From Gentleman’s Club to Professional Body

The Evolution of the History Department in the United States, 1940–1980

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Introduction

From Gentleman's Club to Professional Body:
The Evolution of the History Department at Leading Universities in the United States, 1940–1980

So perfect was the order as the Yale history department sat down for lunch in the Branford College dining hall in the fall of 1940 that it resembled an academic great chain of being. The Branford dining hall itself embodied Yale in all its Gothic glory, with stained glass windows, elegant wood paneling, and a great Burgundian fireplace transported to New Haven from its original European castle. Sherry was served in the hour before lunch, and seating was assigned. At the center of a long table sat the department chair, flanked to his immediate right and left by the senior full professors, who were, in turn, flanked by the associate professors. At the ends of the table and sometimes at a separate table, depending on the size of the turnout, were the junior faculty, who, in accordance with tradition, did not address the senior faculty by their first names.1

While the department had several distinguished members, such as Samuel Flagg Bemis, Wallace Notestein, and Hajo Holborn, it was also a gentleman’s club, very waspish, and very much an extension of Yale itself as it stood in 1940. All the department
members were male, most of them held Yale degrees, and there were no blacks or Jews. There were also several faculty, known as “dollar a year men,” who took only a nominal salary from the university while supporting themselves and their families primarily from their trust funds. The department was also highly Anglo-centric, with its greatest concentration of faculty in English history, amounting to over a third of the department. Most of its members were extremely conservative. Sam Bemis and Wallace Notestein thought Franklin Roosevelt was the devil incarnate.²

Most of the teaching followed the lecture format, providing a narrative history of the critical political events and processes of the rise of western civilization from the Greeks to World War I, a narrative very relevant to the lives of the young gentleman of wealth and privilege seated in Yale’s classrooms.

By the 1980s the shape of the department had been dramatically altered. In 1940 the Yale history department had about twenty faculty; in 1982 it had seventy-one. By 1982 the department’s faculty included Jews, Africans, more than a dozen women, and they held degrees from universities around the world, including Oxford, U.C.L.A., Sao Paulo, SUNY Albany, and the University of Kentucky. Fewer than half its members held Yale Ph.D.s. There were no longer any “dollar a year men.” While the Yale department retained an anglophile quality, the percentage of English historians had been reduced from over thirty to less than ten, and there were now six historians teaching Asian history, six specializing in Africa and African American history, and even a specialist in the Hispanic peoples of the United States.

Thus, Yale department had ceased in large measure to be a gentleman’s club; like history departments at other elite universities, it had become a body of serious professionals. No longer could anyone enter its ranks on the basis of social position. And no longer could anyone receive a permanent place in it without surviving the most rigorous scrutiny. In most cases, junior faculty could not expect to advance without the publication of two major books, favorably reviewed. And there was no respite for the weary. Those who had been granted admission into the temple of the tenured

found that the expectations in terms of scholarly production rose even higher.

The social milieu of the department had also changed. While the department continued to have regular lunches, its hierarchical traditions were fading. Seating was no longer ordered to reflect the power structure. Indeed, younger faculty mingled with senior members, and sometimes appeared in the most casual attire. When Richard Fox arrived at Yale as a new faculty member in 1976, he left the great Vann Woodward speechless by appearing at the pre-lunch, “sherry hour,” in long hair, no socks, and sandals.³

This book is a study of how the change from gentleman’s club to modern department evolved at Yale, and at six other history departments in the United States, including Harvard, Princeton, the University of California at Berkeley, Wisconsin, Chicago, and Columbia. It is then, by definition, a study in academic modernization, a process by no means entirely completed and one not easily undertaken in any case.

The choice of these seven departments is based on two admittedly subjective criteria. The first is that these were the departments most frequently mentioned by the subjects of my research when I asked about which departments were most highly regarded, and the second is that there was a significant body of information about them. My selection of course is not intended to suggest that these are the only departments worthy of study, only that they provide a reasonable sample from which we can view change across time. There will undoubtedly be readers who will wish that other departments be included, but few would contest the ones that have been chosen.

In any event, change in higher education is a complex subject. Academics are notoriously uncomfortable with it and prefer that their curricula, research agendas, and value systems stay as fixed and immutable as the institutional stone of the campus buildings. But time pushes forward, devotion to custom and tradition recedes, and new generations arrive on campus with energy and vision, impatient with the calcified ways of their
elders.

In many cases the changes that occurred in history departments reflected changes going on in other departments across the university. Comparable patterns of professionalization, for example, occurred in English departments. Universities themselves, and, ultimately history departments, were affected by the emergence of a series of structural forces, particularly demographic and cultural, from which they at times both benefited and suffered from, and, over which they had little control.

The first seismic jolt to the traditional history department came immediately after World War II and followed the lead of Harvard President James B. Conant who built Harvard's reputation by waging a relentless campaign to make publication and scholarly reputation the most desirable qualities in a faculty member. Harvard exerts considerable influence on other institutions, and its standards were gradually adopted elsewhere and were by no means limited to history departments. Many departments in a variety of disciplines at elite universities in the 1950s began recruiting new faculty more on the basis of their promise for scholarly achievement rather than for their devotion to undergraduate teaching, their pedigree, or their agreeable companionship at lunch. Gifted undergraduate teachers continued to be valued, but scholarly production was increasingly becoming the coin of the realm by which departments were evaluated.

The appointments in the Yale history department of Edmund Morgan in 1955, John Morton Blum in 1957, and C. Vann Woodward in 1961 were prime examples of hires based upon scholarly achievement. Morgan and Blum especially were fine undergraduate teachers and all three were good company at lunch, but they were hired mainly for the excellence of their scholarship and the luster it would bring to the department.

However progressive they might be, Yale's appointments and those at most other history departments at leading universities, were still accomplished in the most old-fashioned, aristocratic manner. Democratic faculty governance was still a long way off. Most history departments and most academic departments generally at such universities were run by men raised and indoctrinated in the conviction that there was an intellectual and social elite to which they belonged by virtue of their birth or education. This elite believed that it was entitled to make most decisions on academic matters by themselves in or in consultation with a select group of others of similar temperament and experience.

Two of the greatest initiators of change in the fifties, George Pierson at Yale and Joseph Strayer at Princeton, operated in this manner. They knew what they wanted, and, on the basis of long experience with their departments and universities, assumed what they wanted would be best for their departments; they made appointments with a few phone calls and consultation with carefully selected senior colleagues.

When David Potter left Yale for Stanford in 1961, Morgan and Blum went to Pierson, a thorough New England aristocrat and a descendent of one of Yale's founders, and informed him that the only person who could replace Potter was Vann Woodward, then teaching at Johns Hopkins. Pierson thought about it for a moment and then immediately telephoned Woodward, offering him a Sterling Professorship, Yale's most prestigious chair. The consultation involved three people, and the deliberation took less than five minutes.

Building a more professional history department in the fifties referred to three main developments. It meant hiring faculty based upon their scholarly achievement or potential, the appointment of qualified Jews, and the expansion of the curriculum into areas outside of Europe and the United States. Teaching ability played relatively little role in hiring decisions. Several departments, most notably those at Princeton and Wisconsin, were quite concerned with the teaching ability of the faculty they hired. But faculty in other departments believed, along with Harvard's Conant, believed that good teaching was a function of good scholarship.

The appointment of faculty on the basis of their scholarship and the hiring of qualified Jews were closely linked. By the fifties leading figures in several departments had come to the realization that any department that aspired to be the best must be willing to
hire Jews. While the Harvard history department had two Jews on its history faculty in the early twentieth century, it did not hire another one until Oscar Handlin was appointed to a junior position in 1940 and its next Jewish hire was not until the early fifties. But, in 1958, in a move that had clear social implications, the department replaced its celebrated American colonial historian, Samuel Eliot Morison, a man of impeccable New England pedigree, with Bernard Bailyn, a Jew.

The willingness to appoint Jews reflected changes in progress in the academic world for some time. Anti-Semitism was commonplace, even rampant, in American universities before World War II. As David Hollinger has noted, "Jews were suspect in academia partly because many Anglo-Protestants thought them socially crude and aggressive, and politically radical." The history departments at Columbia and Wisconsin were both quite late in hiring Jews in part because of the anti-Semitism of their long-time chairs, Carleton J.H. Hayes at Columbia and Paul Knaplund at Wisconsin. In the early sixties, when Staughton Lynd visited Yale to interview for a position there, he was warned by one of his hosts to avoid buying a house in a particular section of New Haven because that was "where the sons of Abraham reside."

But in the post-war world, even the gentlemanly anti-Semites of the American academy were horrified by the Nazi treatment of the Jews. Moreover, Jews had been admitted for some time into graduate programs in leading history departments, and, it was clear that many of them were persons of exceptional ability. Anti-Semitism by no means vanished from American universities, but, in several cases, as we shall see, the desire to become a department of greatness overcame prejudice.

Despite lingering anti-Semitism on the campus, the most rapid infusion of Jewish faculty occurred at Berkeley. The German medievalist Ernst Kantorowicz was hired just before World War II, and in 1950 the department hired the Asianist Joseph Levenson, but the real explosion came later. By the end of the decade the department was hiring large numbers of Jews. Its appointments included David Landes in economic history, Thomas Kuhn in the history of science, Carl Schorske in European intellectual history, Lawrence Levine in American history, and Hans Rosenberg in modern European history. By 1964, several others, including Gerald Feldman in German history, Sheldon Rothblatt in modern Britain, Henry Rosovsky in economic history, and Leon Litwack in American history, along with many others, had been added.

At the same time, growing awareness of the need to know more about other parts of the world also affected history departments. Before World War II, most departments embraced a curriculum heavily tilted toward the histories of England, Europe, and the United States. By the fifties, it was becoming increasingly clear that these curricula were obsolete in the face of a new and threatening world. World War II had exposed American ignorance about Asia, and, by the fifties, it was evident that Americans were going to have to become more knowledgeable about other areas of the world. The rise of Communist superpowers and their perceived threat to American democracy made a deeper understanding of their history and culture imperative. Moreover, from the arms race to war in Korea, and the desires of peoples in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia to be liberated from colonial oppressors, it became clear that an America that remained ignorant of what was transpiring around the world was destined to become a prisoner of it.

It was at this point that several departments began seriously to expand their offerings in non-western areas. Harvard was ahead of the curve in terms of most American departments, having hired Clarence Haring in Latin American history in 1918, John King Fairbank in Chinese history in 1939 and Richard Frye in the history of the Middle East shortly after the end of World War II. Several departments had Latin Americanists, and Latin America was one of the strengths of the Berkeley department.

But the first real advances in coverage of non-western areas did not come until the fifties. Most departments added East Asian specialists, and, if they didn't already have them, Latin
Americanists as well. Princeton made some significant advances in appointing faculty in non-western areas in the decade or so after 1950, hiring Stanley Stein in Latin America, Marius Jansen in Japan, Fritz Mote in Asia, and Robert Tignor in Africa.

Hiring in non-western areas was also important because many leading universities prided themselves on their mission to provide the nation with people who possessed the expertise needed to govern or to advise those who did on the histories and politics of the developing world. In 1954 Clarence Haring retired at Harvard, and, as late as 1961 he had not been replaced. McGeorge Bundy, previously Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard, had been appointed John F. Kennedy's chief of staff. Shortly after his appointment, Bundy wrote a letter to Franklin L. Ford, his successor as dean, scolding him for allowing the Latin American position to go unfilled. Latin America, said Bundy, was emerging as one of the most troubled and dangerous areas of the world. How was Bundy supposed to conduct foreign policy in the region without a Harvard man to advise him?²⁷

This does not mean that the expansion of the curriculum into non-western areas was accomplished easily. It proved particularly controversial when adding a non-western position required sacrificing one in a traditional area; things moved more smoothly when non-western areas could be funded through grant money or by cobbling funds from several different sources. Non-western fields were established only with great difficulty at Wisconsin, where many of the senior Americanists derisively referred to it as "swamp history." It was only through the tireless efforts of Philip Curtin that non-western courses made it into Wisconsin's curriculum. One of the most dedicated advocates of non-western history, John King Fairbank of Harvard, came to despair of his colleagues' unwillingness to recognize the need for more positions in Asian history.⁸

The post-war expansion of the American economy had a mixed impact on history departments. On one hand, almost everyone benefited from an economy that was growing at an average rate of 3.5 percent a year between 1945 and 1970. During the same period the gross national product rose from around $200 billion to close to $1 trillion. Moreover, under the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of June, 1944, commonly known as the G.I. Bill, and later supplemented by additional measures, more than $13.5 billion was appropriated between 1945 and 1955 to provide education for veterans stampeding into colleges and vocational schools. At the same time, returning veterans, eager to make up for time lost to military service, also married in large numbers and started families. In 1940 2.5 million children were born. By 1950 the total increased to 3.5 million. Between 1950 and 1980, the American population increased by fifty percent.

Among the results was a sharp and continuous increase in the number of people going to college and in the funds available for higher education. To accommodate the demand, the size and quality of faculties in almost all departments increased between 1950 and 1970. Between 1950 and 1969 the size of the Berkeley history department increased from 25 to 65 faculty members. The rate of expansion was also rapid at the University of Wisconsin. Wisconsin had between six and nine faculty members before World War II, but had over sixty by the mid-sixties. State universities especially benefited from legislatures that had more money to spend than they knew what to do with. Times were so flush that at Berkeley, when the department was deadlocked between two candidates for one position, it was often permitted to hire both of them.⁹

The expansion of universities meant a pressing need for more faculty, and departments scrambled to train graduate students to meet the demand. By the late sixties, the University of Wisconsin had 650 registered graduate students, though not all of them were on campus, and, at one point, the department was awarding over sixty Ph.D.s a year. Several Wisconsin faculty were supervising thirty or forty doctoral students at one time. In the eleven years he spent as a faculty member in the Wisconsin department, William Appleman Williams directed thirty-seven completed dissertations. While Wisconsin's graduate program was exceptional, the production of Ph.D.s grew at other elite institutions as well.¹⁰

On the other hand, the expansion of state universities posed
problems for the private ones. For the first time the biggest state universities could offer competitive salaries, lighter teaching loads, and more research support than private universities. The possibility now existed for state universities to lure faculty away from places like Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. In the late sixties, the University of Michigan, for example, lured John Shy and David Bien away from Princeton, even though both held tenured positions there. In 1969 when Harvard enticed William Bouwsma away from Berkeley, he only stayed for two years before returning to Berkeley.

Yet another seismic jolt came in the sixties. In *People of Plenty*, published in 1954, the historian David Potter predicted that a new generation of Americans, raised in relative affluence and comfort as well as by more permissive standards of child rearing, would begin to question the values of its elders. By the sixties, there were new prophets in the land to encourage the young to challenge authority, experiment with drugs and sex, and generally reject the values of the generation that raised them.11

In 1959 Norman O. Brown published *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History*, in which he argued that, despite all of society’s efforts to deny it, whether it be through parental discipline, religious injunction, or social and educational indoctrination, human beings remained pleasure seeking animals. The book, popular with college students in the sixties, seemed to be one of several manifestos proclaiming that what passed as values were simply artificial barriers erected by society to deny the basic humanity of human beings.12

At the same time the civil rights movement exposed fundamental injustices in American society, and the war in Viet Nam seemed to have no strategic purpose other than to enhance the profits and powers of the perceived military/industrial complex. An emerging new left offered unflattering explanations for the pervasive racism and militarism of American society and encouraged students to challenge traditional forms of authority. Moreover, the massive expansion of American higher education in the 1960s had led to the creation of the “multiversity,” by which the university had become a hopelessly impersonal institution, mired in bureaucracy and operating like a large corporation.

By the early seventies every university whose history department is considered here faced some kind of student upheaval, some of them violent. While student protests turned out to be somewhat ephemeral, indirectly they had an impact on history departments. Students demanded more say in curricular matters, and almost every university reduced its requirements at some level. Students also wanted to break with traditional white, male, heavily western course offerings. These attitudes led to yet another seismic jolt to the traditional history departments in the late sixties and early seventies whereby courses in African and African American history, women’s history, and working class history were added.

Not only were new classes offered in black and women’s history, but blacks and, especially, women entered the profession in increasing numbers. Several institutions hired their first black faculty in the sixties and early seventies. Most were in African-American history, including Nathan Huggins at Harvard, John Blassingame at Yale, William Brown at Wisconsin, and Waldo Martin at Berkeley. A significant exception was the medievalist William Chester Jordan, hired at Princeton in 1967.

The entrance of women into the profession bears striking resemblance to the entrance of Jews in the fifties. There were a few women faculty members in history departments before the fifties, although they were mostly in large state universities like the University of Illinois, rather than in the eastern private schools. But, like Jews, women had been admitted, if often grudgingly, to graduate programs for some time. It was clear that many of them had extraordinary abilities and deserved faculty positions in leading departments.

But old prejudices died hard. Male faculty who wished to retain the gentleman’s club atmosphere, found many reasons to oppose hiring women, including the assumption that, once hired, women would just get married, have children, and leave the department high and dry. “Why should I take you on?” William B. Hesselbine snapped at a woman who wished to work with him
at the University of Wisconsin in the thirties. "All you are going to
do is get married, and I will have wasted all this time having you
work with me for a Ph.D." At the same time other male faculty
complained that a department that hired women would lose its
cohesion because men wouldn’t be able to talk with each other
freely in the presence of women; still others argued that if women
were hired, they would start sleeping with the male faculty.

In most cases, women were hired only with reluctance. The
appointment of Mary Wright at Yale in 1959, as well as that of
several others, was loaded with ambiguity. After declaring that a
woman would teach in the Yale history department only over his
dead body, George Pierson was instrumental in her appointment
as the first female faculty member in the Yale history department.
Adrienne Koch was hired at Berkeley in 1958 and was granted
tenure, but left in 1965. In the discussion concerning Nancy Weiss’s
appointment at Princeton in 1969, Joseph Strayer said, with a wink,
“we should hire her; she’s a good man.” And, while Harvard had
several female faculty in the junior ranks in the late sixties and
seventies, it did not appoint a woman to a senior position until it
hired Angelike Laïou in 1983.14

Change in history departments also operated in institutional
contexts where several intersecting worlds could collide. Each
institution studied here, for example, holds a unique conception
of itself which in turn shapes its attitudes toward internal reform.
Harvard believes it is the world’s greatest university and expects to
hire nothing less than the best faculty available, but also struggles
with the idea that people good enough to teach there actually exist; Yale suffers from a compulsion to keep up with Harvard,
but not with anyone else; Princeton takes pride in its devotion to
undergraduate teaching and relatively small graduate program; and
Wisconsin reveres the memory of its noble tradition in historical
studies dating back to Frederick Jackson Turner. Sometimes those
self-images change over time. Before 1960 at Berkeley, the history
faculty were deeply concerned about the department’s mediocre
image; by the mid-sixties they relished their reputation as an
outstanding department. Both Columbia and Chicago believe

that they are more serious and less concerned with pedigree and
social position than Harvard, Yale, and Princeton.

Institutions are also combinations of individual leadership
at different levels and bureaucratic structures through which
departmental change must be mediated. In several cases, college
presidents played significant roles in setting the agenda for their
universities as a whole, perceiving their mission to be constructing
a better university by recruiting better faculty. Conant at Harvard
and Kingman Brewster at Yale were examples of presidents who
took the initiative to improve the quality of their faculties generally,
and change in history departments mirrored changes occurring
across the university.

In other cases, change was promoted initially by ambitious
department chairs, eager to elevate the reputations of their
departments. In the 1950s most departments were small, where
persons with strong personalities, vision, political skills, and
institutional connections could determine the direction of a
department. George Pierson and Joseph Strayer are two examples
of department chairs who led by the power of their leadership
and political skills. They were both classic insiders, who were
undergraduates at the universities where they taught (Pierson
also held a Yale Ph.D.) and closely tied to their university’s power
structures. Because their institutional loyalty was unquestioned,
they could be trusted, even by those clinging to the old
traditions, to keep change from exceeding the boundaries of
permitted institutional aspiration. When an outsider, such as Carl
Bridenbaugh at Berkeley in the fifties, tried to effect change, the
road was considerably bumpier.

Moreover, chairs, such as Pierson and Strayer, by knowledge of
the rules (at Princeton in the fifties appointments at the instructor
and assistant professor level came within the exclusive purview of
the chair) and winning the support of two or three other senior
faculty, could control most appointments. In addition, because
they were responsible for making most of the hires, they were able
to build up a body of loyal retainers, thereby making it easier to
maintain their control of departmental matters.

By the sixties and seventies, however, scholarly reputation and ability to recognize the latest historical fads and fashions, began to outweigh institutional connection. The most formidable reformer of the sixties, Lawrence Stone at Princeton, a powerful personality to be sure, was able to push that department to still higher levels in part because of his international reputation as a scholar and his ability to see the future of the discipline.

By the seventies departments also faced another set of problems. Communities like Cambridge, Massachusetts, New Haven, Connecticut, or Berkeley, California, which were once small, highly attractive places to live, where faculty could live close to campus in affordable housing with good schools and cultural opportunities nearby, were victims of changing demographics. The flight to the suburbs, inflation, crime, high cost of housing, declining tax bases, and crumbling schools were just a few of the factors affecting university communities.

Where Harvard or Yale could once simply crook their fingers at prospective faculty and feel confident they would come, they now found themselves having to work at recruiting. It was necessary to convince prospective faculty that in addition to the privilege of teaching at a great university, they could find affordable housing, good schools for their children, and an agreeable lifestyle away from the university.

At the same time, a new demographic type appeared on the scene, the academic couple. In the fifties, with a few exceptions, candidates for faculty positions were usually men with a wife who did not work outside the home and who required no extra accommodation. By the seventies, not only were there more women applying for jobs, but candidates of both sexes often had a spouse with career ambitions which would require accommodation.

By 1980, then, a more broadly based, professional department had emerged, but its emergence introduced new problems as well as solving old ones. The very size of new departments made it hard to find direction. Moreover, where the faculties of the fifties had a fair amount common ground in their training, social backgrounds, and teaching or professional interest, departments were now so diverse and so specialized that faculty in them might as well have been in different disciplines rather than different subfields. Writing about the ways in which the American historical profession regarded the concept of objectivity, Peter Novick entitled his chapter on the eighties, “There was no King in Israel,” suggesting that the profession had lost a common purpose and direction.

There were other reasons why it was unlikely that the dramatic changes in history departments of earlier periods could be repeated. In addition to the size and diversity of departments, by 1980 democratic faculty governance and affirmative action had taken over. In the late sixties, Alvin Kernan, then the acting provost at Yale, commissioned Bart Giamatti, then a young assistant professor in the English department, who would later become Yale’s president, to rewrite Yale’s faculty handbook. Giamatti spent a summer working on it; Kernan was satisfied with his work, and copies were sent to the Yale faculty who uttered scarcely a peep. Kernan later noted ruefully that had he allowed a faculty member to rewrite the faculty handbook without running it through several committees and faculty leaders a few years later, the entire campus would have been turned upside down.

An administrative change of any significance now needed the approval of involved parties at numerous steps along the way. At the department level, decisions about how positions should be defined, what processes would be followed, who would be interviewed, and who would be hired were now matters for the entire department or at least an appointments committee. The days when George Pierson could pick up the phone and hire Vann Woodward were long gone.

At the same time, while a more professional department emerged by the eighties, the process was still by no means complete. While women had entered into the halls of the great gentleman’s departments, that transition was still difficult, and the number of women hired in history departments was still less than the percentage of women receiving Ph.Ds.

Moreover, while there was an exciting period of hiring at
the senior level in the eighties, the profession also faced serious problems. The post-war economic boom had come to an end. There were fewer jobs for historians, state universities faced major budget cuts, and private ones were forced to lift tuition to undreamed of levels. The search for outside sources of funding reached crisis levels at almost every elite university.

A few words should be said about the methods used in writing this book. I wrote my first book on Oliver St. John, a seventeenth century lawyer and parliamentary radical during the English Civil War. St. John left a tiny paper trail, consisting of a few speeches and a carefully deceptive, self-serving *apologia*. Most of his story had to be sifted through chance remarks in other documents. Getting information about him proved difficult as did gaining a sense of the kind of person he was. I moaned frequently to my friends about how nice it would be to have more direct evidence or to even talk to someone who actually knew him.

In the writing of this book, I faced exactly the opposite problem. The evidence available for this book was an embarrassment of riches. While several key persons involved in the process of creating the more professional department were dead, I could talk to people who knew them quite well, and to almost anyone among the living who was involved. I could even pose to my subjects the exact questions I wished to ask. I also discovered quickly that not only do most historians have very good memories, but those who also served as deans have even better ones. Additionally, several institutions had made serious efforts to preserve the historical record. Yale and Wisconsin have substantial collections of the papers of their eminent historians. For the last decade or so, the Bancroft Library at Berkeley has been engaged in developing an oral history collection of interviews with Berkeley faculty from all disciplines, including over a dozen history faculty from the fifties and sixties.

But the profusion of material proved to be almost as problematic in this case as the lack of it had been in the case of St. John. It was no easier writing a book with copious information than one with limited amounts. Most of this book is based on interviews with people who served in history departments between 1940 and 1980. I did some of the interviews in the mid-nineties for an earlier book, *Engagement with the Past: The Lives and Works of the World War II Generation of Historians*, published in 2001; some of the interviews were done by others and already accessible in print or repository; but most I did myself directly for this book.

Not surprisingly, the interviews came in all sizes and shapes, several of which pose problems for the historian. The first problem was that there were differing points of view even, and sometimes especially, within the same department. While there are significant exceptions, leading history departments, I discovered, were not always cheerful places. The burden of unwritten volumes haunts almost everyone. The junior faculty are often demoralized. At more than one elite institution, the pecking order jokingly, but not inaccurately, could be described as senior faculty at the top, followed by undergraduate students, graduate students, and, at the bottom, the junior faculty. Of course there are numerous variations. The senior faculty member who is an ogre to the junior faculty member whose tenure they opposed, is an angel to the junior faculty member whose tenure they supported.

Even for those who hold tenure in an elite department, nagging doubts remain. Others may hold a higher position in the eyes of the administration, make more money, or exert more influence. At Harvard and several other institutions considered here, salaries are negotiated between an individual faculty member and a dean of the faculty. Theoretically, no one knows what anyone else makes, but word does leak out, and the disparities can be wide. The question of "mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the most brilliant of us all?" often rears its head.

Moreover, while most of my subjects were extremely cooperative, there was a guarded nature to some of their remarks. Several insisted that their particular department was harmonious, a true community of scholars with no rivalries, power struggles, or unseemly scandals. Such attitudes were hardly unexpected. In addition to cherishing a possibly exaggerated sense of harmony,
the interviewees may have insisted on their department's essential harmony in part because they were aware that there remained people at the institution whose feelings could be hurt, friends whose reputations, even after death, needed to be preserved, and old wounds that could be reopened if they spoke too freely.

This is a problem because much of the argument here concerns decisions made about appointments and promotions. History departments at most leading universities guard their gates tenaciously, knowing that considerable attention within the profession will be riveted on who they admit and who they turn away. I made 1980 the cut-off date for the study partly in the hope that after a quarter of a century, some of the controversy and bitterness over some of these decisions had subsided. In some cases this was not true. There was more than one moment when the voice on the other end of the line said, "I better not say any more," on a decision made decades ago.

Happily, some level of closure was possible in other cases. At Berkeley, for example, the most bitter controversies in the department as it emerged as a noteworthy body concerned hiring of William Bouwsma in 1956 and the promotion of Thomas Kuhn in 1962. By 2005 it was no problem at all to get the surviving participants to talk freely about both episodes, and, no problem, I think, for me to understand what happened and why with a fair amount of clarity. But openness and clarity were not always possible at other institutions, and even in the example of the Berkeley, despite the emerging consensus about what happened, it was still largely the winners who got to put their case forward.

Given the discretion of some of my sources, I made it a point to try to talk not just to those who had thrived in their departments, but to the outlyers, those who had left, both by choice or by decree. Here I sometimes confronted the reverse of the original problem. While many retained some affection for the institution that scorned them, some of my interview subjects were so embittered that they would scarcely concede that anything good was happening in the department while they were there.

The problems in source material reflect the dilemma of the contemporary historian. When you write about dead subjects, you have only reviewers and colleagues to worry about. But, when you work in part with live subjects, you face a dilemma. The amount of material that you can draw out of people depends in large measure on your ability to establish a working rapport with them. Had I probed too deeply into sensitive matters, such as controversial tenure decisions and personal rivalries, I might have failed to gain that rapport or to gather much of the information I got in the book. On the other hand, it was necessary to ask unpleasant questions about such things as the entry of women and Africans into the profession, the feelings in the department concerning the student difficulties, and why certain people had failed to get tenure.

In the end there was no obvious way to resolve the difficulties in source material. As C. Vann Woodward noted many years ago, oral history is perhaps no different than any other kind of history. The historian asks questions, reads, selects, analyzes, interprets, and attempts to impose some level of order on the material. But in the face of conflicting testimony, there is no obvious scientific or testable principle to ascertain the truth. In the last resort, historical interpretation comes down to the weighing of evidence and the historian's best judgment of where the truth lies.

With a few important exceptions, we, as historians, have not been good about charting the institutional history of our profession. We are very good about charting its intellectual currents and changes in fashion, but less attention has been paid to the evolution of the profession itself. This book, hopefully, will serve as a first step in addressing that problem.

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7 Palmer, "Interview with John Womack" March 25, 2005


10 Palmer, "Interview with David Cronon," February 8, 2005.


16 Kiernan, In Plato's Cave, p. 151.
Conclusion

The Emergence of a More Professional Body

On a clear fall night, the campus of the University of California at Berkeley looks much as it did a half century ago. From the foot of the Sather Tower, one can see the Bancroft Library where Raymond Sontag had an office that was the envy of the rest of the department. One can also see Wheeler Hall, where most of the department was housed until about 1950, and Dwinelle Hall, where it is today and where the bitter departmental battles of the fifties were waged. With a few exceptions, the principals in those battles are long dead. It is no doubt fanciful, but, like walking the Gettysburg battlefield at twilight, someone who walks Dwinelle’s halls today can feel their presence. The ghosts of Carl Bridenbaugh, Ray Sontag, and others still haunt the corridors of the Berkeley history department.

Dwinelle Hall was only one of many sites where the modernizing of history departments occurred in the fifties and sixties. Similar, though less controversial processes occurred at Yale, Princeton, Wisconsin, and Chicago as well as Berkeley. To a certain extent, several of the steps in the process of modernization had occurred somewhat earlier at Harvard and Columbia, but, by the fifties many of the faculty members involved in them were nearing retirement, and it was time to rebuild again.
The process of modernization was triggered by several forces. The most obvious was the demographic transformation that followed World War II. The end of the war brought thousands of veterans, who had their studies interrupted by military service, back to college or graduate school, and the passage of the so-called "G.I. Bill" would bring still more. Their presence both increased the revenues flowing into American colleges and required more instructors to teach them. Moreover, as the post-war economy boomed in the fifties, more families could afford to send their children, male and female, to college, and a college education ceased to be regarded as something simply for the children of the affluent and increasingly as something that should be open to everyone.

The staggering numbers of students stampeding onto college campuses in the decade following World War II provided the money necessary to hire more faculty. But the kinds of faculty members who would be hired was determined by several visionary departmental chairs and distinguished senior members. In the category of visionary chairs, the most conspicuous of these were George Pierson at Yale and Joseph Strayer at Princeton, and, slightly later, William McNeill at Chicago. In the category of distinguished senior members, the most conspicuous of these was Carl Bridenbaugh at Berkeley.

All of these men wished to upgrade the quality and reputation of their departments by placing more emphasis on research and graduate education. But each of them had a distinctive sense of how to do it, which in the cases of Pierson, Strayer, and Bridenbaugh, at least partially involved chasing the elusive ideal of Harvard. Pierson wanted the Yale history department to rival Harvard's, and he thought that recruiting Harvard men was the surest way to make it happen. Strayer, a Harvard Ph.D., wished to hire faculty members who excelled in research and teaching, and he thought that those who held degrees from Harvard comprised the most likely, though not the only, group in which to find these qualities. At Berkeley, Bridenbaugh, who also held a Ph.D. from Harvard, wished to take what he regarded as an inferior department and make it the Harvard of the West. At Chicago, people holding Harvard degrees were certainly respected, but their superiority was not assumed. "I can read, and I can tell this guy isn't any good," McNeill remarked about one candidate.

How smoothly the process unfolded depended to a large extent upon the main person leading it. Pierson, Strayer, and McNeill were all insiders at their institutions. All three had also been undergraduates at the institutions where they taught. By the time they assumed the position of chair, they were closely connected to institutional power structures and were persons who could be trusted by administrators and older faculty to reform their departments without leaving devastation in their wake or bruising too many egos. The process proceeded smoothly in most cases at their institutions.

By contrast, Bridenbaugh was an outsider, contemptuous of almost anything connected to the "Old Berkeley." He was determined to reform the department whatever the cost, whoever's ego was bruised, and he treated the department's older faculty as if he were a German general and they were Polish stragglers in the way of Wehrmacht in 1939. The process of modernization therefore was much rougher at Berkeley than it was elsewhere.

At the same time, it became clear that any department that aspired to be the best would have to hire Jews, in part because Harvard, Columbia, and other schools had been admitting Jewish graduate students for several decades, and many of these students had established themselves as candidates with superior ability. Selection as a member of Harvard's Society of Fellows was (and still is) regarded as an unmistakable sign of the highest distinction. And the hiring of Harvard-trained Jews, such as Joseph Levenson and Thomas Kuhn at Berkeley, both of whom had been fellows of the Society, were breakthrough appointments at an institution which, in the fifties, had a reputation for anti-Semitism. At roughly the same time, hiring John Morton Blum at Yale and George Mosse at Wisconsin, signaled that Jews of ability could find jobs in history departments at two other American universities also known to possess an anti-Semitic strain.
A closely related component of modernization was the expansion of departments to include more faculty members teaching in non-western areas. While several departments had Latin Americanists and Asianists before the fifties, most departments still maintained highly western-centered curricula. World War II exposed American ignorance of areas outside the West, and the fifties saw a striking expansion of the number of people teaching in non-western areas. By the sixties, it was not enough to have one person in, say, Chinese history, and claim you had the field covered. It was the realized goal of William McNeill at Chicago to have the major areas of the world covered at least by two people with linguistic competence.

The addition of faculty to teach in non-western areas was not always achieved easily. At most institutions non-western history needed a tireless advocate to reach the unconvinced. At Harvard it was John King Fairbank, an Asianist, and at Wisconsin it was the Africanist Philip Curtin. While both, especially Curtin, succeeded in upgrading the coverage of areas of the outside of Western Europe and the United States, at the end of their careers, both reflected upon the difficulty they had particularly in convincing their Americanist colleagues to see the value in non-western courses. At Harvard, Fairbank remarked ruefully at the end of his career, “the faculty was not organized to accommodate an increase of tenured professors in East Asian history.”

In several cases, the modernizing of the history department required more than one visionary. While Pierson and Strayer took the initial steps at Yale and Princeton, the remodeling of their departments was not complete until a second stage in recruitment had occurred. After Pierson’s initial steps, the Yale department was vastly better by the early sixties than it had been a decade before, but the final steps in its emergence were not taken until the “class of 69” had been recruited largely under the leadership of Howard Lamar.

Even with the impressive recruiting of Joseph Strayer in the fifties, the Princeton department had reached a crossroads in the mid-sixties, until Lawrence Stone injected some new life into its ranks. His main contribution to the process was to take the lead in appointing several new faculty, distinguished in part by their interdisciplinary orientations, including Carl Schorske and Robert Darnton.

A second demographic force driving the modernization of history departments was the impact of the arrival of the “Baby Boom” generation on campus in the early sixties. Their arrival injected even more money into university budgets and required departments to hire still more instructors. Benefiting from an economy that continued to expand, generous state legislatures, granting agencies eager to help fund non-western areas, and new methods of reckoning available funds from endowments, American colleges and universities enjoyed a period of prosperity and expansion they had never previously experienced and are unlikely to see again.

It is also clear that increased revenue did not necessarily mean increased salaries, and financial incentives appear to have played little role in attracting new faculty. Oscar Handlin turned down a salary offer from the University of Chicago that was four times higher than his Harvard salary to stay in Cambridge. Stuart Hughes found that Harvard salary in the sixties was barely enough to survive. Yale initially offered John Blum less money to come to Yale than he was making at M.I.T. Members of the Columbia history department often had to find other means of making money, such as writing textbooks or teaching at other New York City colleges, to make ends meet. In most cases, it was the prestige of working in an elite department that motivated new faculty to come. Stanley Kutler recalled that when he was offered a job at the University of Wisconsin, he would have “walked to Madison to take it,” regardless of the salary.

But the arrival of the Baby Boom generation eventually produced difficulties for departments. For a variety of reasons, they tended to be more skeptical of authority than previous generations and more willing to question the wisdom of their elders. Their arrival also corresponded to a time when the Viet Nam War, the Civil Rights and Women’s Movements, and the
increasingly impersonal nature of the higher education in the United States raised fundamental questions about the nature of American society and the place of the university in it.

To express their misgivings, student leaders often determined that peaceful demonstration was insufficient to their purposes, and they occupied buildings, destroyed university properties and records, and terrorized administrators and faculty members. At Wisconsin a bomb planted in a laboratory and designed to go off in the early morning hours when it was thought that no one would be around, actually killed a graduate student in physics who happened to be working when it went off.

Dealing with the students proved to be a divisive issue. Many faculty members of that era sympathized with the students, opposing the war and supporting the various equality movements. But they doubted that the university was the proper place for the students to voice their protests and objected to the violence directed at buildings, administrative offices, records, and, sometimes, faculty. Angry debates erupted in several departments about how protesting students should be handled, and, in many cases, ill feelings among members lasted far beyond the end of student unrest.

On the other hand, student protest expedited the next phase of modernization. By the sixties, most departments were more professional, but remained for the most part all-white and all-male conclaves. Protesting students often demanded the hiring of more blacks and females and the teaching of courses in black and women's history. While several departments were already moving in this direction before the students began to protest, angry protestors clearly forced lagging departments to take action.

Of the various groups that fought their way into leading history departments in the fifties and sixties, women were the group that probably had the most difficult time. Even faculty members who believed that hiring of women was long overdue were unsure about how to behave towards them. Other male faculty displayed outright hostility. Most of the women who were hired in the sixties and seventies faced a wide range of reactions from male faculty. Some welcomed their presence and went out of their way to make them feel welcome; others were hostile. Still others ranted about the declining standards that compelled them to hire women.

It is stunning to note how quickly the boom came to an end. Approximately a quarter century of expansion halted abruptly around 1970 and 1971. In contrast with the free flow of money after World War II, the seventies brought economic hard times. The impact was harder on some departments than others. Yale, which, during the presidency of Kingman Brewster, had spent quite liberally, found itself facing a long period of hard financial times. At Columbia the history department went roughly a decade without tenuring a junior faculty member. At other places, such as Berkeley and Wisconsin, austerity simply meant fewer tenure-track appointments and no senior ones.

At some places, austerity meant that there was at least less departmental acrimony. With few or no new hires, there weren't as many job descriptions and appointments to fight about and no need to argue about the direction of the department. The great exception here was Harvard where the senior faculty appeared to fear that expanding the size of the department meant that they would be compelled to appoint inferior candidates, thereby compromising the department's quality and reputation. Expectations for tenure among the junior faculty at Harvard, already high, were driven still higher in the sixties and seventies, to the point where scarcely any junior faculty were tenured after 1970, not by lack of funding, but by the choice of senior faculty. The department which survived the austerities of the seventies the best was probably Princeton where the Davis Center provided intellectual excitement, and the department continued to make superb appointments, especially in European history.

The changes that occurred in history departments from 1940 to 1980 were about several things. On one hand they were about equalizing opportunity, that is, changing the composition of the WASPish, heavily male departments that characterized the first century or so of the profession's history to include other deserving
groups such as Jews, Catholics, blacks, and women. This process in American academic life, not limited just to history departments, is an often neglected part of the general movement to ensure civil rights for all in the years after World War II. At the same time, excellence in research became the defining characteristic of what constituted the best candidates, and, with a few exceptions, the reformers usually wanted the best scholars, regardless of race, creed, or gender.

But the transition of history departments from gentleman’s clubs to professional bodies was also about approach. Like history itself, historical trends and fashions move in phases. New light flashes across the eastern sky heralding the coming of an exciting new theory or approach with a flock of acolytes eager to plead its case. But, after many a summer dies the swan, and in time what was once fresh and innovative may seem stale and obsolete. It is possible to view the changing imperatives of the historical profession through the lens of the history department.

For much of the first half of the twentieth century, historians focused on writing the grand narratives of political and diplomatic history, and most history departments were composed of men who either taught or wrote in this fashion. By the thirties, under the influence of a variety of figures, including Marx, Weber, Charles Beard, James Harvey Robinson and the “New History,” and the French Annaliste historians, historians began to recognize the inadequacies of this approach. It attended mainly to elites and took little account of the social and economic contexts in which political and diplomatic activities took place.

In the United States it was mainly the “World War II Generation of Historians,” those born between 1908 and 1922, who were most affected by this change. Whether it was Edmund Morgan writing about the Puritans, C. Vann Woodward writing about the post-Reconstruction South, or Richard Hofstadter writing about the Populists, the historians of this generation still often wrote political history, but what they wrote most often was intellectual, religious, and political history placed in its social and economic context. By the mid-fifties, persons of this generation, usually men, writing this kind of history were the innovative young scholars of most leading departments.

Within a decade, however, there were evident flaws in this approach. With significant exceptions, such as Kenneth Stampp’s *The Peculiar Institution*, it was still a history which dealt mainly with white, male, western elites. And, next to Braudel’s *The Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, E.P. Thompson’s, *The Making of the English Working Class*, even the best intellectual and political history placed in context, looked somewhat narrow.

A new generation slouched toward Bethlehem, or at least toward New Haven and the other campuses of major departments. They preferred the history of disadvantaged groups, particularly slaves, women, and the working classes, and they needed new theories and approaches, borrowed from other disciplines to study them. To a large extent, the cutting edge of the discipline reflected the histories and of the groups, blacks, women, and working-class Jews and Catholics who had just been hired. In time, the western focus of much of this history would also be challenged.

In this sense, the transformation of history department reflected a process already at work in society as well as a defining moment for the profession. What history departments are today largely follows the processes and values established during the fifties and sixties. During the eighties and nineties, another seismic shift would occur as, among other things, cultural history vaulted to the forefront of the profession, and many departments confronted the challenge of post-modernist thought, but that is the subject of another book.