

Book Reviews

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Truth in History, by Oscar Handlin. Cambridge, MA and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979. pp. xi, 420. Index. \$17.50.

Oscar Handlin makes "no pretense to dispassion" in his weighty, provocative appraisal of a profession he believes is plagued with growing insecurity, corrupted values, and increased abuses. Historians, he charges, have become exploited by "relevance," or uneasy feelings of disapproval within academe and without. Many have formed informal, powerful "associations" to save jobs and to justify specialties, he argues. "Detectives" in the discipline try to sense what non-specialists and the greater public want and strive to please—a sort of "Roots" syndrome exists, he thinks. The net result of what Handlin thinks is superficial research and sloppy writing causes history to sink to the level of a society being overwhelmed by "easy" vocational pursuits. History is being innundated by an epistemology that allows historians to return to adolescence. Handlin goes to great lengths early in the book to show that his childhood and adolescence, spent in the restrictive "vocational" culture of Brooklyn, represented an attempt to escape. Near the end of a magnificent career, he is still fighting to escape from perceived restrictive influences; his struggle parallels that of his opponents. Viewed in this way Handlin is as much the victim of preconceptions as his antagonists.

Handlin argues that historians can recover their integrity by becoming scrupulous in their interpretations of "Central Themes in American History, Dealing with the Evidence," analyzing political theory and popular thought in non-Manichaeian ways, and informing the public of history's value without surrendering to the laity. These major sections of the book allow Handlin to exhibit his considerable skills. The early chapters are recollections of how the author's objectivity grew while observing the awesomeness of the Alps, a favorite holiday

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resort. By viewing the mountains from a rugged plain, Handlin developed humility while stretching his conceptual powers. History for Handlin plays on a vast stage, and is extremely dynamic. Where there is little or no evidence, Handlin observes, there can be no history. The art cannot be manufactured, and he castigates the American Historical Association, which he has boycotted for years, for supporting questionable practices. He believes that it is ironic that the radical new historians cry out loudly against the forces of industrialization while they "manufacture" history.

Handlin's perplexity stems from his belief that reason has been relegated to convenience, and continued oversights will bury the past. The more statistical data scholars amass to support preconceptions, he argues, the more truth eludes them. The more appealing these historians try to be, the less appealing they become; and the less scholars and their audiences remember of history, the more vocational disciplines benefit. Gimmicks and history do not mix, Handlin argues. The responsibility for saving the profession falls upon empathetic, creative scholars who notice the difference between rhetoric and actuality.

Handlin aims his critical powers, and his frustrations, most menacingly at the revisionism of William Appleman Williams and Walter LaFeber. Mentor and student are rejected for misinterpreting central themes, misusing words, and (less so with LaFeber according to Handlin) oversimplifying "Hard Facts." Handlin still believes that Williams' *Contours of American History* is "an elaborate hoax." Handlin whips revisionist historians of American expansion and the Cold War rather unmercifully for not questioning authority properly. He attacks LaFeber's student, Ernest N. Paolino, who used the expansionist theme in *The Foundations of the American Empire* (1974). But Handlin's claim that Paolino's distortions went unnoticed by reviewers is erroneous. As the furor over Vietnam and the Cold War weakened, so did the revisionist case. Here Handlin's desire to slay the radicals blurs his perspective and technique: he fails to appraise the work of James B. Chapin, another LaFeber student, and he ignores scholars who have tried to demonstrate the differences between territorial and commercial expansion. There is more orthodoxy than Handlin seems aware of since he did not use the works of James Field, Jr. and C. S. Campbell, Jr. Nor did he notice the recent "Forum" essays about the controversy in the *American Historical Review* where Field was matched against LaFeber and Robert Beisner.

Handlin's book has more merit when his warnings supersede dislikes. "The design of the creator may distort the image," he warns; and he cautions historians to distinguish "between the reality in the artist's

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mind and that outside it." Handlin reminds the reader of the numerous categories of sources, with which one must empathize objectively. Ego and vanity must be relegated to the pursuit of truth, although his own approach is questionable here, and his admissions to personal clumsiness, learning slowly, and sloppiness are unconvincing. He writes his own reprieve by describing constant self-appraisal sessions in the Alps where he learned that majestic peaks look much different when viewed from various angles in different kinds of light. Handlin's mountains stand out individually and disturb anyone who cannot see their peculiarities before trying to think about what the entire edifice means. Similarly, he believes that historians who try to "overinstitutionalize" history cannot master divergent sources. The revisionists of the Cold War and slavery, Handlin posits, have fractured a once honorable endeavor with conclusions that match preconceptions.

Handlin is guilty of the Manichaeian allegations he levels at the revisionists. Seen this way, the book is a self-defense. Handlin is quick to admit that he assisted in interdisciplinary courses combining history, sociology, and psychology at Harvard in 1945 to expand his analytical and imaginative faculties, not to be relevant. Maybe he was and maybe he wasn't, although he argues that he sampled other disciplines with only truth in mind.

He attributes great uncertainty and fear to present-day advocates of interdisciplinary approaches. Handlin is convinced that reliance on quantitative methods corrupts the Truth, and here he adds such radical works in terms of methods and interpretations as *Time on the Cross* and *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. Handlin considers Eugene Genovese, Robert Fogel, and Stanley L. Engerman, and their "parasites," as the leaders of overinstitutionalization. Much of their work is important to Handlin, but it loses force because of preconceptions and an "awkward present-mindedness," which, he argues, cause more falsification in the 1970s than ever before.

Handlin is more absorbed in the hunt for history's malefactors than in describing the institutional structures in which he thinks the radicals operate. He curiously enough—for all he has to say about the ineffectiveness of the Marxian determinist structures the revisionists use—appears as the self-righteous, Dickensian outcast. He writes that if he had another chance to choose a career it would not be history.

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