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HISTORIANS AND THE PUBLIC: PREMATURE OBITUARIES, ABIDING LAMENTS

Eric Arnesen

Obituaries for individuals usually come once, at the end of a lifetime; obituaries for social phenomena, cultural trends, or institutions, in contrast, can come often and enjoy a long shelf life. Let me begin with the former before moving on to the latter. The recent passing of historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. has occasioned, appropriately, numerous obituaries in the press. Given his stature within the profession, his participation in government, his role as a public figure, and the scope of his scholarship, it should hardly be surprising that daily newspapers, rarely accustomed to probing or assessing the lives and works of those of us in the history business, run tributes to such a prominent and influential figure.

But Schlesinger's death also afforded commentators the opportunity to resurrect and recycle a decades-old obituary—an ongoing lament, really—for a figure of a different sort: the public historian. "America lost its last great public historian" when Schlesinger died, declared book review editor Sam Tanenhaus in the *New York Times*. Along with the late Richard Hofstadter and C. Vann Woodward, Schlesinger "stood at the forefront of a remarkable generation of academic historians" who penned "classic works that reanimated the past even as they rummaged in it for clues to understanding, if not solving, the most pressing political questions of the present." The combination of their intellectual weight and engagement with issues of contemporary relevance ensured that "new books by these historians often generated excitement and conveyed an urgency felt not only by other scholars but also by the broader population of informed readers." Younger historians today no longer write with the "authority" found in Schlesinger's work, according to Tanenhaus, for they seem "unable to engage the world as confidently as Mr. Schlesinger did." Compared to the greats like Schlesinger, historians today have "shrunk"; their work cannot be "said to have affected how many of us think about current issues."¹

The last great public historian? Scholars no longer writing with authority and unwilling to engage the world? Shrunk historians? If nothing else, Tanenhaus struck a raw nerve; his tribute to Schlesinger and his disparagement of the current historical profession have occasioned sharp rebukes from those on the Left and the Right. Barbara Weinstein, president of the American Historical As-



Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. in a debate on the David Susskind Show, 1979.
© Bettmann/CORBIS.

sociation, rejects Tanenhaus's "dyspeptic assessment," arguing that it is "redolent of nostalgia for an era when almost all major historians (not to mention politicians) were white males, and when it was possible to speak with the 'natural authority' of a privileged sector." Historians today, she notes, "keep our distance [from political leaders] not out of distaste for the rough and tumble world of political debate, or lack of keen insight, but to maintain a critical edge that often gets blunted by too close a relationship with those we study." Besides, she insists, Tanenhaus's "vision of the Lone Brilliant Historian who will ride into Washington, D.C., with intellectual guns blazing" misses the "less spectacular but perhaps more enduring impact of a scholarly movement that has helped form the foundation for new political actors, local, regional, and national."² On her Legal History Blog, Mary Dudziak wonders "what Tanenhaus has been reading," for there have been "so many works of history that speak directly to 'how many of us think about current issues.'" Tanenhaus is fundamentally wrong, she insists, for historians have not "shrunk from a national stage"; the "plethora of history blogging is a testament to the efforts of many historians to speak to a public beyond their classrooms." And, she bitingly observes, if historians have difficulty finding larger audiences, Tanenhaus, as editor of the *New York Times* book review, may be part of the problem. The *Times* selects which books to review and which to ignore,

who will do the reviewing and who won't. There are "plenty of powerful and eloquent historians speaking to broader issues . . . Tanenhaus can help achieve his own aims by giving them a broader voice."³

From the other end of the spectrum, William Voegeli goes after Tanenhaus in the pages of the *Claremont Review of Books*. The last thing Voegeli wants is for historians—particularly those of liberal or leftist persuasions—to step onto the political stage. "Like two magnets turned the wrong way, the words 'public intellectual' (or 'popular artist') resist each other," he argues. "There's a tension between engaging with public life in order to influence political outcomes, and following the evidence wherever it leads in pursuit of truth." For Voegeli, Schlesinger wrote history in the service of a political cause, New Deal liberalism, which he "spent his life promoting . . . All of his histories served polemical purposes." Voegeli appreciates neither Schlesinger's politics nor his scholarship. Schlesinger "leaves behind a mountain of readable but tendentious books and articles, all of them advocating a liberalism that retains the ability to buy votes but not to change minds."⁴

The defensiveness and hostility of these responses notwithstanding, the simple questions about historians and the broader public that Tanenhaus raise remain. But the *Times* book review editor was hardly the first to raise them; they have been circulating for some time. Shortly before Schlesinger's death, attendees of the American Historical Association's (AHA) annual convention in January would have heard commentary that Tanenhaus might have endorsed. On the AHA meeting's first day, several panels confronted the "problem of attracting the audience for history," in the words of the editor of the History News Network, Rick Shenkman. According to Shenkman's conference blog, former *American Historical Review* editor Michael Grossman said that "part of the problem was that historians don't write for a mass audience the way they used to. He admitted it's hard. He's been trying to make his newest book accessible. But *his* editor keeps telling him, 'it's not working.'" What to do? An audience member suggested that graduate programs don't teach good writing; Jim Banner is reported to have responded that good writing is not "something you can probably teach" and that a "great writer" like Hofstadter did not take "some class" in writing in order to develop his own style. Shenkman concluded that "[b]y the end of the afternoon all the usual

suspects had been rounded up and shot. The problem was that historians aren't writing about subjects the general public finds interesting. Or. The problem was that textbooks turn Americans off to history. Or. Historians don't privilege public history so historians don't write it."⁵ Perhaps Tanenhaus was right: Schlesinger's death marked the passing of an era.

If so, then that era has been dying for decades. The memories of today's historians and their critics are short, for the laments of 2007 are in no way novel. Exactly two decades ago, Russell Jacoby published his *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe*. The title said it all. Jacoby's

starting point was a question: "Where are the younger intellectuals?" He was hard pressed to find them. (To be sure, Jacoby was talking about all intellectuals, not just historians). Before the 1960s, there were intellectuals with a "voice and presence"; they wrote with "vigor and clarity" for "the educated public" and "intellectuals and sympathizers anywhere." Mastering a "public idiom" and a "public prose," they "all sought and found a larger audience." "[G]raceful writers, they were 'iconoclasts, critics, polemicists, who deferred to no one.'" As it turned out, they were, as his title declares, "the last" of their kind. No new generation emerged to replace them. "An intellectual generation has not suddenly vanished," he observed; "it simply never appeared."

Jacoby's favored last intellectuals were sustained by bohemia and small journals and wide-circulation magazines. Unfortunately for them and their potential successors, bohemia died, done in by industrial development, urban blight, gentrification, and real estate developers, which jointly eliminated cheap rents, independent bookstores, and cafes and squeezed out "marginal intellectuals and artists." The "fitness center or fern and wine bar" that replaced them marked the "eclipse of cultural space," as did the vast highway construction program that breathed new life into suburban sprawl at cities' expense. To make matters worse, television and national newsweeklies had a deleterious impact on cultural life, while "a public that reads serious books, magazines, and newspapers has dwindled." In Jacoby's words, "To live from selling book reviews and articles ceased to be difficult; it became impossible. The number of serious magazines and newspapers steadily declined . . . the cultural frontier closed in the 1950s."⁶

Of much greater concern to Jacoby than the

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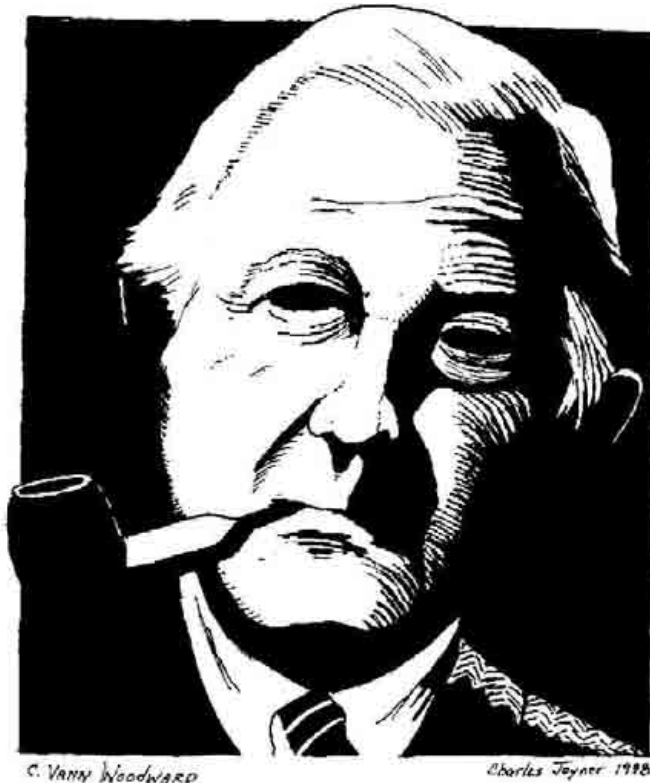
structural and environmental factors were the choices made by younger intellectuals. Rather than embrace a declining bohemia and find their public voice, they retreated behind the walls of academe, where the salaries, benefits, and perks proved too tempting to resist. They were, in short, seduced and tamed by the professionalization that the university fostered and the rewards it offered. Unlike their public intellectual predecessors, “[a]cademic intellectuals did not cherish direct or elegant writing.” Preferring substance over form, their writing “developed into unreadable communiques sweetened by thanks to colleagues and superiors.” It was “largely technical, unreadable and—except by specialists—unread.” (Jacoby was, and remains, at his best when savagely skewering the pretentiousness and vacuity of academic theorists and poseurs). This orientation was understandable, given broader cultural and economic shifts, but not inevitable—or desirable. Academics succumbed to a “new scholasticism insulated from larger public life,” in essence, abandoning their larger responsibility to seek refuge in professionalism and their narrowly defined disciplines. They could have risen to the occasion, like their independent predecessors, but they did not. Instead, they turned their back on the public. The result, he believed, is the growing impoverishment of our culture.

These laments raise many questions: First, just how golden was the Golden Age of History dominated by Schlesinger (and Richard Hofstadter and C. Vann Woodward) invoked by Tanenhaus and others? Or, alternatively, just how towering were the Towering Figures of Public Intellectuals whose passing Russell Jacoby mourned? Second, if, in fact, historians no longer write for broader publics, why not? Do the rise of Starbucks, the demise of bohemia, the growth of suburban sprawl, and the benefits of professionalization at the university level explain academics’ turning their backs on real people? And finally, are the lamenters correct? Are historians really no longer writing for the broader public? Have they truly buried their collective heads in the sands of academe, refusing their responsibilities, reaping professional rewards, reveling in disciplinary jargon, and otherwise impoverishing our civic culture? It is this last set of questions that I now want to address.

The short answer is: no; or, at least, not entirely. The academy is a big place and historians are a diverse lot. Within our ranks, there is guilt enough to go around. Yes, textbooks can be dull; public history is sometimes denigrated; we don’t devote enough attention to writing (much less *good* writing); obscure subjects, including plenty that the public might not find particularly interesting, attract our attention; and a disdain for public appeal can be discerned here and there. It’s not difficult to find dense prose, theoretically obtuse jargon, arcane arguments, and insufferable politics (though whose politics are insufferable depends on one’s vantage point). But to return to the questioning mode: Is it true that historians have

“shrunk”? Are academic historians guilty of not writing with Schlesinger’s authority or engaging issues of contemporary relevance? Have we wholly abandoned that “broader population of informed readers” for which we once wrote?

Some—okay, many—academic historians have. But that, in itself, is not inherently a bad thing—or a new thing. Even in the heyday of Schlesinger, Hof-



Historian Charles Joyner’s sketch of C. Vann Woodward, 1998.

stadter, and Woodward, most historians attended to their lectures, their students, their colleagues, and their research, producing narrow monographs in their areas of specialization. Today, not surprisingly, most do the same. They produce solid scholarship that continually informs and revises our view of the past. And, not coincidentally, the building blocks they provide for revisions of our historical understanding also constitute the interpretative and evidentiary base upon which so many nonacademic, popular historians base their readable books. It’s no shame to say: this is our job. We should do it well. And we shouldn’t feel obliged to apologize for it.

That said, a growing number of academic historians *are* breaking out of their scholarly insularity and are writing for precisely what Michael Grossman called the “mass audience”; they are doing what Tanenhaus, Jacoby, and others want them to do. Historians of the American Revolution (Gordon Wood, Pauline Maier, Edmund Morgan, and Joseph Ellis, for instance) and the Civil War era (David Donald, James McPherson, and Eric Foner, to name but a few) have long had eager popular audiences ready to buy their books and absorb their insights.¹⁰ Some academics, like Niall Ferguson, Sean Wilentz, Tony Judt, and Victor Davis Hanson, write with the very “authority” that Tanenhaus found in Schlesinger’s work and absent in everyone else’s.¹¹ Others—Don-

ald Kagan, Alan Kors, Stephanie Coontz, Stephan Thernstrom, Ruth Rosen, Richard Pipes, and Alan Brinkley, among others¹²—speak to contemporary issues through their historical scholarship, while yet others are content to write accessibly about the past with no explicit intent to affect the present (Patricia Cline Cohen, Felipe Fernández-Armesto, Timothy Gilfoyle).¹³ And a few historians have even attained that rare status—for academics, at least—of cultural celebrity. Steven Gillon can be seen hosting a program on the History Channel, Simon Schama frequently writes and narrates BBC series, Michael Beschloss regularly serves as a television talking head, Allan Lichtman is a frequent political analyst on cable and network news programs and ran for a U.S. Senate seat (unsuccessfully) in Maryland, and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich stars in a documentary and is even quoted on a bumper sticker. One thing is clear: more and more academic historians are engaged in an effort to address audiences beyond the university setting. They are not content to leave the field of popular history to the popular historians.

To accomplish their task, they publish their books with trade presses, which traditionally have published history books written by nonacademic historians. For years that market has been dominated by another set of towering (measured by their sales) writers—Doris Kearns Goodwin, Walter Isaacson, David McCullough, and the late Stephen Ambrose, for instance—as well as a host of fine writers with broad appeal (if somewhat fewer sales), including Adam Hochschild, Taylor Branch, Richard Rhodes, and Ann Hagedorn.

“When I visited the chain bookstores that proliferated” in the 1980s and 1990s, former academic turned popular historian Maureen Ogle recently wrote in the pages of *Historically Speaking*, the “history sections were huge, but most of the titles had been written by journalists.”¹⁴ Yet if one puts aside their market share (which is considerable) for a moment, today one can also find on the front tables at Barnes and Noble or Borders trade press books by an eclectic group of bona fide academics. A short list of some notable authors (minus those already mentioned) would include David Garrow, Douglas Brinkley, Linda Colley, J.R. McNeill, Saul Friedlander, Leon Litwack, Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, John Mosier, David Blackbourn, Jack Rakove, John McGreevy, Thomas Sugrue, Peter Novick, Drew Faust, Melvin Ely, Kevin Boyle, Eric Rauchway, Richard Gid Powers, David Blight, James Oakes, George Chauncey, David Bell, Alexander Keyssar, Kenneth Alder, Louis Masur, and Vernon Burton.¹⁵ Publishing with the trade divisions of university presses like Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and Oxford are Heather Cox Richardson, William Freehling, Scott Reynolds Nelson, David Brion Davis, David Hackett Fischer, and John Lukacs.¹⁶ And if one expands the categories to include biography, the list becomes even longer: Nancy Isenberg, Catherine Allgor, Robert Dallek, David Cannadine, David Levering Lewis, David Nasaw, Elliott Gorn, John Patrick

Diggins, Martin Sherwin, Michael Kazin, and Richard Lyman Bushman, just for starters.¹⁷

This list is meant to be neither comprehensive nor representative; nor does it speak to the very different issue of quality or approach. It does suggest, however, that while some observers are wringing their hands over the loss of our “last great public historian,” bemoaning the intellectuals’ embrace of professionalism and “crabbed” academic writing, or complaining that historians no longer “write for a mass audience the way they used to,” there is, in fact, good reason for optimism. Many college- and university-based historians are rising to the occasion, cherishing good prose, and communicating with people other than themselves. The literary marketplace for good and well-written history is growing crowded.

Which is not to say that there isn’t room for more, for in this instance “crowded” is a positive thing. But academics newly interested in writing with “authority,” engaging the world “confidently,” and addressing popular audiences have many new skills to master. Academic prose may serve one well before a tenure committee but won’t likely prompt nonacademics to curl up with one’s tomes late into the night. Many writers “trained in academia are steered down a path that will preclude” their being read widely, concludes Melvin Ely, himself the author of several successful popular histories. “Too often our graduate students think that what we, as professors, want is something that is very dense, very theoretical, which on every page self-consciously engages the existing scholarly research.” But if “that is what you produce, you’re never going to get a readership beyond a few hundred people.”¹⁸ On the upside, more historians than ever are steering themselves down a different path, one more attentive to the literary quality of their writing and storytelling techniques.

Perhaps the Age of the Really Towering Historians who Speak with Considerable Cultural Authority is over. Even if it is, I would suggest that not only are things not bleak, but they’re looking pretty darn good. Today’s history scene includes, to appropriate Tanenhaus’s words, a “remarkable generation of academic historians” who are engaging with “issues of contemporary relevance,” reanimating the past while seeking to understand today’s “most pressing political questions.” And The Last Intellectuals? They are “the last” no more. In recent years many of the newer ones have been striving for the very “vigor and clarity” that Jacoby found missing after the 1950s. We can and should debate their interpretations, challenge their politics, and question their style and effectiveness. But recognizing that their frequently penned obituaries have turned out to be premature might allow us to appreciate the strides that have been made in recent years. And how much more we might accomplish.

Eric Arnesen, current president of the Historical Society, is professor of history and African-American studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Among the many books and articles he has written and edited are The Black Worker: Race, Labor,

and Civil Rights since Emancipation (University of Illinois Press, 2007) and Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality (Harvard University Press, 2001).

¹ Sam Tanenhaus, “Dispatches: History, Written in the Present Tense,” *New York Times*, March 4, 2007.

² Barbara Weinstein, “The Case of the Incredible Shrinking Historians?” *American Historical Association Perspectives* (September 2007).

³ Mary Dudziak, “Tanenhaus Dumps on Historians for the State of Public Discourse: But Is He Part of the Problem?” *Legal History Blog*, March 4, 2007.

⁴ William Voegeli, “Crisis of the Old Liberal Order,” *Claremont Review of Books* (Summer 2007).

⁵ Rick Shenkman, “Reporter’s Notebook: Highlights from the 2007 Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association,” *History News Network*, January 4, 2007.

⁶ Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (Noonday Press, 1987), ix, 7, 78, 17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 20, 6, 19.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 16, 141.

¹⁰ To be fair, Tanenhaus recognizes that scholars like Gordon Wood and James McPherson offer “a major contribution to our understanding” of their subjects. The problem, he argues, is “one of reach.” Neither “can be said to have affected how many of us think about current issues.”

¹¹ Niall Ferguson, *The War of the World: Twentieth-Century Conflict and the Descent of the West* (Penguin, 2006); Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (Allen Lane, 2004); Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (Norton, 2005); Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (Penguin, 2005); Victor Davis Hanson, *War Like No Other: How the Athenians and Spartans Fought the Peloponnesian War* (Random House, 2005).

¹² Donald Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War* (Viking, 2003); Kagan, *On the Origins of War* (Doubleday, 1994); Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage* (Penguin, 2006); Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (Basic Books, 1992); Alan Charles Kors and Harvey A. Silverglate, *The Shadow University: The Betrayal of Liberty on America’s Campuses* (Free Press, 1998); Stephan Thernstrom and Abigail Thernstrom, *America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible* (Simon and Schuster, 1997); Thernstrom and Thernstrom, *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning* (Simon and Schuster, 2003); Ruth Rosen, *World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America* (Penguin, 2000); Richard Pipes, *Communism: A History* (Modern Library, 2001); Pipes, *The Russian Revolution* (Knopf, 1990); Diane Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Battles Over School Reform* (Simon and Schuster, 2000); Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade: American Education, 1945-1980* (Basic Books, 1984) and Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (Knopf, 1995).

¹³ Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett* (Vintage, 1998); Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Pathfinders: A Global History of Exploration* (Viking Press, 2007); Fernández-Armesto, *Amerigo: The Man Who Gave His Name to America* (Random House, 2007); Suzanne Leacock, *A Murder in Virginia: Southern Justice on Trial* (Norton, 2003); Timothy Gilfoyle, *A Pickpocket’s Tale: The Underworld of Nineteenth-Century New York* (Norton, 2006).

¹⁴ Maureen Ogle, “The Perils and Pleasures of Going ‘Popular’; or My Life as a Loser,” *Historically Speaking: The Bulletin of the Historical Society* vol. VIII, no. 4 (March/April 2007), 29. Ogle addresses the “disconnect between historians and the public,” academics’ “contempt for the public” and their focus on “narrow-bordering-on-arcaic topics,” and the academic “universe far removed from the messy bustle of the rest of the world” in her engaging essay on writing popular history.

¹⁵ David Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality: The Right to Privacy and the*

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¹⁶ Heather Cox Richardson, *West from Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America after the Civil War* (Yale University Press, 2007); William Freehling, *The Road to Disunion, Volume II: Secessionists Triumphant, 1854-1861* (Oxford University Press, 2007); Freehling, *The Road to Disunion, Volume I: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854* (Oxford University Press, 1990); Scott Reynolds Nelson, *Steel Drivin’ Man: John Henry, the Untold Story of an American Legend* (Oxford University Press, 2006); David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (Oxford University Press, 2006); David Hackett Fischer, *Paul Revere’s Ride* (Oxford University Press, 1994); Fischer, *Washington’s Crossing* (Oxford University Press, 2003); and John Lukacs, *June 1941: Hitler and Stalin* (Yale University Press, 2006).

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¹⁸ Ely quoted in David Williard, “Response to Ely’s *Israel on the Appomattox* Continues,” *William & Mary News*, January 20, 2006.