

Public History – a Provocation

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The term 'public history' is distinctly tricky by virtue of its range of meanings and the diverse reactions it elicits. Everyone is familiar with E.P. Thompson's phrase about rescuing the working-class from the condescension of posterity in his *The Making of the English Working Class*, 1963. Recent weeks have seen Niall Ferguson condescend to Jane Smiley, a historical novelist, on R4's Start the Week, and her riposte in the *Guardian* on 17th October. For him fiction cannot be history in any meaningful sense, for her it can. For him history is research intensive, but so is her work, she protested.

Condescension is common in the face of some forms of public history, as words such as 'populariser' can easily suggest, and so does the assumption that writing for wider audiences is somehow diluting not just the past but the scholarship of those who do so. There are some notable exceptions, of course, the books by and reactions to Christopher Clark and Adam Tooze, for example. So it would be worth examining these instances to see what sets them apart. But in the Ferguson/Smiley case, there is an all too familiar hierarchy of historical genres.

I consider historical fiction to be a major form of public history, hence this episode is of considerable interest for our discussions today. It would take far longer than I have this morning to disentangle the disagreements, the misunderstandings and the strong feelings involved. But I take the Ferguson/Smiley encounter as a telling example of some of the difficulties that arise in talking about 'history' in public. Whether we 'like' or sympathise with one or other side is hardly the point. I happen to feel that novelists can also be historians, if in ways we want to specify, case by case, book by book as we would with any historical genre. All genres, like the works within them, invite such careful analysis.

There are three issues arising from Ferguson's condescension to Smiley that we may want to consider today. The first and perhaps most obvious is the forms of paring down that may be involved in presenting accounts of the past to non-specialists. For example, accounts may be deemed simplified if they do not include footnotes and bibliographies, since readers are relying on a persuasive narrative without having the option to assess for themselves the kinds of mediation necessarily involved. Although some novels have footnotes, on the whole general readers do not want a massive scholarly apparatus. Many non-fiction trade books have a rather light supporting structure, often at the publisher's request. The problem becomes more acute with forms of representation where the authority behind any claims may be unclear – exhibitions, some websites, TV and film, for instance. Jane Smiley doesn't parade the depth of her research, so it is difficult to assess it in conventional ways.

The second issue concerns the role of the imagination: 'I have to use my imagination to make connections, to evoke feelings, to show patterns, to build a logical structure', Smiley insisted in her *Guardian* piece. She continues 'But then, my historian colleague must do the same.' It is unclear to me precisely what Ferguson's position is on the role of imagination in historical practice, but it is evident that most forms of public history, however we define the term, involve not only the imagination but forms of imaginative collusion, that is, audiences *actively* participate in some way. It is worth reflecting on such collusions, no matter what kind of history one practices, or consumes.

The third issue revolves around the language we use to analyse historical practice. In the radio programme, Smiley characterized history in terms of 'events', which allowed Ferguson to come right back her with a riposte: it's about much more than this, he claimed. But, without defining their terms, and some philosophical discussion, what are broadcasters supposed to do? Smiley was reaching for a quick way of making a point, and the term used tripped her up, I think. 'Truth' is another such term, and so is 'fact', and indeed 'history'. Smiley has a doctorate, is a Pulitzer Prize winner and has published non-fiction works, but she is not a historiographer, as it were. And would it be appropriate to go into these matters on Radio 4 or in the *Guardian*? Commonsense, and often quite reductionist, meanings of such terms do inhibit public discussion, channel debate into simplistic polarities. I am not sure what the solution is here, but one conclusion might be that it is the role of public history as a field to address the difficulty.

Running through all these points, however, are questions about hierarchies, especially of knowledge. All scholars can benefit from engaging with them. My main provocation consists of just this – public history, both the field and the range of practices – history in public, crystalizes many central issues of historical practice, and hence is relevant to all historians as well as to others, and should not be seen just as a new specialism and accordingly as only for a select new group of specialists, since this can easily tip into a sense that other people/historians don't have to bother with it.

As historians, as citizens, public history touches us directly if in a multitude of intricate ways that are difficult to disentangle. Jane Smiley suggests that we think of genres not as a hierarchy but as 'a flower bouquet, with different colours, scents and forms...' It is a delightful simile: social and political realities, however, demand that we are thinking all the time about the *quality* of knowledge and the broad implications of historical claims, topics that must also be central to public history in so far as it claims to be an academic field.

I'd like to draw your attention to what I see as an irony here. On one reading, much public history is under-conceptualised; for instance, popular history may concentrate on lists of key facts, often surprising or piquant in some way – this is common in history magazines. Such formats reinforce common beliefs about facts and dates lying at the heart of history. I am bemoaning a separation of public history from other parts of the discipline, yet at the other end of the spectrum, so to speak, we have had another field emerging over the same period – variously referred to as history and theory, historiography, or historical theory. These two more or less simultaneous changes show how easy it is for the discipline of history to fragment, and for this to happen in ways that generally affirm rather than challenge existing intellectual hierarchies, which tend to rate refined theoretical perspectives more highly than assemblages of information. It is a further irony that many historical websites – a major form of public history and frequently connected to the sophisticated field of digital history - consist of and celebrate just such assemblages.

So I thought it would be useful to put, in the most direct way possible, some of the issues that 'public history' raises. Some further context may provide a fuller sense of my perspectives.

I first became aware of the phrase 'public history' in the 1990s, and when preparing the first edition of *History in Practice* (first edition, 2000, second edition, 2006), I asked all the historians I interviewed in order to get a more rounded view of the discipline, what they understood by it. Most replied that did not know what it meant. I devoted a whole chapter to the topic because I cannot see how any practicing historian can responsibly ignore the ways in which their field is alive in the world beyond educational institutions

and professional associations. This is why my main point today is that public history is about history in its broadest sense and that consequently there are costs to treating it as a specialist field more about 'popularization' than about 'real' history.

The vast majority of practicing historians do now have some idea of what public history refers to, even if there are many different ways of construing it. There are posts and courses, journals and textbooks. Hence we might assume that public history has arrived. However, this is only a partial account, and I suggest that we need to adopt a more critical perspective. In part this is precisely because, as I hope I have already shown, the meanings of public history are both unclear and contested. One obvious fissure here is between those who believe that it should be generated through grass roots activity, and those for whom it should be practiced by professionals. My Ferguson/Smiley example has not addressed the grass roots question, since novelists too tend to be 'professionals'. As it happens, I do not see any obvious professional/amateur polarity. In any case, advocating forms of public history from below and stressing the need for trained historians to be involved are not wholly incompatible positions: a crowd sourced exhibition can nonetheless be curated by a museum professional. An exhibition in the Bankfield Museum, Halifax, *For King and Country*, is a good example, while authoritative websites are made possible by volunteers – the Clergy of the Church of England Database, for instance.

Nonetheless there are important political issues here: if we think about the activities at Ruskin College, Oxford as a case in point, these are more bottom up than many of the forms of public history in the USA and Canada, where the field is considerably more professionalized. And their emphasis is certainly a considered political position.

But why should 'public history' be a separate, delineated field at all? Perhaps a curious question, and there are two rather different ways of thinking about it. The first follows patterns of professionalization and of the deployment of historical expertise in public life, which, in a world that places great emphasis on structured occupations, formal qualifications, and the recognition of specialized knowledge is highly likely to result in a new field, with all the *paraphernalia* that goes with it. With ever more pressure on jobs related to history since the Second World War, these phenomena help people build careers, while institutions and organisations assist practitioners in their interactions with preexisting structures, such as legal systems. This pattern is so common that it would be surprising to find any field, especially if it made claims to public value, *not* following it. Since historians study just such shifts, it is helpful if they are aware of them in their own lives and settings.

The second route is rather different. It recognizes that 'public history' refers to highly diverse phenomena, and that it is these phenomena with their complex 'public' status that invite our attention. Such complexities require skills, insights and knowledge that are 'specialized'. This line of thought might be developed further to stress the activities that are involved with making history public, in which we might well be participants rather than observers. Many academic historians, for example, have little idea how museums work, and this leads to frustrations on the part of museum professionals when, largely because of the Impact agenda, they are expected to conjure up exhibitions for nothing in a short period of time. The point has implications for the practice of history, certainly for forms of education, which are now building relevant forms of training in, especially at doctoral level. Arguably, making and responding to public history has become or is becoming integral our professional lives. But, as I have already suggested, public history is also central to our lives as citizens, and perhaps we can also use our roles as consumers of 'public' culture more fully. Having a domain called 'public history', then, should help us to think through these issues as well as to practise history more energetically, openly and in more diverse forms.

It's important to accept that there cannot be stability when it comes to what is meant by 'public'. Its generative qualities come from its richness – it is better to embrace this rather than bemoan ambiguity. When I told a colleague that I was interested in public history, he responded, 'I didn't know there was any other kind'. I was initially flummoxed by the comment, but the more I thought about it, the more interesting it became. What would 'private' history look like, if we take a term commonly thought to be the opposite of 'public'? When we publish, we enter a public realm. And can there really be watertight distinctions between history by and for the public and the history produced in and for academic settings? Here again the writings of Tooze and Clark are relevant. Nonetheless the heterogeneity of what falls under at least some definitions of public history should give us pause for thought. There are many significant differences between, say, war memorials that were designed to remind future generations of the conflict in question, of those who lost their lives, and to provide a focus for survivors, and an exhibition designed to provide visitors with historical understanding of that very same war.

One possible way of tackling this is to consider the level of historical focus involved. Buildings, squares, street names and so on are largely out of focus, brought sharply in when threatened in some way, or changed in a controversial manner. A paying exhibition, by contrast, will be in focus for visitors, who have chosen to engage with it, although what they may 'learn' in the process is likely to be highly variable. Another way is to take what we might think of as boundary cases: costume drama, historical fiction, art exhibitions, for example. Let us take all 'historical' forms seriously, precisely because they help us attend to questions such as the nature of historical imagination, the representation of moral complexities in the past, and forms of identification with people, places, and processes in earlier times. All these are themes that concern scholars with a theoretical bent.

To conclude: public history in all its senses stands for the ways in which the past is mediated and for the continual need to reflect critically on those ways. Accordingly it is central to the discipline and to citizenship. It must not be condescended to. Yet to engage with it fully, it is necessary to have a certain tool kit, which brings together sympathy, knowledge, experience and reflection. As a field public history can help to assemble, refine and refresh these tools. I have argued that the ranking mentality is unhelpful, perhaps it is even pernicious. But in saying this, I am not inviting a thousand flowers to bloom, on the contrary I suggesting we get out there and engage with the diverse practices of public history – there is much to engage with, some of it deeply worrying – the ways in which some popular history magazines sensationalise past violence is a case in point. Public history in its fullest sense enjoins us all to think and practice history more openly and thoughtfully.

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