Book Review

Robert B. Townsend. *History's Babel: Scholarship, Professionalization, and the Historical Enterprise in the United States, 1880–1940*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013. 272 pp. Cloth $90.00.

In *History's Babel: Scholarship, Professionalization, and the Historical Enterprise in the United States*, Robert Townsend persuasively argues that the pioneering "scientific" historians, who displaced the "gentlemen" historians and founded the American Historical Association (AHA) in the 1880s, held a "capacious" view of historical work. That view lasted for about twenty-five years until it fragmented under the leadership of the second generation of scientific historians in the 1920s (p. 2–3). In Townsend's story, members of history department faculties at research universities were therefore not originally positioned as the "center," or norm, for all historical workers (p. 3). Rather, historical research constituted one dimension of what Townsend calls the larger "historical enterprise," meaning "the broad range of activities where such knowledge about the past is produced and used in an organized or systematic way" (p. 2–3).

Through this argument, Townsend aims to correct two kinds of historiography about the historical profession: that of "public historians" and that of university historians. Despite their somewhat opposing perspectives, both groups have overlooked the capacious understanding of historical work held by the first generation of scientific historians, instead assuming "that academics are the normative definition of history professionals" (p. 2). In refuting this assumption, Townsend also aims to challenge the normative role that current interpretations of the historical profession have assigned to research scholars. Instead, he presents "an expanded vision of the historical enterprise that tries to encompass the entire terrain over which academic historians have claimed some jurisdiction or authority over the past 130 years" (p. 2). This terrain includes precollegiate classroom instruction and the management and preservation of historical sources. His study examines how these areas of the historical enterprise gradually evolved into separate professions between 1880 and 1940.

Townsend focuses on the leadership, membership demographics, and professional activities of the AHA. Drawing heavily on the extensive archives of the AHA, he investigates "how competing spheres of professional identity and practice developed" (p. 3). Founded as the professional organization for the wider historical enterprise, the AHA "gradually pared its ambit of responsibility down to the interests of college professors and monograph writers" (p. 8). He argues that the

lines of professional distinction between the areas of the historical enterprise were conceptually and institutionally established by 1940, "when teachers at the secondary and collegiate levels and specialists in the archives and historical societies were essentially defined out of the larger project and voted with their feet by leaving the organization" (p. 8).

The book's narrative is cogently organized into three chronological sections that trace a complex story of professionalization, expansion, and fragmentation. Each section includes a chapter dedicated to a particular area of the historical enterprise. Part I discusses scholars' early efforts to establish a "scientific" method of historical research and define the professional boundaries of the historical enterprise from 1880 to 1910. Part II focuses on the period between 1911 and 1925, when early signs of fracture began to appear amid scholarly specialization and the expansion of the historical enterprise. Part III addresses the fragmentation of the historical enterprise when archivists and librarians, precollegiate teachers, staff of historical societies, and research scholars "scattered into separate professional spheres" between 1926 and 1940 (p. 8).

Between 1880 and 1910, American scholars of history began to articulate a more "scientific" method of historical scholarship and training adapted from the German model of doctoral education, which culminated in the production of original research based on primary source material. As the distinctive method of this new program of doctoral education, original primary source research made history a unique discipline and, ultimately, profession. The formation of the AHA in 1884 laid the foundation for a profession whose expertise included primary source research, archiving historical sources, writing history, classroom teaching, and applying historical knowledge to daily life. In 1895, the AHA began publishing the *American Historical Review*, which featured primary sources, original scholarship, bibliographic essays and indices, book reviews, as well as discussions of teaching practices. To support archival collection, the association established the Historical Manuscripts and Public Archives Commissions. The AHA also led public discussions of issues related to history teaching, "which played a fundamental part in establishing history as a profession" (p. 55). Five AHA members participated in the Committee of Ten sponsored by the National Education Association (NEA) to outline a national curriculum. In 1896, the organization assembled the Committee of Seven to promote the study of history in public schools and establish a basic curricular structure for secondary history education that still exists today. Overall, the AHA had developed an "emerging infrastructure of commissions and conferences" to support the varied interests of the wider historical enterprise by 1910 (p. 54).

Between 1911 and 1925, the historical enterprise began to show signs of strain, fracturing under "intellectual and demographic

pressures in the discipline" that "promoted an inward turn by many in the academy" (p. 77). History faculties at research universities expanded and produced more history PhDs, while the length of dissertations grew from articles to books. The rising numbers of trained historians facilitated the diversification of historical scholarship, and the number of serial publications devoted to specialized areas of historical scholarship grew commensurately. As notions of historical research became increasingly abstract and divided into "narrow subfields," it became "harder to rely on a common language and tools for assessing the quality of scholarship" (p. 87). Scholars turned to the AHA to establish standards and regulate historical scholarship, marginalizing the interests of archivists and teachers in the organization. By the mid-1920s, the AHA had come to dedicate a substantial portion of its activities and resources to promoting the interests of research scholarship.

Meanwhile, many more students were entering American higher education, and this expansion shifted the focus of academic work toward teaching. In addition, the movement for a "New History" encouraged historians to explore social and cultural issues using primary sources taken from daily life, placing "new pressure on archivists and documentary editors to gather a wider range of materials" (p. 80). At the same time, new technologies strengthened the professional network of historical societies and archival organizations, which could now share collections and more easily distribute them to a wider audience. These developments placed further "strain [on] the relationship between academics and the specialists employed in other areas of the historical enterprise" and by 1925, had "started to pull these constituencies apart" (p. 101).

From the mid-1920s to the 1940s, the historical enterprise fragmented into separate professions. After 1925, "younger generations of academics took up leadership positions" in the AHA and "sought to establish a clear set of professional parameters for... their increasingly esoteric subjects of research," and the AHA "took on the shape of a professional organization intended primarily for 'research men'" (p. 133). Consequently, archivists and historical societies departed the AHA to form their own organization, the Society of American Archivists (SAA) in 1935. The AHA also "relinquished much of its authority in the area of history teaching at the secondary level... by failing to engage in the increasingly rigorous discussions about the professional interests of teachers" (p. 130). History teachers distanced themselves from academic historians, preferring to identify their interests with those of other teachers and the education community. The National Council for Social Studies (NCSS), which had been closely associated with the "New History" movement of the AHA, joined the NEA in 1925, and became an independent "professional association for history teaching"

by 1939 (p. 179). The AHA did little to win back archivists, historical societies, or pre-collegiate teachers, and by 1940, "the professional fragmentation of the historical enterprise was complete" (p. 179).

This interpretation, based on Townsend's 2009 dissertation, is carefully researched. He has meticulously examined the membership records, dissertation lists and publications contained in the AHA archives, as well as manuscript collections held by the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, Harvard University, and the Library of Congress. The tables and charts are especially helpful in summarizing empirical evidence regarding patterns in organizational membership and historical scholarship. As the former deputy director of the AHA, Townsend focuses on developments within that association and debates among its leaders, and devotes less attention to events in history departments. Despite his announced intent to "recenter" discussion around the "more capacious" historical enterprise, Townsend casts academic historians in the center of his narrative, and one hears from comparatively few individuals in archival management, precollegiate teaching, or local historical societies.

Nevertheless, Townsend has produced a well-written and well-documented book with an informative and stimulating argument. Though concluding in 1940, Townsend's account has continued to have relevance to all those currently training or seeking employment in all areas of the historical enterprise. For academic historians, the work offers a longer perspective on the current employment trends and encourages recent history PhDs to think beyond the bounds of academic employment. Townsend's book also encourages public historians and archivists to reconsider the origins of their fields and their relationship to research scholars. Townsend's work also makes a valuable contribution to the historical literature on higher education by examining how the nature of academic research and disciplinary knowledge influenced the professionalization of academic scholarship in the early twentieth century. In addition, his study suggests how historians of education came to be housed in schools of education rather than history departments. This work is also relevant to preservice social studies teachers interested in the development of their prospective fields. In sum, *History's Babel* is a well-crafted and insightful work with wide relevance to anyone interested in American higher education during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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