

## Historians in Public: The Practice of American History, 1890–1970

Rebecca Conard  
*Middle Tennessee State University*

ISSN 0003-4827

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### Recommended Citation

Conard, Rebecca. "Historians in Public: The Practice of American History, 1890–1970." *The Annals of Iowa* 65 (2006), 252-254.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.1050>

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## Book Reviews and Notices

*Historians in Public: The Practice of American History, 1890–1970*, by Ian Tyrrell. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005. xii, 348 pp. Notes, index. \$57.00 cloth, \$23.00 paper.

Reviewer Rebecca Conard is professor of history and director of public history at Middle Tennessee State University. Her most recent book is *Benjamin Shambaugh and the Intellectual Foundations of Public History* (2002).

Not since Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream* appeared in 1988 has an intellectual historian given us so much to think about. In *Historians in Public*, Ian Tyrrell demonstrates that from 1890 to 1970 the historical profession "adapted to and influenced its changing publics more than the profession is given credit for, though not evenly and not always in ways that are readily apparent" (2). Three publics interest Tyrrell: mass culture, the classroom audience, and the particularist audiences associated with "marketing history as a discipline relevant to state legitimation and public policy" (7). The book is organized around these audience categories.

Part 1, "The Broken Mirror," examines the process of specialization that, according to Tyrrell, has been driven, in part, by historians' concerns about audience, or relevance. Such concerns, he claims, are "not separable from the question of the perceived power, influence, and social position of professionalized history" (26). Tyrrell dismisses the accepted idea that the new social history of the 1960s initiated a new intellectual current. Rather, he argues, it ushered in a new wave of specialization; in the larger picture, "the underlying call of the New Left for 'relevance' and inclusiveness continued the project of the (now old) New History" (39).

Part 2, "Historians and the Masses," follows the trajectory of popular media formats to examine academic historians' pursuit of wider audiences through books, film, and radio. He demonstrates that both academic historians and professional writers enthusiastically participated in the enterprise of developing a national culture through popular history, aided by new mass marketing techniques in the publishing industry and the expansion of public libraries. Importantly, World War I stimulated public interest in understanding the historical forces that led to the conflict, and New Deal programs, especially the Federal

Arts Project and the Federal Writers Project, fostered public interest in American culture, traditions, and heritage.

The story of academic historians and public school curricula is more complicated. In Part 3, "The Problem of the Schools," Tyrrell demonstrates that Progressive historians succeeded in maintaining the distinctiveness of history when integrated social studies took hold in the 1920s. World War II changed the intellectual dynamics, however. Riding a crest of patriotism, conservative academicians gained strength, and, as a result, the historical profession "ceased to make a case as to why history was an important school subject to preserve" (149). By the 1950s, he asserts, the American Historical Association (AHA) had all but abandoned K-12 teachers.

In Part 4, "Public Histories," Tyrrell devotes four chapters to developing an interesting thesis about the genesis of public history in the United States. He makes a distinction between "historians in public" and "public history" as a field or subdiscipline, but his discussion of applied history initiatives is almost always tied to the AHA or to academic institutions. He argues that the origins of applied, or public, history are to be found in the third audience category, particularist audiences associated with state interests. He posits that academic historians became "servants of the state" in their "search for usefulness." "Long before the crisis of relevance in the 1960s, historians in the United States had become strong proponents of applying history to solve social problems." In short, by applying their "knowledge and skills to public issues through federal and state governments," academic historians largely created the field of public history (149). To buttress his argument, Tyrrell compares American historians' outreach activities ("the work of experts") to British public historians' preference for "people's history." "The American tradition," he asserts, "became one of academic involvement in public activities. . . . In this way, public history has been an extension of academic history" (157). As a result, this book will resonate most agreeably with those who argue that all history is public history and with those who conflate the terms "public intellectual" and "public history."

*Historians in Public* is rich in ideas, insights, and detail, but Tyrrell's argument about the intellectual foundations of public history is flawed. He does not examine the whole practice of history at the local and state levels; he ignores the practice of history in privately funded cultural institutions as well as business corporations; and he also ignores the work of non-academic historians in shaping standards of professional practice, especially in museums and archives. Still, the four chapters of Part 4 merit close reading, for they shed a bright light on the shadowy

area that links academic and public history. Tyrrell expertly weaves “threads of continuity” from Progressive historians to the 1970s and beyond. He demonstrates that Progressive historians, operating on the margins of the profession, instilled a tradition of activism among American historians that continues to the present, citing in particular the “formation of the Conference of Historical Societies within the AHA in 1904, the applied history initiatives of Benjamin Shambaugh, and the myriad of projects sponsored by the Department of Agriculture and by the New Deal . . . [t]he National Park Service, the Department of Defense, and other federal agencies” (250). That same activist strain led historians to experiment with various mass media formats to communicate with broad audiences and to wade fearlessly into the discourse on K–12 history education. These indeed are important historical ties that bind academic and public historians, and they continue to shape scholarly discourse as well as professional practice.

*John Caspar Wild: Painter and Printmaker of Nineteenth-Century Urban America*, by John W. Reps. St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society; distributed by University of Missouri Press, 2006. xx, 164 pp. Illustrations, appendixes, catalogue raisonné, bibliography, notes, index. \$51.95 cloth.

Reviewer Charles K. Piehl is professor of history at Minnesota State University, Mankato. He has written many articles about the relationship between art and society in the works of Robert Gwathmey.

This profusely illustrated volume is the first attempt to account for all of the American work of the Swiss-born artist John Caspar Wild (ca. 1804–1846), whose paintings and prints from the 1830s and 1840s provided a visual sense of the architecture and views of the growing cities from Philadelphia to Cincinnati, St. Louis, and the Iowa and Illinois towns of the upper Mississippi River. John W. Reps, the author of many studies of nineteenth-century urban planning and development, has published widely on the importance of views and view makers in urban development. Hence Wild, who produced important views of the changing urban surroundings, is a logical subject of this beautiful volume.

The artist arrived in Philadelphia in 1832, where he attempted to gain the patronage necessary to survive in the port city. Wild gained a general reputation and showed promise, particularly through his depiction of the Fairmount Water Works near the city, but he did not find long-term financial success, so, like so many others at the time, he left for what he hoped would be better opportunities elsewhere.

In Cincinnati in 1835 he apparently sought patrons among the commercial leaders who were flocking to the emerging city along the banks