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THE HISTORICAL AGENCY: REVELANCE AND RESPONSIBILITY

By JAMES C. OLSON

High on the list of responsibilities which the historical agency must assume is the cultivation of our collective sense of history. Although it might seem that this is so obvious that it hardly needs stating, I am convinced that we are losing our sense of the need for historical studies.

You may have noted the *Saturday Review's* editorial entitled "Who Needs History." Richard L. Tobin who wrote the editorial began this way: "Some activist professors have told us in recent weeks that Henry Ford was right when he said that history was bunk, and that even a study of history will be of no use to coming generations. Everywhere we look, the extremist minority is convinced that the present moment, however

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exciting or ridiculous, is the thing that matters and that deliberate rejection of the past is the only way to look upon a future where all men are brothers in a peaceful world.”¹

I am afraid Tobin is right. We are a profoundly unhistorical generation. As Thomas N. Bonner wrote recently: “Not only students but educators approach each problem *de novo*, as if the past had nothing to teach the present. In the liberal arts, including the social sciences and even the humanities, the historical dimension has often been sacrificed to the vogue of behavioral and quantitative studies. The whole thrust of campus and political movements in our time is to challenge the authority of history and to contest the value of age and experience. Whatever is, is *now*, and *now* is an insistent demand that cannot go unanswered. Education, it is seriously argued, must focus on the immediate and the now, around the problems that are seen and felt; and participation is seen as a higher value than thoughtfulness or suspended judgment.”²

Lyman Draper, first secretary of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, spoke frequently of the need for “rescuing from oblivion the heroic deeds of the pioneers.” If the need ever existed, it exists now.

Of course, our need for history, for the study and understanding of history, is much broader than simply the need for commemorating the heroic deeds of the pioneers because we all know that not all of their deeds could be classified as “heroic.”

John F. Kennedy put it eloquently in his introduction to the *American Heritage New Illustrated History of the United States*: “There is little that is more important for an American citizen to know than the history and traditions of his country. Without such knowledge, he stands uncertain and defenseless before the world, knowing neither where he has come from nor where he is going. With such knowledge, he is no longer alone but draws a strength far greater than his own from the accumulative experience of the past and the accumulative vision of the future.”³

Change is the order of the day and if we are going to combat what the sociologists like to call “future shock” we need as a people to have firm moorings. We need to have our roots deeply in the past. The historical agency has large responsibilities for nurturing these roots. That, as a matter of fact, is what the emblem of the American Association for State and Local History tells us so vividly. The historical agency must nurture these roots by affirmation and by action.

The historical agency must seek to make our history meaningful to the generation which has no sense of the importance of the past and which has no historical roots, a generation which lives in a city with experiences quite unlike those of the American past. A few years ago Harvey Cox published a much discussed and very meaningful book, *The Secular City*. In one place the author reported a survey by some Protestant ministers about an attempt to establish house church groups in a new, urban high-rise apartment area.

He talked about the completely unrealistic view of urban life which prompted these pastors to undertake their study: "In conducting their study, the pastors were shocked to discover that the recently arrived apartment dwellers, whom they expected to be lonely and desperate for relationships, did not want to meet their neighbor socially and had no interest whatever in church or community groups.' At first the ministers deplored what they called a social pathology and a hedgehog psychology. Later, however, they found that what they had encountered was a sheer survival technique. Resistance against efforts to subject them to neighborliness and socialization is a skill apartment dwellers must develop if they are to maintain any human relationships at all. It is an essential element in the shape of the secular city.'⁴ To survive in the city of the late twentieth century one must abandon the old culture patterns that served the American community so well.

Whether Cox's interpretation is correct, it illustrates a part of the problem of the historical agency and, particularly, the historical museum which seeks to evoke a degree of nostalgia through portrayals of the past. In other words, nostalgic exhibits will no longer suffice if the historical museum is to get across the significance of history. Museum administrators are challenged with solving the problem of developing another kind of more relevant exhibit. Even if you do not have a museum, you must be concerned with this particular problem. You must ask yourself whether your collecting policy is really one which will enable you to answer questions which are meaningful in today's world.

In asking this question, of course, you will not be engaged in anything that is new. Historical agency people have been concerned with relevance for a rather long time. As a matter of fact, historical agency historians saw the need for relevance before their colleagues teaching in the universities thought much about it.

Back in 1954, the American Association for State and Local History, with the assistance of the Rockefeller Foundation, sponsored a conference on local history in Madison, Wisconsin. Some very important and searching questions were asked at that conference, and while not many definitive answers were supplied—at least answers that all would accept—the historical agency people set themselves to thinking. The conference was concerned with such questions as the importance of local history, the nature of the American heritage, and the role of the local historical society. These are still important questions, and we still need to continue the search for appropriate answers.

An understanding of history is important to the inculcation of patriotism and national pride, but this use of history is tricky and frequently results in a gross misuse of the subject. We are all familiar with the insistence of dictators that history be written and taught to serve their own particular ends. There are politicians in this country who insist upon the same thing. They want American history taught not as a branch of learning, but as an instrument of propaganda. This approach can destroy the usefulness of history and it will do little to inculcate a lasting patriotism. For a patriotism based on unsupportable legends is not particularly durable.

Louis Gottschalk put it well when he said: "A better and more lasting patriotism can be inculcated by a frank and unabashed preaching of democratic ideals as a faith. Do you think any the less of Judaism because Moses killed a man; or of Catholicism because Augustine was a sinner in his younger days; or of Protestantism because Calvin had Servetus burned at the stake? If we hold with religious fervor to our democratic ideals of liberty of expression, equality of opportunity, and tolerance of others creeds and opinions, what difference will it make that some of democracy's heroes were land grabbers, job hunters, and publicity hounds? Our ideals, not a series of frail mortals, ought to be held up to our school children as the foundation of our national creed." ⁵

History will serve the nation best by developing citizens who understand their past. And if they are to do that, they must have their history straight. This represents a problem of academic freedom. We tend to think of academic freedom as something related almost solely to the teacher in the classroom. This, of course, is not true. The historical agency and the historical museum are faced with exactly the same kind of problems in the maintenance of academic freedom—the pursuit of truth, if

you will—that plague schools, colleges, and the universities. Indeed, truth-telling in historical publications and in museum exhibits can be as difficult to sustain as truth-telling in the classroom. In a practical sense it may be even more difficult to sustain because the classroom, after all, is a rather privileged sanctuary. The historical publication is no such sanctuary, and the historical exhibit, open as it is to visitors possessing virtually no historical sophistication, is even less so.

The historical agency administrator can avoid many of the difficulties involved in the maintenance of freedom by confining the activities of his agency to a study and interpretation of those aspects of our history which evoke little controversy. This policy may be safe in the short run, but in the long run it will develop a kind of irrelevancy which will destroy the basis of sustained support.

Historical society administrators must tackle the important relevant themes of our past and this means that they must tackle the controversial. In so doing, the historical agency cannot behave as advocate. It can only seek to provide the basis for understanding.

If the historical agency does this, it will take its place proudly and securely among the important cultural institutions of the community. All too often many otherwise intelligent layman fail to recognize the historical agency as an important cultural institution. They support the Art Gallery, the Symphony Orchestra, the Little Theater, and perhaps even the Science Museum. But somehow they neglect the historical agency. In part this derives from a general lack of appreciation of history on the part of community leaders. In part, it derives from the failure of administrators to proclaim by word and by deed the historical agency as a significant cultural institution.

To function as a significant cultural institution, the historical agency must remain true to scholarship, to the pursuit of truth. It must maintain high standards. It must recognize that it serves as both a repository and a transmission vehicle. The historical agency must provide service for the scholar, but it cannot confine itself solely to that activity. It must engage in a broad program of public education. There are those who feel that providing service for the scholar and engaging in public education are disparate objectives. They are complementary rather than contradictory, and it is essential for the historical agency to try to achieve them if it is to remain both relevant and significant.

Administrators should seek to involve themselves and their agencies in

the cultural life of their communities. It is by involving the agency in the community's life that you can gain for it the kind of support that will enable it to flourish and to reach its full potential. That kind of involvement is essential if the agency in this era of change is to maintain itself as a relevant institution.

The historical agency must continue to be a respected, supported, and heavily used institution because it provides the best basis available for the understanding of our past by many of our people. Never in our history was that understanding more important to all of us.

NOTES

1. Richard L. Tobin, "Who Needs History?" *Saturday Review*, September 6, 1969, p. 22.
2. Thomas N. Bonner, review of *John Milton Gregory and the University of Illinois*, *Educational Record* (Spring, 1969), 236.
3. *John F. Kennedy*, "On History," *American Heritage*, XV (February, 1964), 3-4.
4. Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 38.
5. Louis Gottschalk, *Understanding History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950), 9.