



William Cronon

Photo by Hilary Fey Cronon

Presidential Address

Storytelling

WILLIAM CRONON

THERE CAN BE FEW MORE DAUNTING assignments in our profession than the one that lies before me. Like every other AHA president, I have struggled with the question of how best to address the membership of the American Historical Association as the culminating act of my presidential duties. Because you are among my most learned colleagues, because no one knows more about our shared discipline than you do, because you represent so many different subfields and specialties and periods and places, and because your ability to criticize whatever I may say is unmatched, the challenge of saying something that you will find interesting and worthy is formidable indeed.

AHA presidents have met this challenge in quite different ways. One of the rituals of the presidency is to peruse all the past addresses that have been delivered since Andrew Dickson White first did so (twice!) in 1884 and 1885. As others have noted before me, these addresses tend to cluster into certain recurring genres. AHA presidents have sometimes sought to offer the broadest of philosophical statements about what history is, how it should be done, and what its role in the life of the present should be. A closely related subgenre makes the case for particular emerging subfields that a particular president believes to be vital to the future of the discipline. (Not too surprisingly, the chosen subfield in such cases is almost always the president's own.) Gordon Wright labeled this first genre of presidential addresses the "manifestoes," and they are easily the most numerous among all the talks that have been delivered on this ritual occasion.¹

A second major genre that has been present almost from the outset but that seems to have become increasingly popular in the past three decades consists of what we might call the monographic addresses, in which presidents read tightly focused essays drawn from their own work. These histories-in-miniature arguably do a better job than the manifestoes of honoring the rhetorical maxim "show, don't tell" to exemplify rather than describe best historical practice. Laurel Ulrich's lovely essay exploring the history of a single Mormon quilt from 1857 and Tony Grafton's astonishingly wide-ranging explication last year of an obscure notebook from the colonial frontier of Pennsylvania show what can be accomplished when this genre is executed with real mastery.²

¹ Gordon Wright, "History as a Moral Science," *American Historical Review* 81, no. 1 (February 1976): 1–11, here 2.

² Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "An American Album, 1857," *American Historical Review* 115, no. 1 (Feb-

The manifestoes and the monographs account for the lion's share of all AHA presidential addresses. But there are scarcer genres also worth noticing. Although the vast majority of all the addresses focus in one way or another on original historical research, a small handful explore the role of history in public life, and a still smaller handful (the fingers of one hand are probably sufficient to count them) discuss the *teaching* of history.³ Finally, there are a few presidential addresses—rather fewer than I initially imagined, but I guess ours is not the most confessional of disciplines—that are explicitly autobiographical, reminiscing about the journey that a particular scholar made to reach this podium. The outstanding example of this last genre is Walter Prescott Webb's "History as High Adventure," which is unique in its plainspokenness, its sly humor, and its outsider's devil-may-care attitude toward the discipline of history and even the AHA itself.⁴

What then should I offer as my own contribution to this distinguished collection? I was elected two years ago as the first self-described environmental historian ever to serve as president of the AHA (though some of my predecessors—I think especially of William H. McNeill, Frederick Jackson Turner, and Walter Prescott Webb himself—were certainly asking environmental questions about the past long before this newly named subfield came into being). I would be delighted to persuade all of you that the study of history should pay close attention not just to human beings but to all our companions on this planet—animals and plants and microorganisms—to say nothing of the ecosystems and climates and geophysical processes without which we cannot hope to understand the wider contexts within which human history unfolds. Nothing would please me more than to explicate for you Raymond Williams's profound observation in 1971 that "The idea of nature contains, though often unnoticed, an extraordinary amount of human history."⁵ I am sorely tempted, in other words, to deliver a manifesto prophesying environmental history as the next new new thing in the future of our discipline—or at least to express the pious hope that my colleagues in other fields should include its questions and methods in their own historical toolkits.

But I have chosen not to do this for reasons that will lead via a circuitous path to my actual topic, which will commit me to one of the more hybrid of these presidential addresses: part manifesto, part state of the field, part autobiography, and

ruary 2010): 1–25; Anthony Grafton, "The Republic of Letters in the American Colonies: Francis Daniel Pastorius Makes a Notebook," *American Historical Review* 117, no. 1 (February 2012): 1–39.

³ On history in public life, see especially Theodore Roosevelt, "History as Literature," *American Historical Review* 18, no. 3 (April 1913): 473–489; Henry Osborn Taylor, "A Layman's View of History," *American Historical Review* 33, no. 2 (January 1928): 247–256; Allan Nevins, "Not Capulets, Not Montagus," *American Historical Review* 65, no. 2 (January 1960): 253–270; William E. Leuchtenburg, "The Historian and the Public Realm," *American Historical Review* 97, no. 1 (February 1992): 1–18; and the incomparable Carl Lotus Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *American Historical Review* 37, no. 2 (January 1932): 221–236. On teaching, see Charles Kendall Adams, "Recent Historical Work in the Colleges and Universities of Europe and America," *Papers of the American Historical Association* 4, no. 1 (1890): 39–65; Louis Gottschalk, "A Professor of History in a Quandary," *American Historical Review* 59, no. 2 (January 1954): 273–286; and Dexter Perkins, "We Shall Gladly Teach," *American Historical Review* 62, no. 2 (January 1957): 291–309.

⁴ Walter Prescott Webb, "History as High Adventure," *American Historical Review* 64, no. 2 (January 1959): 265–281.

⁵ Raymond Williams, "Ideas of Nature," in Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays* (London, 1980), 67–85, here 67.

most of all a meditation on teaching and storytelling as essential activities of our discipline. The American Historical Association exists to support and promote *all* history, not just particular subfields: *all* places, *all* periods, *all* themes, *all* methods, in *all* the professional and institutional settings where historians practice their craft. Much as I care about environmental history, I feel even more strongly that the discipline as a whole is facing greater threats and challenges than at any time in the past half-century.

There are myriad explanations for this that I can only gesture at here. Far more than most people seem to recognize, the end of the Cold War brought an end to the political alignments, funding dynamics, and national policy agendas that helped motivate the immense investments in higher education, K-12 teaching, and public history that sustained the institutional infrastructure for historical practice in the United States and elsewhere in the decades following the Second World War. It has taken a long time for these Cold War alignments to erode, but now, more than two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, we can clearly see some of the consequences. Public support and funding for history and other forms of academic inquiry are in decline, especially in the humanities and especially in public institutions.

Other national and geopolitical trends add to and amplify these threats. Among them are secular shifts in long-term patterns of economic growth and social mobility; fears about the sustainability of public and private indebtedness that call into question twentieth-century assumptions about the welfare state; the declining status of education in competing for public resources; widespread concerns about the costs and effectiveness of education, whether in K-12 or baccalaureate or postgraduate settings; the rise of political movements aggressively seeking to diminish the role of government, with partisan gridlock and policy stalemate among their most important consequences; contestations over race, gender, class, religion, social justice, and state power that have made majoritarian policymaking increasingly difficult; and even environmental fears about energy costs, resource scarcities, and climate change. The list goes on and on.

Make no mistake: very few of the infrastructures supporting the work of historians during the second half of the twentieth century have been unaffected by these trends, and we desperately need the intellectual community and institutional resources represented by the AHA if we hope to navigate such shoal waters successfully. This organization has never needed the support of all historians more than it does right now.

AND THEN THERE IS THE INTERNET. My columns in *AHA Perspectives* this past year were organized around the theme of “The Public Practice of History in and for a Digital Age.”⁶ I will not try to repeat here all of the arguments I made in those columns about the ways in which the digital revolution is transforming literally everything about the way historians work. The printed books and articles on which we have long relied to communicate our findings are yet another example of the “old media” that—like CDs, encyclopedias, and newspapers—have proven extraordinarily vulnerable to the

⁶ William Cronon, “The Public Practice of History in and for a Digital Age,” *AHA Perspectives* 50, no. 1 (January 2012): 5–7.

liberation of content from its physical containers that digitization has made possible. Some argue that colleges and universities themselves are old-media containers of much the same sort, with scholarly knowledge impatiently awaiting its liberation from the ivory-walled towers that have so long guarded it. Organizations like the AHA traditionally supported themselves by publishing journals and newsletters, holding conferences, and overseeing job markets, which were among the chief reasons why historians chose to become dues-paying members. All these activities are being called into question as scholars access digital copies of journals through their institutions and forgo personal subscriptions, as travel subsidies diminish, and as electronic alternatives for meetings and job markets become more attractively cost-effective compared with traditional face-to-face gatherings. Rethinking the role of professional organizations such as the AHA in this digital age is vital if we are to sustain the essential functions they have long provided.

One of my deepest fears about this brave new digital world has to do with reading itself. As I wrote in my October and November columns, it seems to me that the book-length monograph on which our discipline has long relied is very much at risk as texts migrate from paper to screens.⁷ It is not just that libraries are reducing purchases, that university presses are facing cutbacks, or that declining print runs and rising per-unit costs are pricing many specialized monographs beyond the reach of ordinary buyers. My deeper fear comes from watching my own students, many of whom no longer read books for pleasure. If they have any prior experience doing research, almost all of it is online. If a piece of information cannot be Googled, it effectively does not exist for them. More than a few of my students have never actually been inside the stacks of a library. To the extent that good writing is predicated on frequent skilled reading, the ability of such students to recognize and construct grammatical sentences and paragraphs—let alone graceful or elegant ones—is plummeting.

In a manically multitasking world where even e-mail takes too long to read, where texts and tweets and Facebook postings have become dominant forms of communication, reading itself is more at risk than many of us realize. Or, to be more precise, *long-form* reading is at risk: the ability to concentrate and sustain one's attention on arguments and narratives for many hours and many thousands of words. I have come to think of this as the *Anna Karenina* problem: will students twenty years from now be able to read novels like Tolstoy's that are among the greatest works of world literature but that require dozens of hours to be meaningfully experienced? And if a novel as potent as *Anna* lies beyond reach, what does that imply for complex historical monographs that are in many ways even more challenging in the demands they make on readers?

Two anecdotes from my own classroom experience will suggest the depth of the challenge we face here. Ever since I began teaching, I have circulated outline notes before each of my undergraduate lectures so that students can concentrate on what I am saying and on the images I typically project on a screen as I talk. At the top of these outlines is a small section called "Suggested Readings," listing a few books

⁷ William Cronon, "How Long Will People Read History Books?" *AHA Perspectives* 50, no. 7 (October 2012): 5–6; Cronon, "Recollecting My Library . . . and My Self," *AHA Perspectives* 50, no. 8 (November 2012): 5–6.

about that day's topic that might be interesting to read. In the past few years, I have had maybe half a dozen earnest students come up to me after class to say that they have searched for the websites I have listed on these note sheets, but could not find them anywhere. I have to explain as patiently as I can that these suggested readings are *books*, not websites. That's a thought that no longer occurs to some students even as a possibility, and many of them would not know how to find such books, let alone the libraries that house them, even if they wanted to.

Still more poignant and worrisome was the young man who came up to me after a lecture I had just given at another university introducing the major themes of the very long book about Portage, Wisconsin, on which I have been working for longer than I care to admit. I sometimes describe that book as "Michener-length," though that is a reference few students born in the past thirty years would recognize. So I usually add that I expect the final book to be at least five or six hundred pages long, covering as it does the history of this small Midwestern town from the glacier to now. The illustrated talk I give about Portage is intended to be a crowd-pleaser, with lots of engaging images and stories, and at the end of this particular lecture, a shy young man came up to say how much he had enjoyed it. I thanked him for his praise, but was then mystified when he added that he was very sorry he would never be able to read the book on which my talk was based. I sheepishly told him that although I was taking a long time to finish it, it *would* eventually be published, and he would certainly be able to read it then. He shook his head and said that was not what he meant. He reminded me that I had described the book as being more than five hundred pages long. Then, with a sad and embarrassed look on his face, he said he was simply incapable of reading such a book, that he had never in his life read anything so long. I was taken aback, but I am quite certain he was speaking in earnest, and that his regret was quite real.

SO HERE, FINALLY, IS THE THEME I want to explore in this address. In a distracted world where even undergraduates at top universities are increasingly challenged to read the kinds of books we have traditionally written, and at a moment when there seems to be widespread public doubt about whether to continue supporting the study of the past as this organization has traditionally understood that activity, what is the future of history? There are many answers to this question, of course, and it is the job of the American Historical Association—and all of us—to offer those answers as effectively as we can to defend in public the continuing importance of history both in the United States and in the wider world. But for me, there is one answer that is arguably the most basic of all, and that is, simply: *storytelling*. We need to remember the roots of our discipline and be sure to *keep telling stories* that matter as much to our students and to the public as they do to us. Although the shape and form of our stories will surely change to meet the expectations of this digital age, the human need for storytelling is not likely ever to go away. It is far too basic to the way people make sense of their lives—and among the most important stories they tell are those that seek to understand the past. Hang on to this truth, and there is no reason to fear

that history will be any less important to the human future than it has been to the human past.

I wrote a presidential column in March 2012 on what I called “professional boredom.”⁸ What I meant by this was the tendency of professionals, when talking mainly with each other, to adopt vocabularies and ways of speaking that have the effect of excluding outsiders who do not belong to that profession. When we stumble into one of these professional circles—as all of us do when we enter a hospital, talk with a lawyer, or try to decipher the writings of colleagues in other disciplines—our initial reaction more often than not is bewilderment or bemusement, but this soon becomes boredom if we linger long. Unless we have a compelling need to understand what these alien professionals are saying to each other, our eyes glaze over, our ears tune out, and our minds head off toward more intriguing thoughts or daydreams.

As I said back in March, there are many reasons, good and bad, for this tendency of professionals to generate boredom among outsiders. Some serve to defend professional monopolies so as to make it harder for outsiders to compete in offering the services sold by members of that guild. Some involve complex insider hierarchies whereby members of a small community jostle for recognition and status, a process requiring such intense scrutiny to be understood that few outsiders have the patience even to notice, let alone decode, the resulting communications. Others have legitimately to do with the specialized techniques of that profession, which encourage shared vocabularies for the sake of clarity and concision. All of these help explain why professionals talk with each other as they do, but they also explain why professional talk is so opaque—so boring—to outsiders.

We historians face especially difficult challenges in this domain of professional boredom. Although we favor ordinary language more than most of our academic colleagues, we nonetheless experience precisely the same temptations toward self-referential insider language whenever we communicate mainly with each other. More importantly, the heart of our enterprise is to immerse ourselves in the arcane events and contexts of vanished times and places that most other people have long since forgotten. This means that most of what we study is by definition unknown and unfamiliar to most outsiders who encounter our work. We learn to read languages that are not merely foreign but antiquated; we study documents so seemingly unimportant that no one else has bothered to look at them in years; and we seek to reconstruct past milieus that few outside our profession even remember existed. What could be more boring than that?

We all know the answer: there is nothing remotely boring about history if only one gives it the time and attention it deserves. The longer and harder one looks at almost anything in the past—the more one appreciates its subtleties and contradictions—the more richly and endlessly fascinating it becomes. The chief reason we do this work, after all, is to pursue such fascination so as to understand ever more deeply both the worlds we have lost and the worlds they became. Our own love for the past must be pretty robust to keep us going amid the dusty archives and the unread books, but our ultimate reason for doing so must always be to pass that love on to others who do not yet share it. Nothing we do is more important. Our core

⁸ William Cronon, “Professional Boredom,” *AHA Perspectives* 50, no. 3 (March 2012): 5–6.

business is resurrection: helping the dead past live again. We forget this most basic task at our peril, for there is no deeper betrayal of the historical imagination than to leave the past inertly, boringly forgettable. For historians, the peril of antiquarianism has always been to assume that everyone else in the world loves our subject as much as we do, when very nearly the opposite is true. It is our job, not theirs, to persuade them of its importance and teach them its fascinations. Other professionals can perhaps afford to be boring, but not us.

No one has made this case more eloquently than Carl Becker in “Everyman His Own Historian,” delivered way back in 1931 and still arguably the greatest of all AHA presidential addresses. In it, he posited in the gendered language of his day a character called “Mr. Everyman”: an ordinary citizen, distant from the concerns of professional historians, who nonetheless used historical reasoning in nearly every waking instant of his life. The job of historians, Becker argued, was to place the past in dialogue with the present, restoring it to living memory so as to render it useful to Mr. Everyman. Toward the end of his talk, he declared quite categorically that popular understandings of the past were ultimately more important than professional ones, and so much more powerful that they would ultimately triumph over any scholar who ignored them. Let me quote at length from Becker’s peroration:

Berate him as we will for not reading our books, Mr. Everyman is stronger than we are, and sooner or later we must adapt our knowledge to his necessities . . . The history that lies inert in unread books does no work in the world. The history that does work in the world, the history that influences the course of history, is living history, that pattern of remembered events, whether true or false, that enlarges and enriches the collective specious present, the specious present of Mr. Everyman . . . We do not impose our version of the human story on Mr. Everyman; in the end it is rather Mr. Everyman who imposes his version on us . . . If we remain too long recalcitrant Mr. Everyman will ignore us, shelving our recondite works behind glass doors rarely opened. Our proper function is not to repeat the past but to make use of it, to correct and rationalize for common use Mr. Everyman’s mythological adaptation of what actually happened.⁹

We can argue with each other later about whether Becker struck the right balance between what we might today call history versus memory, but for now I will let his argument stand in support of my own assertion that keeping the past alive for the wider public is the essential mission of our discipline, on which all our other activities ultimately depend.

HOW DO WE MAKE THE PAST COME ALIVE? By telling stories about it. Unfortunately, the craft of storytelling too often gets short shrift in the training of professional historians. We are often so busy introducing students to the challenges of framing research questions, locating documents, performing analyses, positioning our interpretations in larger historiographies, and constructing persuasive arguments that we forget to ask how all these pieces might fit together to create a good story. Even that phrase “a good story” feels a little unprofessional, doesn’t it? It seems to imply that the aesthetics of storytelling might so take over our work as to trump critical rigor

⁹ Becker, “Everyman His Own Historian,” 235.

or scholarly analysis. Worse still, many of us fear that the desire to tell “a good story” might tempt us past the limits of our evidence to assert as certainties claims about the past that our discipline tells us can never be known with confidence, if they can be known at all. In graduate seminars we witness the withering criticism to which scholars are subjected when they build arguments with insufficient documentary support, and so we adopt a whole series of defensive rhetorical behaviors to protect ourselves from this kind of attack. Usually these involve piling up documents, caveats, and buttressing claims to such an extent that any sense of narrative momentum is buried beneath the defensive fortifications. In such seminars, we also learn to practice history mainly for the audience of our professional peers, for whom cutting-edge scholarship, innovative techniques, and the latest academic fashions all combine to push our work into intellectual territory that, however exciting to us, is likely to feel obscure or even opaque to audiences beyond the academy.

At the AHA meeting in New Orleans, we were lucky to have in our midst some of the finest and most creative storytellers currently producing historical narratives for large popular audiences. My friend Michael Pollan has spent the past quarter-century exploring the history of modern American attitudes and behaviors toward food and agriculture. Steeped in the literature of environmental history, he has deployed his literary and journalistic skills to synthesize findings from across a wide array of scientific and scholarly disciplines. To tie them all together, he has deployed narrative techniques drawn from the journalistic tradition pioneered most notably by George Plimpton, in which the journalist attempts to enter and master an alien profession (in Plimpton’s case, professional sports) and winds up telling a comic tale in which his own bumbling incompetence becomes not just the thread that carries the plot forward, but the journey toward understanding in which the narrator’s education also becomes the reader’s.

Pollan has applied this literary device to the histories of gardening, architecture, agriculture, and nutrition, and in so doing has made these topics more engagingly available to more readers than ever before, so much so that he has become the most widely read commentator on contemporary food policy in the United States. His book *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, narratively constructed around a series of meals that he himself prepares after following his food from field to stove to table, manages along the way to introduce readers to the histories of such arcane topics as corn hybridization, food supplements, organic farming, and even the farm bill. For most of his readers, much of what he writes about would have been so mind-numbingly boring in the hands of a different author that they would not even pick up such a book, let alone be riveted by what it has to say. But because Pollan is such an amiable narrator, because he can be hilariously funny at his own expense when this serves his rhetorical purposes, and because he is above all else a brilliant storyteller, his readers will follow him almost anywhere. I have been assigning his essay “Nature Abhors a Garden” to my graduate students for more than twenty years, and it is still one of the best and most provocative introductions I know to the kinds of questions environmental historians ask.¹⁰ Regardless of whether you agree or disagree with

¹⁰ Michael Pollan, “Nature Abhors a Garden,” in Pollan, *Second Nature: A Gardener’s Education* (New York, 1991), 37–53.

Pollan's arguments, he has much to teach historians about making the past come alive through storytelling.

We were equally fortunate to have had the writer and director John Sayles on hand in New Orleans to comment and answer questions about six of his most important historical films, discussing the ways in which cinema and fiction draw on the work of historians to construct their very different kinds of narratives. Few filmmakers have sought more consistently than Sayles to depict far-flung episodes in the American past in ways that try to do justice to historical complexity while also meeting the needs of cinematic storytelling. I have admired his work for many years, and two of his films in particular—*Lone Star* and *The Secret of Roan Inish*—are among the most powerful narratives I know depicting the continuing presence of the past in the lives of characters who are haunted by history even when they are unaware of the effects it has on them.

In *Lone Star*, multiple sets of parents and children from very different generations and backgrounds—Anglo, Mexican, and African American—struggle with each other over historical legacies that some seek to forget and others to remember. The unfolding plot involves a murder mystery that can only be solved by multiple layers of historical excavation. The lead character—a sheriff named Sam Deeds, played by Chris Cooper—essentially becomes a historian, sifting through documents trying to interpret his own past and that of every other character. As he does so, he gradually discovers that almost nothing about his town's past is what it appears, and that racial communities that seemed entirely separate from each other share histories that could not be more deeply entangled.

The film is full of evocative moments, including a famous brief scene in which teachers at the local high school try to defend their new multicultural interpretation of Texas history to angry Anglo parents who see it as a violation of their ancestors' heroic past and as propaganda corrupting their children's present. In a narrative segment that lasts just a minute and a half, Sayles manages to convey both the complexity of contemporary historical debates and the angry emotions they evoke.¹¹ The last spoken line of dialogue in *Lone Star*—"Forget the Alamo"—seems to echo James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus in implying that "history . . . is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake," but this is surely not the moral that Sayles wants us to draw from his story. For him as for most historians, there is no exorcising the past by forgetting it. Only by remembering and confronting its real and imagined legacies in all their contradictions can we live in the presence of history without being its victims.

Michael Pollan and John Sayles are two extraordinarily talented examples of the kinds of storytellers who share with professional historians the task of interpreting the past so as to create Carl Becker's "living history": "the history that does work in the world, the history that influences the course of history."¹² But in celebrating their achievements as I have just done, I must hasten to recognize the narrative techniques available to them that are not permitted to us as professional historians. Aside from scholars who do oral historical work on the recent past, the interviews

¹¹ The original script for this scene (which occurs about sixteen minutes into the theatrical release) can be found in John Sayles, *Men with Guns* and *Lone Star* (London, 1998), 128–130.

¹² Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," 235.

that enable Michael Pollan to construct such intriguing protagonists to populate his narratives and illustrate his arguments are impossible—to state the obvious—when the subjects of one’s work are all dead. For that matter, the literary technique of organizing an entire book around a carefully fabricated narrator named “Michael Pollan” would undoubtedly leave many historians queasy about calling too much anachronistic attention to themselves as opposed to their historical subjects. Pollan’s example reminds us that one of the most important characters in any story is in fact the narrator. Our available choices for shaping that character are more constrained than for a journalist like Pollan, in part because of our discipline’s longstanding (and too long unquestioned) commitment to the omniscient third-person voice of the nineteenth-century era when modern professional history was born. We can learn from Pollan the importance of taking more explicit responsibility for the narrator’s voice and rhetorical roles, but the moves that are so successful for him are unlikely to work in quite the same way for us. Our narrative chops must necessarily be different from his.

As for John Sayles and all other creators of historical fiction, whether in film or on the printed page, they have the power to invent scenes and episodes and characters, to put words in people’s mouths and thoughts in their heads, and to present such fabrications as real within the suspended disbelief of their narrative frame. No historian can ever do likewise. For us, the deepest challenge of our discipline—the maddening constraint that is also the wellspring of our creativity—is that we are not permitted to argue or narrate beyond the limits of our evidence. We cannot even begin to imagine a story without first having spent enormous amounts of time answering the question that arguably defines our discipline more deeply than any other, a question so seemingly simple that few who are not historians recognize its profundity: “*What are the documents?*” It is our devotion to documents, our awareness that without them the past lies forever beyond the reach of our inquiry, that supplies the epistemological foundation on which all our professional practice is built.

That we are so often willing to sacrifice narrative elegance and momentum as we puzzle over the gaps in our evidence reflects our commitment to the authority of our sources. When we compare our work with that of a creator of historical fiction like John Sayles, we may be tempted simply to say that he makes things up and we do not. But that gets nowhere near the heart of the matter. Anyone who has tried their hand at historical fiction (or fiction of any kind, for that matter) will know that it too has rules of verisimilitude and facticity that are far subtler and much easier to violate than most people realize. Especially when fictions are set in real places and real times and involve real people, and when the authors of those fictions aspire to say something profound and true about the lives they depict, they are hemmed in by history almost as much as we are, albeit in quite different ways because fidelity to the documents is not so high a priority for them as it must be for us.

Steven Spielberg did a nice job of describing this difference between historians and creators of historical fiction in a speech he gave at Gettysburg this past November on the 149th anniversary of Lincoln’s famous address, just a few days after the opening of the film *Lincoln*:

History forces us to acknowledge the limits of memory. It keeps track of memory's victories, it keeps track of memory's defeats. It tells us that memory is imperfect, that no matter how much of the past we've recovered, much that once was or has been now is lost to us. It's simply not the job—and in fact, I believe it's the betrayal of the job—of the historian to promise perfect and complete recall of the past . . . One of the jobs of art is to go to the impossible places that other disciplines like history must avoid. Through art we enlist the imagination to bring what's lost back to us, to bring the dead back to life. This resurrection is of course just an illusion, it's a fantasy, and it's a dream, but dreams matter somehow to us.¹³

Given their different goals and emphases, historians and creators of historical fiction will always argue with each other about whether a proper balance has been struck between historical facticity and the fictional dreaming that aspires to bring the dead back to life. The resulting debates are presumably what Carl Becker had in mind when he encouraged his scholarly colleagues to “correct and rationalize for common use Mr. Everyman's mythological adaptation of what actually happened.” But we do ourselves and history a disservice if we fail to recognize how the imagined pasts of history and fiction complement each other. To say that historians hold true to the facts while fiction-makers do not obscures the extent to which they both contribute to the shared project of keeping the past alive for members of the public who otherwise might not care about it at all. The deeper truth is that the two value different kinds of facts differently, and so are willing to make different kinds of compromises with historical reality in order to tell the kinds of stories that matter most to them. This in turn means that the narrative options available to each differ quite radically in ways that historians should try to understand more generously.

To name just one of the most important differences between historians and those who create fictions about the past, our rules of evidence build a high wall between us and the inner emotional lives of the human beings about whom we write. Perhaps partly for this reason, the questions we ask are biased toward people in groups as opposed to people as individuals. Even when we do concentrate our attention on a single human being, our disciplinary conventions permit us to talk only about those actions and feelings of the person that have somehow been recorded in documents. This creates a bias toward public as opposed to private life that is still present in our discipline despite decades of creative work by scholars seeking to give the history of private life its proper due. For the novelist or the filmmaker, the historian's definition of “private life” is still not private enough, since the one aspect of human reality for which our documents are most limited—the inner stream-of-consciousness that we each experience uniquely inside ourselves in ways we can never fully render for anyone else—is often what the fiction-maker is most eager to tell stories about. The narrative representations of a person's innermost thoughts that are among the greatest achievements of the modernist novel by authors such as Joyce, Woolf, Proust, and Faulkner are not available for us to emulate. Even when historians are lucky enough to work on individuals who left behind copious letters and diaries, these are still ultimately public representations of an inner life that we can never quite touch or recover. When even the most basic of human experiences fail to register in the

¹³ Steven Spielberg, Remarks at Gettysburg National Cemetery, November 19, 2012, as recorded by Jake Boritt and posted on YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_uZM1HxInJg. Thanks to my assistant Adam Mandelman for transcribing this for me.

sources available to us, our disciplinary conventions leave us little choice but to follow the famous final admonition of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."¹⁴

I share all this because I want us to recognize that history is just as committed to a set of representational conventions and compromises as these other narrative forms.¹⁵ Filmmakers construct stories that represent the past by having actors depict characters moving and speaking before a camera to create narratives that are more visual than verbal, gliding across spatial and temporal scales with extraordinary ease. Dramatists, on the other hand, must put their actors on a fixed stage before audiences who will observe and listen to them from relatively large distances with much less spatial and temporal freedom than is true of film. Onstage, the power of the close-up and the tracking camera must be replaced by characters speaking their minds in artificial conversations and soliloquies in which they describe their thoughts and feelings more explicitly than would ever happen in real life. Novelists may have almost limitless freedom to move in and out of their characters' heads and build plots that leap effortlessly across space and time, yet they, like us, are bound to verbal representations of thought and talk and action that must still meet myriad subtle rules for plausibility if readers are to suspend their disbelief.

Each storytelling form, in other words, has its own peculiar narrative possibilities and constraints.¹⁶ Historians choose not to represent aspects of the past about which our documents are silent, but some of these—stream-of-consciousness and informal conversation most obviously—are so fundamental to so much of life that it is a little hard to say which depiction of the past is more distorting: a history that says nothing about them, or a fiction that in the absence of authoritative evidence tries to represent them as responsibly as possible. If we were more open to recognizing the legitimate trade-offs involved in such choices, we might have a little more professional sympathy for the narratives that our fiction-making colleagues create in the service of Carl Becker's "living history."

AS FOR US, WHAT STORYTELLING OPTIONS are available to us within the limitations that our rules of evidence impose? In a discipline as vast as history, the number of narratives we have to tell is quite literally infinite, and even to catalogue their principal genres would double or triple the length of this essay. So let me instead tell a story

¹⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922), 7. ("Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen.")

¹⁵ I of course follow in the footsteps of Hayden White in making this assertion, but I do so for rather more pragmatic reasons. White sought to demonstrate the extent to which historians more or less unself-consciously emplot their work by deploying metahistorical tropes and narrative structures. My own purpose is to invite them to be more explicit about their own literary choices as they do their work, which is one reason I have tended to favor the word "storytelling" over "narrative" in this essay. My purpose here is less to criticize the contradictions of narrative than to invite all of us to become better and more explicit storytellers. See White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1975). For additional thoughts on this theoretical background, see William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *Journal of American History* 78, no. 4 (March, 1992): 1347–1376.

¹⁶ Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (New York, 1997), offers useful discussions of these representational differences between film and other forms of fictional narrative.

about storytelling to illustrate the kinds of stories that I myself most love to tell about the past. It is also a story about a particular storyteller: the teacher who more than anyone other than my father helped me fall in love with history.

At the start of the second semester of my first year as an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, I was looking for one more course to fill out my list of classes. My father, who was on the faculty at Wisconsin, suggested that I consider studying with an English professor named Richard Ringler, who taught a course, English 360, called “The Anglo-Saxons.” Although I had no prior knowledge of medieval literature or history, my dad knew that I had long been a fan of J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, and he thought I might be interested in learning more about the medieval sources on which Tolkien had drawn in writing that book. It was a brilliant suggestion, for no other course and no other teacher ever made a greater impact on me. Dick Ringler changed my life forever, and may well be the reason I am delivering a presidential address to the American Historical Association.

Ringler had had quite an unusual career. Having earned his Harvard Ph.D. with a dissertation on Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queen*, he had joined the Wisconsin faculty as a scholar of Elizabethan literature. But when an opportunity arose to teach a course on *Beowulf*, he decided to add it to his curricular offerings, and he was drawn into the literature and history of early medieval England as a result. He steeped himself in Anglo-Saxon, so much so that he eventually co-edited one of the leading textbooks on the language, and then decided that he could not really do justice to Old English literature without also studying the Icelandic sagas. He taught himself Old Norse in order to read the sagas in their original language, and became so fascinated by them that he wound up spending a year in Iceland learning modern Icelandic. He soon gained fluency in that difficult language as well, and wound up splitting his academic appointment between English and Scandinavian studies in order to teach courses in Icelandic. Along the way, he also became a serious student and practitioner of Zen Buddhism, and was fascinated by parallels between the monastic traditions of Zen and medieval Catholicism.

I knew none of this when I walked into Ringler’s classroom, but I realized in the first ten minutes of his first lecture that I was experiencing one of the most brilliant and unusual minds I had ever encountered. He spoke with machine-gun rapidity, as if his mouth could barely keep up with how quickly his thoughts were moving. More often than not, he used projected images from a Kodak Carousel projector to illustrate the maps or medieval manuscripts or archaeological artifacts or works of art or jewelry that he happened to be discussing at a particular moment. He lectured from a deck of 3 x 5 cards that he shuffled as he moved from topic to topic, and one of his strangest and most endearing habits was his willingness to interrupt his own presentation if a sudden thought occurred to him that seemed worth exploring at length. He signaled this in an almost comic way by pausing for a long moment, often with a quiet groan of frustration at his own inability to keep the lecture on track, then announcing “Digression!” before starting his detour. These sidebar engagements with loosely related themes typically proved so fascinating that we sometimes came to the end of the hour without reaching the end of the digression. But no one cared. Ringler’s narrative detours were just as fascinating as his main topics, and it was often difficult to tell which was which.

Ringler may have been trained as a literary scholar, but he was really a cultural historian, and there seemed to be literally no subject he was not willing to engage in his efforts to help us understand medieval England between the fall of Rome and the Norman Invasion. Like Tolkien, he was a philologist fascinated by the history of the English language and the ways words themselves can be treated as historical documents if only one knows how to decode their phonological and etymological pasts. My lifelong love affair with the *Oxford English Dictionary* began in that class. To understand the written documents of the Anglo-Saxon period, we had to learn enough of the language to understand the subtleties of their meanings. (In subsequent semesters, I would go on to take courses in Old English and Old Norse from Ringler, having by my sophomore year concluded that I was going to be a medievalist like him.) But he did not stop with mere words. He taught the history of medieval calligraphy, and explored the evolution of the scriptoria where monastic scribes copied manuscripts. He gave a lecture on the manufacture of vellum, the slaughter and processing of the animal skins on which the scribes worked, and the reasons why the two sides of a sheet of vellum—the inside and outside of the animal, the side with the flesh and the side with the hair—responded differently enough to ink and pen strokes that they subtly affected the calligraphy that appeared on them. He explained the geometrical underpinnings of the great illuminated carpet pages of the *Book of Kells* and the *Lindisfarne Gospels*. We read the Anglo-Saxon chronicles and traced changing conceptions of history by comparing them to the work of the Venerable Bede, and then contrasted these in turn with the epic narratives of the Beowulf poet. We studied the Sutton Hoo ship burial in order to see what its treasures could teach us about Anglo-Saxon poetry, warrior society, and pagan religious beliefs. We then turned to the missionaries who brought Christianity to England, and watched the transmission of Catholic doctrine and institutions to the British Isles up through the Viking raids on Lindisfarne and beyond: the development of Romanesque architecture and monophonic Gregorian chant, the relationship of Rome to the courts of Alfred and Charlemagne, and so on and on and on.

Scribbling as furiously as I could, I filled a green notebook with the facts and insights that Ringler poured forth. That notebook is still among my most prized possessions. The best way I can describe what he accomplished in that course was that it was the richest, most interconnected and multilayered representation of a long-vanished historical universe that I had ever experienced. It was as if Ringler could begin a story about any particular aspect of the Anglo-Saxon past and by a series of sideways moves repeatedly demonstrate the unexpected connections among aspects of that society that no one else would have brought together in quite that way. It felt as if we were watching the turning of a kaleidoscope, with endlessly shifting patterns combining and recombining in a never-ending series of stories, each deepening and enriching and adding layers of new meaning to the ones that had come before.

It was some of the most brilliant storytelling I have ever witnessed—and, crucially, it was storytelling of the kind that historians do so well, honoring all the rules of evidence that govern historical as opposed to fictional narrative. Indeed, among the master tropes that ran through almost all of Ringler's stories was the one at the core of our discipline that begins with the question "How do we know what we



Richard N. Ringler, Departments of English and Scandinavian Studies, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1974.

know?” and then answers “Let me show you . . .” We did not need fictional stream-of-consciousness or made-up conversations to feel that we were gaining ever greater insight into past ways of being human that were wondrously rich and complicated. By the time the semester was over, I was sure I wanted to be a scholar like Dick Ringler. I spent two and a half years preparing to become a student of the early medieval Germanic North, and in fact I won a Rhodes Scholarship with the intention of pursuing that subject at Oxford. Only an equally accidental course on the history of the American West, taken with Allan Bogue during my senior year at Wisconsin, redirected me to the western and environmental history of the United States, which eventually became my life-long objects of study. But there is no question in my mind that I am still trying to practice history and tell stories about the past in the kaleidoscopic, multidimensional way that Dick Ringler exemplified so superlatively in that class on the Anglo-Saxons.

Let me pause here for a moment. I said that I was going to tell a story about storytelling. To do so, I had to create a narrator that was a version of my former self,

a young undergraduate steeped in the fictional world of J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, who had no way of knowing how much that novel had prepared him to become excited by the scholarly specialty that was Tolkien's own. That narrator told you the story of his encounter with a very unusual, even eccentric, teacher, whose multidisciplinary way of thinking and talking about the past—even though as a professor of English he was not officially a member of our guild—was held up to you as the narrator's ideal of what brilliant history can look like.

Although I am only now calling attention to it, one of the morals of this story is that some of the most important historical storytelling we do happens not in our books and articles but in our classrooms. Ringler in fact poured the same scholarly rigor and intensity into his teaching that most scholars reserve for their monographs, persuading at least one of his students to try to do the same. Each of his lectures was a brilliantly crafted narrative journey steeped with anecdotes and arguments and documents and insights that were not just about Anglo-Saxon England, but about the practice of history itself. And not just history, but all the other disciplines that in truth were every bit as important to history as history itself: archaeology and philology and literature and art history and architecture and theology and folklore and so on and on. Nothing in the past was irrelevant. We needed all of these disciplines if we wished to understand the fragments that had survived from that long-ago time. All of them were connected. We had simply to follow the threads in whatever directions our curiosity suggested in order to discover their meanings.

One moral of this autobiographical narrative, then, is that we should all aspire to bring the same passion and intellectual engagement to our historical storytelling that Dick Ringler brought to English 360, whether in our books or our classes or in public. There is no reason why the work we do cannot have the same qualities that Ringler exemplified with such passion. We just need to keep looking for the best and most engaging ways to tell our stories, and to remember always to be on guard against boredom. We need also to resist the research university's habit of privileging the latest and most cutting-edge scholarship over older and more familiar topics, since both are equally essential to the syntheses that not just undergraduates but the public and even we ourselves need if we are to understand the past in its myriad interlocking complexities. Ringler's course was utterly the creature of an R-1 research university, and he regularly had us engage the latest scholarly findings and interpretations; but he was no less careful to place that new work in a larger frame that also included older approaches like philology, as well as the broader thematic syntheses that occur more often in textbooks than in monographs.

I HAVE TWO MORE BRIEF STORIES to share about Ringler's class, with two additional lessons that have stayed with me ever since.

It should be obvious that I was very much under the spell of this teacher, and I went out of my way to talk with him during office hours about all the exciting stuff we were studying in his class. One day I made the mistake of stopping by his office outside the regular time—in fact, just half an hour before the class was scheduled to begin. I found his door ajar, suggesting that he was probably inside, and when I

tentatively knocked on it, not knowing whether I should interrupt whatever he was doing, it swung open to reveal him sitting at his desk, with his Kodak Carousel projecting onto the wall in front of him, his little deck of 3 x 5 cards in his hands . . . and I suddenly realized that he was actually delivering the lecture that we were about to hear. His performances in class had always seemed so extemporaneous, so stream-of-consciousness, so thinking-out-loud in their brilliance, that it had never occurred to me how much they might be scripted; indeed, how much he might have polished and rehearsed them to produce the rhetorical and interpretive effects—maybe even some of those famous and beloved digressions—that he seemed to generate so effortlessly in the magical space of his classroom.

I apologized for interrupting him, asked my question, listened as he patiently gave me the answer, and then scurried off, not wanting to intrude on his rehearsal time. But I have never forgotten that moment, since it taught me one of the most important lessons I have ever learned about teaching: when magic happens in a classroom, it is because someone worked hard to create it. When, years later, I finally began teaching myself, I began the practice of delivering my own lectures in their entirety the hour before I actually shared them with my students in class. Not only did this pour their contents into my short-term memory, so that I had far less need of notes, but it also helped me more clearly anticipate the narrative moves and hooks and segues that kept the lecture flowing and helped me remember the storytelling signposts that would keep my students from getting lost even as I guided them through complicated arguments on my way to the end of the story. This same skill has served me equally well as a writer, since the signposts needed by listeners in a classroom, although subtly different in form and execution because a book and a lecture have such different narrators, are no less helpful to the readers of a book.

I have one last little story about Dick Ringler's office hours that remains for me perhaps the most important life lesson he ever taught me. In the middle of one of his lectures, a minor question occurred to me that seemed quite interesting, though not important enough for me to raise my hand about it during class. I happened to be near his building the next day during his office hours, so I dropped by, thinking that this little question of mine was something he could answer in a couple of minutes. I walked in, sat down, and asked it. He paused for a long moment in silence, staring at the wall in front of him. Then he leaned back in his chair for a full fifteen seconds and gazed at the ceiling, concentrating with great intensity. Finally, he sat back up, looked at me, and said: "I don't know." This was not at all what I had expected, since I had thought my question quite trivial. There was another pause, and then he said, "If I were going to try to figure it out, I think this is where I'd start." He pulled an etymological dictionary and several other books from his shelves, and began showing me the evidence we would need in order to grapple with the puzzle I had posed. A full thirty minutes later, we had both gained more insights than I would have thought possible when I entered his office.

I do not remember what that question was. I do not even remember whether we actually answered it. What I do remember was that Dick Ringler—whom I regarded as the most brilliant and learned teacher I had ever known—had responded to a casual undergraduate question by saying "I don't know." He had then taken that question seriously enough to spend half an hour in my company puzzling through

the process of figuring out what its answer might be. I will never forget that moment as long as I live. There are so many morals to this story: No matter how expert you are, never be afraid to admit when you do not know something. No matter how much you know, remember that knowing how to figure something out is far more valuable than just knowing a particular piece of information. No matter how naïve a student's question might be, treat it (and the student) with the same respect you would give to the erudite questions of your most distinguished colleagues, because in fact that respect is the foundation for all learning, including your own. And finally, no matter what question you think you are hoping to answer, always be prepared to learn a completely different lesson from the one you were expecting. In that one seamless moment, Dick Ringler showed me what it meant to be a scholar . . . and what it meant to be a teacher as well. He showed me a way of being in the world, an example of what a fully engaged adult life could look like. Nothing he ever taught me about Anglo-Saxon England mattered nearly as much as that way of being—though of course that way of being required Anglo-Saxon England as its expression and embodiment.

Ringler persuaded me that the undergraduate classroom, far more than the graduate seminar, is where we take the results of our monographic research and place them in a much larger interpretive frame where we can show our students—and, by extension, our non-professional readers and ourselves—the larger meanings of our work. Original research is of course indispensable and lies at the cutting edge of disciplinary growth and transformation. But no one else will ever know this if we fail to come back from the cutting edge to integrate what we have learned into the older and more familiar stories that non-historians already think they know and care about. This is where we join other historical storytellers—journalists, novelists, dramatists, and filmmakers, as well as our academic colleagues in all the other historical disciplines—to keep asking what the past means and why ordinary people should care about it. Carl Becker was right: our ultimate responsibility is to living history, which withers into professional boredom if we speak only with each other or with our graduate students. The digital revolution has created endless opportunities via blogs, websites, YouTube, and social media to connect our professional stories with the concerns of the wider public, making it possible for pithier, more visual, and more topical narrative strategies to find audiences as never before. But they will do so only if we remember the lessons of the classrooms where our specialized work reconnects with those who do not yet share our passion for the past.

THAT IS WHY WE KEEP REVISITING the most basic and powerful stories even though their particular content is always changing, along with the moral lessons we draw from them. There is the story of where we came from and how the world got to be this way that is the great engine of public curiosity, especially for young people who have little direct personal experience of the past. Much as our discipline may fear the teleological dangers of presentism, we cannot live without it, since it is the doorway opening out onto the backward path by which we guide students and readers and members of the public toward a past that initially seems completely irrelevant and

disconnected from the concerns of the present. Once we have reconnected that past with the present and established just how relevant it continues to be, we can start telling that other great story, the one about the past as a foreign country whose inhabitants are so different from us that we barely recognize them. And yet because their world ultimately became our own—and because their struggles with each other to decide what they did and did not want their future to be continue to shape our own lives today—these two sets of stories turn out to be far more intimately linked to us than we first imagined. Together, they combine to create a third story about the world as given and the world as made, inviting us to reconsider a taken-for-granted present that can seem timeless and unchanging until we begin to view it historically. Only then do we recognize how much our present world reflects the choices of those who came before; only then do we see how different it could have been had those choices been made differently.

From these most basic of all stories about the past flow myriad others. They are part of the common heritage of humanity, which is why we share their telling with everyone else who narrates the past. That is what makes them so powerful and why it is so crucial that historians never tire of telling them, no matter how familiar they may seem to us the more professional we become. Only by looking into the eyes of our youngest students—and the eyes of our own children—do we remember how strange and fresh these stories were when we first encountered them ourselves. Stories of people struggling for justice or democracy or freedom or progress. Stories of oppression, endurance, liberation. Stories of people seeking to understand the meaning of their relationship to God or nature or the state or each other. Stories in which very small events or objects or ideas turn out to have much larger consequences than anyone would have thought possible. Stories that explore the intended and unintended consequences of the choices people make. Stories in which things we thought we knew about the past turn out to be unexpectedly and importantly different than we thought. Stories about how we know what we know—and how hard we have to work to earn such knowing. And stories of why different people understand the past so differently, and why seemingly contradictory historical narratives can yield truths that are all the more profound when juxtaposed against each other.

More than anything else, though, we need to keep telling stories about why the past matters and why all of us should care about it. Nothing is more important, for only by the neverending telling of such stories is the dead past reborn into memory to become living history, over and over and over again.

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