

# Introduction: Winding Down—Somewhat

*Robert Hampel*

What would you study if life were endless? What are the topics you would like to explore but realize you never will? For this issue of our journal, I invited four historians to answer those questions and I asked five others to comment on their papers.

I hope these pages offer young historians many topics to investigate. A novice might fear that all the good ones are gone. With so many books and articles in print, what remains to be done? How can rookies ever find a neglected subject that is not trivial? How often does anyone have the luck of Michael Katz, whose majestic dissertation began when a Harvard classmate mentioned a ledger book in the Beverly town hall?<sup>1</sup> In contrast, we old fossils usually think of more things to research than we have the time and energy to undertake.

So what do we veterans do? In the spirit of this issue, we share. We can share in print, using footnotes or bibliographies to point out the hidden treasure. As a graduate student I always appreciated seeing the people I revered claim that “we badly need work” on whatever they considered overlooked (that word *badly* I found inspiring—they were not fooling around). It was exciting to read dozens of those exhortations in Daniel Boorstin’s long essays at the end of each volume of *The Americans* trilogy and, closer to home, there were many references to unplowed fields in the monumental Cremin bibliographies in his three volume tour de force. As a result, I began to put a “T” (for “topic for future research”) in the margins of articles and books, writing a few lines about the most interesting Ts for a “TFFR” manila file folder.

I did not keep a diary, unlike psychologist Abraham Maslow, who started his journals primarily to let posterity have “everything unfinished, all that is  $\frac{1}{4}$  or  $\frac{1}{2}$  done . . . it will save all of my forgotten insights, beautiful ones that are lost because I have too many of them to work them all out or even to classify & save efficiently.” At age 57, he mourned the lack of time with a powerful metaphor: “there are so many births from among which I have to choose a few & let the offspring die.” He was not bashful about the value of his journals. Before teaching a class

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<sup>1</sup>Wayne J. Urban, ed., *Leaders in the Historical Study of American Education* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2011), 183.

one morning, he wrote, "I must get this in print before I die. It will change the world! And the thought: My God, I may die or get killed this A.M. What a pity! So better catch at least a few notes before I go & risk my life in traffic." Maslow often preferred jotting random thoughts over developing them later. The notes could be the end, not the start. As he fretted in one entry, "If only they let me publish my rhapsodic memos, the first drafts. No! Publishing is definitely in the hands of obsessional tightasses, & much of my work will die with me."<sup>2</sup>

To avoid that fate, literary critic George Steiner at age 77 described the seven books he had envisioned but set aside. In *My Unwritten Books*, Steiner devotes a chapter to each uncut gem. Readers of *HEQ* will enjoy "School Terms," his reflections on secondary and higher education in Europe and the United States. The proposal for a curriculum featuring music, math, architecture, and genetics (including the history of each field) is so stimulating that an entire book would have been a treat. Equally stimulating would have been a longer exposition of "The Tongues of Eros" chapter, an autobiographical exploration of the cross-cultural intersections of language and sexuality, "how the making of love is a making of words and syntax"<sup>3</sup>—the joys of the multilingual Casanova who knows how the "ache will differ from language to language, from dialect to dialect." I bet that book would have sold a few more copies than the unwritten volume on Rowena, Jemima, and Ben, the Steiner family dogs.

Another way to share our bright ideas is more widespread than the Maslow and Steiner strategies: we offer them to our students. For instance, John Morton Blum began his doctoral seminar at Yale by describing thirty different topics in twentieth century U.S. history, each suitable for a term paper *and* for expansion as a dissertation.<sup>4</sup> Michael Kammen did the same thing when I was a second-year graduate student at Cornell and, as one result, a friend of mine spent the next fifteen years analyzing wills to understand inheritance patterns in seventeenth and eighteenth century New York City.<sup>5</sup>

And then there are many historians who simply keep working. Maybe they think time is endless, that they will not die with any loose ends or scraps of paper in their equivalent of the "New Things" desk cubbyhole where Thomas Edison stored ideas for experiments. William McNeill reached a point where he was sure that "my life's ambition is

<sup>2</sup>Richard J. Lowry, ed., *The Journals of Abraham Maslow* (Lexington, MA: Lewis Publishing Company, 1982), 1, 2, 188, 26.

<sup>3</sup>George Steiner, *My Unwritten Books* (New York: New Directions, 2008), 71.

<sup>4</sup>John Morton Blum, *A Life with History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 142.

<sup>5</sup>David E. Narrett, *Inheritance and Family Life in Colonial New York* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).

now accomplished.” He wrote that when he was 86, we learn from his autobiography.<sup>6</sup> Most historians who wrote their own lives loved to work, so it is no great surprise that they continued to publish long past 70. Allan Nevins had a stroke at 77, yet six weeks later he was working on the final two volumes of *The Ordeal of the Union* and starting a biography of Admiral Nimitz.<sup>7</sup> John Lucas called his old age “a leaking ship” but he wrote ten books from 68 to 88.<sup>8</sup> Thomas Clark finished his autobiography when he was 101.<sup>9</sup> For those historians, retirement was what John Hope Franklin aptly called “winding down—somewhat.”<sup>10</sup> Working to the last day of his life, the perfectionist–procrastinator Frederick Jackson Turner left thirty-four file drawers of notes and several unhappy editors. No wonder his dying words were “Tell Max [Farrand] I am sorry that I haven’t finished my book.”<sup>11</sup>

What have the rest of us not finished—or even begun—and who will benefit from our seed corn in the future? Isn’t it time for more of us to file and share our topics for future research? I was disappointed when I read the first one thousand finding aids for the Yale University archives to see how many historians’ papers had a folder or box with TFFR. Of the ten historians, not one had it. But after scanning all those finding aids, I added a few more scraps to my own folder. You never know where the next good idea will come from.

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<sup>6</sup>William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Truth: A Historian’s Memoir* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 156.

<sup>7</sup>Ray Allen Billington, compiler, *Allan Nevins on History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1975), xxiv–xxv.

<sup>8</sup>John Lukacs, *Last Rites* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 76.

<sup>9</sup>Thomas D. Clark, *My Century in History* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006).

<sup>10</sup>John Hope Franklin, *Mirror to America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), chapter 23.

<sup>11</sup>Ray Allen Billington, “Why Some Historians Rarely Write History: A Case Study of Frederick Jackson Turner,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 50, no. 1 (June 1963): 27.