The World War II Generation of Historians

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In recent years much has been written about an extraordinary generation of Americans, those born between about 1910 and 1922, usually known as the World War II generation. This generation has become synonymous with hardship and sacrifice. In the 1930s their generational identity was formed in the crucible of the Great Depression, the rise of fascism, and the movement toward World War II. Their triumph as a generational force was announced in 1961 by John F. Kennedy, himself a member of the generation, when he remarked in his inaugural address that his election signified the “passing of the torch to a new generation of Americans.”

There is also a World War II generation of historians, a group that exerted comparable influence over the historical profession. Those entering graduate school between the mid-1950s and the early 1980s were likely to find their reading lists dominated by works written by members of this group. In American history it is scarcely conceivable that anyone could emerge from graduate school without a substantial study of the work of Richard Hofstadter, Edmund Morgan, C. Vann Woodward, or Kenneth Stampp. In English history the works of Christopher Hill, Lawrence Stone, Hugh Trevor-Roper, and Geoffrey Elton were equally sacred texts.

With a few exceptions most of this group demonstrated superior abilities at an early age. Trevor-Roper acquired fluency in six languages, learning German over a summer and winning all of Oxford’s coveted classics prizes. Daniel Boorstin graduated from high school as a valedictorian at age fifteen and proceeded to have a glorious university career, achieving, among other things, a rare double first at Oxford. Boorstin and Gordon Craig were Rhodes Scholars. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Trevor-Roper, Hill, J. H. Plumb, William

From Historically Speaking 5 (September 2003).
McNeill, and Richard Southern were among the most celebrated undergraduates of their time at their institutions. Elton arrived in England not knowing a word of English but within a few years earned a first-class university degree.

Many also had inspiring teachers and mentors. Several, including Anne Scott, Schlesinger, McNeill, and Elton, were inspired to a large extent by their academic fathers. But having good teachers also helped. The history and literature program at Harvard and Perry Miller, F. O. Matthiessen, and Bernard DeVoto in particular provided memorable teaching for Schlesinger, Morgan, and Boorstin. Dedication to teaching could sometimes go to extraordinary lengths. Theodore S. Currier at Fisk College borrowed money to help John Hope Franklin go to Harvard for his Ph.D.. Scott found Oscar Handlin an inspiration throughout her career. Carl Schorske learned about the meaning of dedicated teaching from a weekly, two-hour tutorial he received from the Harvard classicist William Scott Ferguson.

On the other hand, many of this generation succeeded despite desultory university experiences. For example, with the exception of those at Balliol College, most of the Oxford historians got very little from their undergraduate experience, and they represent for the most part the last generation of English historians to enter professional history without taking advanced degrees. Postgraduate study at English universities required students to learn on their own. Trevor-Roper in particular had to learn without supervision and wrote his first book with scarcely any historical training. He was not alone. Geoffrey Elton received barely five minutes of supervision from Sir John Neale, his thesis advisor at the University of London.

Several received their most valuable mentoring after graduation. R. H. Tawney proved more useful to Stone than most of his Oxford tutors. J. C. Masterman materialized again and again to help advance Trevor-Roper’s career. F. M. Powicke rescued Southern from his post–military service depression. In some cases members of the group mentored each other. Hofstadter and Stampp had a happy convergence in the mid-1940s while teaching at the University of Maryland. They talked history by the hour while reading and criticizing each other’s writing.

The ghosts of several historians loomed over the World War II generation. Foremost among these were the twin specters of Charles Beard and Tawney. Beard was the primary figure for the Americans. Stampp and Woodward took their inspiration from Beard’s economic interpretation of history and never rejected it. Hofstadter rejected Beard, but his greatest books emerged as he developed the reasons behind that rejection.
Tawney exerted a similar influence on the English. Hill and Trevor-Roper, along with Stone, were drawn to Tawney's interpretation of the rise of the gentry, even though Trevor-Roper later attacked it. In the same way that Hofstadter was inspired by Beard, much of Trevor-Roper's best work came from his need to find alternative explanations to Tawney's class struggle.

Lewis Namier was another powerful influence. Along with Beard he championed the use of manuscripts. But like Beard and Tawney he also advanced an explanation of historical truth and how it could be discovered. Most people, to Namier, had no principles; they operated primarily on self-interest, which could be uncovered by meticulous examination of the records of an individual's private affairs. Namier's appeal was primarily to those who worked on English history. Hill still remembers the excitement of the year in which a new book of Namier's appeared at the same time as a new volume of T. S. Eliot's poetry. J. H. Hexter wrote his first book under Namier's influence.

Although Beard, Tawney, and Namier were very different as historians, they shared a common theme, one central to the work of the World War II generation. That theme was the notion of submerged reality; meaning that historical truth, like an iceberg, is never what it appears on the surface. Behind the lofty rhetoric of the American founding fathers, the historian, for Beard, must seek an underlying economic motivation; for Tawney the reality of class tension and convulsive social change lay behind the platitudes about liberty delivered in the speeches of the members of the seventeenth-century English Parliament. Expressed principles were, for Namier, usually camouflage for self-interest.

The difference between the ideal and the real, surface appearance and underlying reality underscores most of the best work of this generation. Among the Americans, whether it was Scott's *Southern Lady*, Stampp's *Peculiar Institution*, Woodward's *Origins of the New South*, Handlin's *Uprooted*, or most of Hofstadter's best work, irony—the difference between the stated aims of policy makers or of society's ideals and the reality beneath them—was a theme to which they repeatedly returned. The English were less devoted than the Americans to ironic detachment, but it still played at least a part in some of their work. Trevor-Roper, like Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*, was pleased to expose the irony of early-modern witch hunters who considered themselves enlightened and civilized but in reality committed crimes more sinister and frightening than those supposedly committed by the witches they hunted.

Skilled in the exposition of historical irony the World War II generation of historians experienced one of their own. They entered university teaching
during one of the most difficult times in history to begin an academic career, but they pursued their careers during one of the best. Although they experienced considerable anxiety about finding jobs, most of them got good ones fairly quickly. Moreover for both the Americans and the English the university and the historical profession reached the height of their expansion and power in the 1960s. Surging enrollments and economic growth allowed for enormous expansion of the university and of history departments. The history department at the University of California at Berkeley, for example, had fifteen regular faculty in 1941, twenty-five in 1954, and sixty-five by 1970.

Franklin and the women faced obstacles the others barely had to think about. For Franklin it was of course the ever-present specter of racism that made his career and life difficult. Gertrude Himmelfarb and Scott faced colleagues who occasionally didn’t understand the women’s commitment to their children. Barbara Tuchman did all her work outside the academy and was never really accepted by professional historians.

The social and cultural changes of the 1960s provided the greatest intellectual challenge to this generation. By the 1960s most had reached the pinnacle of their careers and achievements. But the 1960s came for many as a shock to their value systems. While most were liberals who supported civil rights and were sympathetic toward the antiwar movement, they were irritated by the use of the university as a political tool and by the overwhelming hostility of students to the American system. Even their prizewinning and groundbreaking books came under fire. Several critics asserted that the history written by the World War II generation was not radical enough.

Now that there is some distance between the publication of their great books and the reaction against some of them, it may be possible fairly to assess their collective achievement. First, they are the generation that moved the most decisively away from the narrative, storytelling traditions of Francis Parkman and G. M. Trevelyan to the history of themes and problems, such as slavery, the rise of the gentry, the Tudor revolution in government, the Puritans, the rise of fascism, and the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Slavery and race relations engaged the Americans more than the English. Study of the transition from feudalism to capitalism engaged English historians more than Americans.

The World War II generation did not invent new kinds of history, but they were responsible for the elevation of several previously existing types. Foremost among these was a dedication to manuscript research. Before the emergence of this generation it was possible to write great books based on printed materials. After the publication of such works as Elton’s *Tudor
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Revolution in Government, Stampp’s Peculiar Institution, or Woodward’s Origins of the New South, it became much more difficult.

Yet the historians of the World War II generation were not afraid to take on big subjects, which were often too vast to be approached archivally. Particularly in the 1950s history as cultural criticism flourished in the hands of Boorstin, David Potter, Hofstadter, and Schlesinger. And despite the archival revolution it was still possible to write great books without manuscripts, as William McNeill’s Rise of the West, Franklin’s From Slavery to Freedom, Tuchman’s Guns of August, and Schorske’s Fin-de-Siecle Vienna among others can testify.

“If history is not about change,” declared Stone with typical boldness, “it is nothing.” The favored subjects of the World War II generation—the rise of the gentry, the transition from feudalism to capitalism, slavery and race relations, the Progressive movement, and the German Question—were usually either about change, attempts to initiate change, or about things they wanted to change. A later generation of historians sometimes tended to write, especially in the case of Jonathan Clark and the school of English Civil War revisionists, about how little things changed even in revolutionary times. In the histories written by the most recent generation of historians there are few decisive changes—no Tudor revolution in government, no rise of the gentry, no English Revolution, and no Industrial Revolution.

Both the English and the Americans saw history as a socially purposeful activity, but there was a difference. The Americans tended to see history as the construction of a usable past to assist understanding of contemporary social and political issues and advance social justice. Getting the story straight remained paramount, but once you got it right, you could pursue its contemporary social and political implications. Americans were particularly conscious of the need to study underprivileged groups. Several of the Americans, especially Boorstin, Hofstadter, and Schlesinger, used history as a vehicle to criticize contemporary society. Boorstin celebrated American pragmatism, Schlesinger pleaded for the maintenance of a vital center, and Hofstadter deplored the menace of the masses.

The English were more interested in the rise and fall of classes. The reason for this difference seems relatively clear. For the most part this generation of historians did its seminal work in the decade and a half after the end of World War II. During this time the United States reached the zenith of the American Century. But in the 1950s it appeared to many American historians that it was time for progress in social justice to match material and economic progress. The English historians, on the other hand, wrote in the
context of decline. Although England had survived the Depression and World War II, it had surrendered economic superiority and leadership of the democratic world to the United States. As the English aristocracy and England itself declined in the face of forces that were essentially beyond their control, English historians sought to understand the response of earlier classes to the stresses of other immutable social and economic forces.

From the vantage point of retirement the members of this generation look uneasily at what their profession has become. Among the Americans most are dismayed at the fragmentation of the profession that they attribute primarily to the seeming obsession with race, gender, and ethnicity. For Edmund Morgan the new social history removes from consideration one of history’s most critical questions, that of power relationships, because women and minorities were ordinarily not particularly powerful.

Both the English and Americans share dismay at the cult of professionalism that pervades in recent historical writing, which, ironically, stems in large part from the elevation of archival research for which this generation was largely responsible. Several of them long ago warned of the danger of losing the reading public by bombarding it with exhaustively detailed, highly specialized studies. Historians, remarked Trevor-Roper, are killing history just as classicists long ago killed the classics.

Despite some pessimism there survives in this generation a cautious optimism not only about history but also about the world. Handlin, the author of Truth in History, the most pessimistic jeremiad about the state of the profession in the late 1970s, was still able to write in the 1990s: “My philosophy, such as it is, develops out of the study of the human past which persuades me that, despite the susceptibility to error and despite the frequent risk of failure, man has the capacity to make order and find purposes in the world in which he lives when he uses the power of his reason to do so.” In a similar vein Schlesinger has remarked, “I am a short-term pessimist, but a long-term optimist. I think some future crisis will rally the country and bring out new leaders. These are the cycles of history.”

While harboring no illusions about the crooked timber of humanity, these remarks echo the novelist William Faulkner’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech, delivered in 1950. Faulkner asserted that postwar writers of fiction had forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself and must strive to relearn the old universal truths without which any story is ephemeral and doomed. Historians today, from the perspective of the World War II generation, ought to abandon the narrow and antiquarian and return to subjects that will engage and educate the interested public.