

Reflections on History and Historians, by Theodore S. Hamerow. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987. xiii, 243 pp. Appendixes, index. \$25.00 cloth.

After forty years of extraordinary growth, higher education and history confront a crisis of confidence. Theodore S. Hamerow, the eminent historian of Central Europe, lived through these years and now tries to explain them. He is indebted to Oscar Handlin, whose *Truth in History* (Cambridge, MA, 1979) was pessimistic about the history profession and threatened century-old professional values. Handlin argued that historians have perverted history and lost the larger audience outside of academe by relying on the social sciences, quantification, and novelty.

Hamerow does not think that history will be eclipsed entirely but that the crisis of confidence might make history as unpopular as classics or philosophy. He predicates renewal with humility: professionalism must surrender to the common sense the pioneers of modern history used before history courses, professorships, journals, conferences and conventions, and foundations intervened between historians and society. Historians can improve, he contends, by recognizing the contributions of journalists, lawyers, and other nonacademics without Ph.D.s who write history for diverse audiences.

Hamerow explains the crisis of confidence with chapters on professionalism, the education of historians, which offers younger historians and graduate students much to ponder, and "History as a Way of Life." He exclaims that historians' disputes over the "new history" and the "old history" grew louder during the crisis of confidence. He shows that over the last century or so the dispute restricted the potential of the profession by causing historians to narrow their focuses. History became eclectic as the leadership of historians born of upper classes along the eastern seaboard gave way to historians from the middle and lower social classes. Hamerow opines that eclecticism brought a general retreat from the public, and that this is ironic since the social and economic backgrounds of historians became more diverse than ever before. In short, Hamerow believes that history has become too fragmented to provide public leadership. He wants historians to see that popular needs change. Hamerow agrees with Handlin that the new history has not maintained the stylistic freedoms of preprofessional narrative historians who were not distracted by institutions and scientism. Hamerow argues that once conventional freedoms were lost historians became pedants, entrepreneurs, and politicians.

Hamerow demonstrates that crisis moods are endemic in history, but he cannot imagine that perhaps crisis generates tremendous ac-

accomplishments. He argues that historians contribute to the myth of crisis in professional operations and commitments. Both Handlin and Hamerow agree that historians should worry less about advancement and more about accomplishment. Hamerow wants historians to think about the competition and consequent methods in the rituals of academic politics and of obtaining foundation funds and sabbaticals and how these pursuits have changed the profession. Another contributor to the myth of crisis has been the weakening of the arts over the past several decades. This recession has not been entirely necessary, and history departments and associations with strong leadership continue to flourish. Handlin might have devoted more time to looking at successful departments in universities whose missions are much different from each other. Such programs might illustrate that if the profession makes a resurgence, there are proven steps to take. For instance, historians should write for a larger readership. They should consider new affiliations before new history. Hamerow's own writing about the transformation of Germany a century ago enables him to explain how contemporary society has surpassed industry with the rapid transfer of information and technical instruction. The conceptions people have of the limits of history have changed accordingly.

Hamerow believes that the popular need for history is not being served by our universities and foundations. He posits that they have caused research and writing history to veer from the search for truth to the search for funding and status. Because foundations were swayed by social science methods, Hamerow contends that many historians became academic entrepreneurs after 1945, and the original meaning of history as self-exploration was lost. In the 1970s history declined during the loss of confidence in social science methods. He notes that psychohistory never fulfilled its promise as a response to science. He also shows the decline by revealing that only about ten percent of history Ph.D.s ever publish.

Hamerow argues that the more scientific historians claimed to become, the more their work suffered from a sense of realism, which Hamerow defines as humility. (He reminds us that the past remains a blur despite the efforts of gifted scholars.) To regain humility, he wants historians to create narratives that absorb readers. He includes Allan Nevins's idea that "the role of the historian is thus closer to that of tribal prophet or religious teacher than of scholar or scientist" (p. 231). Hamerow notices that younger historians today are too absorbed with scientism to care whether lay audiences read them or not. A second objective is to make the past contribute a definition of the present and the future. His ultimate objective is to enable readers to understand history as contemporary history.

In a lengthy discussion, Hamerow explains how Allan Nevins maintained the balance between academic and nonacademic history before the 1970s and 1980s. Nevins never got a Ph.D., yet he was a nationally known historian who taught at Columbia, presided over the American Historical Association, worked with original sources, and wrote books with wide appeal. Hamerow admires Nevins's realism. Nevins's speeches and writings about the dangers of professionalism on the brink of the decline outlined the causes of the present crisis. They were in themselves illustrations of the contemporaneity of history.

Educators will find that Hamerow's book transmits important messages about the future of higher education if it does not adapt to social needs and grow confident about how to serve them. This effort does not mean suborning leadership to social trends, but it does mean making serious efforts to expose history to the public. Historians can initiate this campaign by shrugging off traditions that were responses to entrenchments in universities in the 1970s and early 1980s. Hamerow sees the growing eclecticism as symbolic of the crisis, for he believes that eclecticism causes historians to become strangers to other historians, other disciplines, and the public.

Crisis is an ambiguous term however it is used. Leading historians of the 1960s and 1970s used the term to argue that there were crises in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries throughout Europe and North America. Here Hamerow is strong in showing how ideas about the extent of these crises receded as quantification failed to accomplish all it claimed. He describes the growing disillusionment of Lawrence Stone, one of the early advocates of crisis theory, who confessed his "lost faith" in 1979. But Stone was expressing self-discovery also, and he has contributed valuable insights. Stone's self-understanding acquired while undertaking years of rigorous research and experimenting with methods extended the significance of historical explanation. The number of special fields that historians have since investigated could be said to draw history closer to truth. Hamerow perhaps also underplays the resilience of institutions in response to change. One way or another, professionals will want to discuss this book with colleagues and students.

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