarly work. Many of the academics who took part in the founding of the AHA in 1884 lacked formal training. The criteria for professionalization were modest. A PhD was not necessarily the essential passport to academic employment, which is why the development of history PhD programs served as the core of the emerging academic history profession, reflecting the need to create basic universal standards of doctoral training.

New forms of scholarly publishing were at the center of shaping institutional infrastructure, the establishment of new academic models, and the dissemination of scholarly work. The AHA established a publishing program and *The Papers of the AHA* (the association's annual report) served as an early journal. The establishment of the *American Historical Review* in 1895

marked a vital step in the professionalization of the discipline. The AHA's role as the central institution in the professionalization of the historical enterprise was confirmed by its growth from 220 members in 1885 to 2,763 members in 1910.

In the second chapter, *Developing the Tools and Materials of History Research*, Townsend discusses how historians established academic rules. Of most importance was the development of criteria for treating historical documents and the development of an institutional infrastructure for research materials through the establishment of a central repository for the publication of significant documents. In 1895, the AHA set up its first independent committee, the Historical Manuscript Commission, which brought together academics, archivists, and publishers in the process. The success of this commission contributed to the development of an institutional infrastructure for historical material and inspired the formation of the Public Archives Commission in 1899. The reports of the Public Archives Commission served to promote new areas of research, ensuring that proper attention was paid to the identification of institutions at the local, state, and national levels that were involved in the gathering and dissemination of historical material. Additionally, the commission's reports disseminated standard archival practices.

The third chapter, *Defining a Profession of History Teaching*, touches upon the question of the role of history teaching in the establishment of history as a profession. History emerged as a separate school subject between 1830 and 1860 for two reasons. First, history was seen as a civic good and, second, it was an academic discipline. Two difficulties with institutionalization of history teaching involved the need to distinguish it from studies in political science and civil government and political economy and to measure its value through assessment of its worth to the present. The AHA did not play the leading role in discussions about history teaching and the most important national voice was generated by the *History Teacher's Magazine*, which was established in 1909 by Albert E. McKinley, a history professor at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. By 1910, however, the AHA had also established itself as a leader in the study of history teaching.

The fourth chapter, *Seeking Refuge in Professionalized Scholarship*, focuses on the difficulties of creating a unified discipline after 1910. This situation arose as a result of the development of the AHA into a professional association, a rise in academic standards, and the promotion of economic self-interest. The AHA was engaged in the establishment of barriers between academia and other spheres of historical enterprise and in encouragement of the production of monographs and articles. A PhD in history became an important criterion for AHA membership and academic employment. James Harvey Robinson's *The New History: Essays Illustrating the Modern Historical Outlook* (1912) served as a banner for the changing discipline. The dilemmas thrown up by professionalization can be seen from the use of the term *profession*, which was used very rarely in AHA correspondence and explicitly in contexts relating to teaching.

The fifth chapter, *Placing the Tools and Materials of Research in Other Hands*, deals with new areas of employment in the field of history and fundamental changes to archival practices resulting from significant technological changes, such as the invention of photocopiers. Professionalization relied on both cooperation and specialization. Cooperation among historical organizations led to the Conference of Historical Societies in 1916. The *American Historical Review* became the leading voice of the AHA in the 1920s. The Conferences of Archivists and Historical Societies also became an independent body during this time period.

The sixth chapter, *History Teaching Finds its Own Voice*, analyzes changes to history

teaching following the AHA's initiative to take on a new leading role in history teaching. It revived the *History Teaching Magazine*, which experienced a dormant period when the AHA's attention to teaching issues began to drift and the organization focused on other issues. The rebooted journal provided one of the first outlets for the National Education Association's Committee on Social Studies in Secondary Education and the Committee on the Certification of High School Teachers to secure a better professional preparation of the teachers of history. Despite this initiative, 1913 marked the academic disengagement of the AHA from developing trends in history teacher training. In general, academic historians failed to keep pace with trends in the professionalization of history teachers. A particularly complex problem was that history teaching could not gain autonomy from other social studies academic subjects in secondary and higher education.

The seventh chapter, *The Crisis of the 'Research Men'*, focuses on a renewal of interest in AHA activities. The aim of the renewal was an ambitious improvement to the quality of work and development of new tools and types of research material. After 1926, a new generation entered the discipline, a generation of PhD history degrees, with one-half of the PhDs devoted to American history and one-third to European history. The PhD theses served as building blocks in the Tower of Babel of a fragmented academic history profession.

The eighth chapter, *Handing Tools and Materials over to Others*, is devoted to the development of tools and materials to demarcate the professional divisions among academics and others involved in historical work. In 1935, members of the Conference of Archivists separated from the AHA to create the Society of American Archivists. By 1941, historians' professional communities separated the activities of historical societies, archivists, and academics from one another to the point where each group represented different professional interests and jurisdictions.

The ninth chapter, *Teaching Goes its Own Way 1925-1940*, describes the professional divergence between history research and teaching activities. Secondary school teachers managed to shape an independent professional identity. They accepted separation from the AHA and the inclusion of history teaching within the broader framework of social sciences. The formal separation of history into distinct professional spheres did not mean a complete rupture among the different types of activities.

Overall, the analysis Townsend provides is relevant for educational researchers and students interested in the evolution of the professionalization of the American historical enterprise. *History's Babel: Scholarship, Professionalization, and the Historical Enterprise in the United States, 1880-1940* is a study of the fundamental components and stages of the professionalization of an academic discipline that can be recommended for researchers looking at U.S. history scholarly work. It would also be of interest to specialists investigating other higher educational contexts.

References

- Adams, C. K. (1882). *A manual of historical literature: Comprising brief descriptions of the most important histories in English, French and German, together with practical suggestions as to methods and courses of historical study*. New York: Harper.
- Robinson, J. H. (1912). *The new history: Essays illustrating the modern historical outlook*. New York: The MacMillan Company.

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