

Open letter to Emma Griffin, President of the Royal Historical Society

29 October 2021

Dear Professor Griffin

Thank you for your email of 21 September informing me of the results of the recent election to the Council of the Royal Historical Society. As you may imagine, to come fourth in the ballot when there are three vacancies is a frustrating experience, rather like being an athlete finishing fourth in an Olympic final. But these things happen and we must accept them. In so doing, it is natural to look for some positives in the outcome. The principal one is the possibility that those who have been elected will do a better job than I could have done at reforming the Society and making it fit for purpose in the modern age. I sincerely hope they do. It is with this in mind that I am replying to your email and its news in the form of an open letter.

Over the course of my career, I have watched history and historians become increasingly peripheral to society. This is not only to the detriment of historians but everyone, including those who are not interested in studying the past or learning lessons from history. We live in a world in which historical ignorance is growing and in which people cannot determine fact from 'fake news'. Conspiracy theories abound and are circulated via the Internet more swiftly and easily than ever before. Rarely does the historical profession take an active role in providing an antidote, and even when it does, it is hard to circulate the correction as rapidly or as far as the misleading idea. Historians have lost traction. Postmodernism has not helped, having encouraged many ordinary people to see all possible views of a series of historical events as equally valid, even those that are founded on attitude, not evidence. In short, over the last thirty years, history has gradually been marginalised, so that now it is seen either as pure entertainment or as pure education, in these silos, with little chance to make a significant impact on the central intellectual current of society.

I am aware that there are historians who flatly deny this is the case. To my mind, such a response indicates complacency. The decline is to be seen everywhere – from the closure of heritage sites and the government's apparent determination to oust the courtyard societies from Burlington House (including the Society of Antiquaries) to the negative impacts on higher education, where it may be measured in terms of reduced government funding and lower student numbers. With regard to the first of these, successive governments have reduced real academic budgets, and, from a public point of view, one can hardly blame them when academic historians are playing less of a role in society than they used to. With regard to the second, since the late 1980s, history has dropped from being the third most popular subject in higher education (after medicine and law) and now lies well outside the top ten. This fall seems to be continuing. I see from the 2020-entry UCAS figures that the proportion of young people applying to study history or philosophy has fallen by almost a third over the last ten years – from 3.3% of the annual cohort in 2011 to 2.3%. That strongly suggests that young people deem the combination of skills and knowledge that history offers less desirable than they used to.

Another indication of the demise of history in academic circles is that scholarly work is often out of step with public interests. On this point, it is worthwhile bearing in mind the time-honoured philosophical question, 'If a tree falls in the forest and there is no one around to hear it, does it make a sound?' If you give an account of the outbreak of the Hundred Years War with perfect accuracy alone in the proverbial forest, the impact of your words is like the noise of the falling tree, without significance. You might as well be entirely wrong because no one is listening. It is our audiences that give our work meaning – by their drawing meaning from our work. The smaller the audience, the more it appears that historians are speaking only to one another and disregarding the rest of society. And if historians disregard society, they can hardly be surprised if the feeling is mutual. The *TLS*'s list of the fifty most influential books published between 1945 and 1995 included many historical titles but almost all of them appeared before 1972. A *Guardian* list of the 100 best books published between 2000 and 2019 included only one historical work, Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens*. A historical memoir features on that list – Edmund de Waal's *The Hare with Amber Eyes* – but it is historical fiction that dominates. Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* appears at number one. It should be a wake-up call to all historians that made-up stories about the past have huge cultural resonance yet genuine ones have much less. Public interest in historical fiction has grown as its engagement with academic history has declined. The recent cuts proposed to history departments and declining student numbers have to be seen in this light.

It is easy to complain, hard to do anything about the general slippage of the standing of the profession, and very difficult to reverse public opinion. However, not to do anything would be to succumb to the general malaise. And since the Royal Historical Society is the only UK organisation 'working for history and historians', it seems logical to concentrate on the Society as the principal potential agent of change. On this point, recent and ongoing reforms to the organisation of the Society are most welcome, and of course it will take time to appreciate what the long-term benefits will be. But much else remains to be done. We should look at this positively, as there are many improvements that can be made, to the advantage of both history and historians. What follows is therefore a resume of some of the initial thoughts I would have presented to the Council, had I been elected.

My first priority would have been **to improve the standard of methodology and elevate its standing within the profession**. Source criticism is the prime reason why society needs historians right now: to show the public how we may determine facts and test the limits of evidence. Such training should be valuable to employers in an information age, as well as to those wondering what to make of the misinformation and disinformation circulated on the Internet. On top of this, we are increasingly seeing attitudes prioritised over evidence in public discourse – especially with regard to medical procedures (such as vaccination), technology (e.g. 5G masts and climate change), xenophobia, criminal activity and differences associated with social prejudices (especially race, sex, sexuality, trans issues and class). When people come to conclusions on the basis of attitudes rather than evidence, the fabric of society is beginning to tear.

The reason for making this priority number one is not only because historians have something to sell to the rest of society but also because they are in danger

of squandering it. Methodological standards are slipping within our profession, even in academia. Revisionism, for example, is widely frowned upon as it is perceived to be contrary to the interests of historians who do not wish the assumptions on which they have built their careers to be questioned. The result is that we do not look on our past work as a profession with a sufficiently critical eye. Only when our colleagues are dead do scholars feel happy pulling apart their work. But there is plenty to pull apart. Some writers blatantly employ scissors-and-paste methods, even though these were deemed unprofessional by R.G. Collingwood way back in 1946 (in *The Idea of History*). Editors of journals are reluctant to publish methodological essays because they do not present new material and thus 'do not constitute new research'. Selectivity of evidence, circular arguments, groupthink and confirmation bias are by no means uncommon and, where they are found, one also finds a commensurate complacency about methodology. Scholars naturally deny these things but putting one's head in the sand is not the solution.

On top of these problems, I have noticed that there is a widespread expectation that historians should not criticise fellow scholars on methodological grounds. It is assumed that every scholarly historian knows the limitations of his or her evidence and to question their methodological rigour is disrespectful. It is no exaggeration to say that, in some quarters, historians are expected to prioritise loyalty to one another over their objective pursuit of the truth. This attempt to suppress debate within the profession is in marked contrast to the earlier part of the last century when some historians went at each other with great character. Sometimes these controversies became matters of public interest in themselves. Today, historians are averse to methodological deconstructions of cherished beliefs. Anti-revisionism is seen as a safe place by editors and senior historians alike. Academic complacency and the decline of methodology go hand in hand.

The most damning aspect of all this is that we just don't talk about it. Even as the budgets and student numbers are falling around us. Instead, the declining statistics are themselves seen as the problem. In reality, they are symptomatic of a deeper crisis in our profession.

What can be done under the Society's aegis? The Society could initiate and oversee the development of a set of methodological guidelines and make them required reading for every student of history in the country. Perhaps it could work with the Historical Association in this. It could ensure a relevant methodological test is built into every examination. I would suggest creating a series of prizes for the most significant methodological historical studies to be published each year, with an emphasis on their award being made regardless of how controversial the findings might be. I'd encourage journals to do what they could to stimulate methodological debate. If we can get the methodological approach right, improvements in the quality, efficacy and lasting qualities of the history we write should automatically follow.

A second priority is **balancing the Royal Historical Society as an organisation**. The Society claims to be 'working for history and historians' but in truth, the 'history' for which it is working does not extend beyond the bounds of historical scholarship, and the majority of 'historians' for whom it is working are university employees. The recent public announcement of the election results

underlined this. It stated that ‘it is important that our Council is truly reflective of the demographic, institutional and intellectual diversity of today’s historical profession.’ The Council cannot possibly reflect ‘the diversity... of today’s historical profession’ unless it believes that ‘the profession’ and scholarship are synonymous, with the implication that any non-academic historical endeavours are not professional. That view seems somewhat out of date. This raises the fundamental question: what is the Society for these days? Is it to reward academic distinction through election to the Fellowship and to promote academic values? Or does it exist to represent the study of the past in all its forms? If the latter, it does not speak for the whole profession in its current format. Independent scholars are not represented on the Council. Nor are the authors of the vast majority of history books sold in this country. Nor are the members of those professions that apply history in the course of their daily activities.

This lack of representation draws attention to a deep division in our profession. On the one side we have academics, who naturally concentrate on historical scholarship. On the other, we have non-academics, who may or may not be concerned with scholarship but who have the additional burdens of considering the ways in which we might use our knowledge and present it to different audiences. This division is detrimental to the interests of all historians, and thereby to the public understanding of the past. Indeed, I suspect it is the most important single factor resulting in the decline of history that I mentioned at the start of this letter – more damaging even than postmodernism or any government cuts.

The negative impact on the academic side of the profession seems to stem from the ‘tedious but necessary’ form of scholarship advocated by Geoffrey Elton back in the late 1960s. It provides the framework for assessing academic outputs. Yet it places no value on the quality of narrative (storytelling) or the sensitivity of expression, or the historical correlative (juxtapositions of past and present) or any of the literary forms one might employ to convey meaning in an exciting way and make a historical topic meaningful to modern society. It ruthlessly dismisses all forms of romance, fun, humour, empathy and sympathy. This dispassionate, analytical approach to the human past means that, when the RAE and REF came along, it seemed appropriate to assess historical outputs on a similar basis to the sciences and social sciences. This was disastrous. Academics were required to avoid everything that had even a whiff of the joyous or creative about it. This is no doubt why books by academic historians do not appear on ‘best of’ lists in the mainstream media.

This straightjacketing as a social science disempowers many academics. It trains them to resist drama, humour, romance, empathy and literary flourishes as if, simply by using them, one undermines one’s standing as a scholar. The problem is that in order to reach an international audience, scholarship alone is not enough. It is necessary to go far beyond the scholarly frontier and embrace the art of history – by which I mean balancing scholarship, imagination and literary skill to impart meanings of importance to the ordinary reader. When at a conference at the Institute for Historical Research in 2011 I declared that ‘higher education institutions in the UK do not teach people how to write history’, one professor from Birkbeck strongly disagreed with me on the grounds that (in her

words) 'I teach all my students to write clearly and concisely'. Her reply proved my point. What did she teach about the use of suspense or drama, of 'light and dark', 'showing not telling' or the objective correlative, or any other correlative effect? What did she even know of writing about her specialist subject for a general readership? She was no doubt an excellent scholar but that does not automatically make her an excellent historian in the eyes of the public.

It is not difficult to see how this negatively impacts on history itself. Academic historians find themselves excluded from wider audiences. They are forced to stand aside and allow less-qualified writers and broadcasters to become publicly associated with their specialist subjects. Thus the most important consumers of history, the public, lose out by being fed a less authoritative account. Academics naturally criticise the person who presents the subject to the public. The two sides seem at odds. Public support for academic endeavour commensurately diminishes.

The non-academic side of our profession is also losing out from this divide. Independent scholars and writers for the public are barred from applying for almost all research funding. They are regularly left out of specialist symposia and similar academic gatherings, even when they have considerable expertise and a different perspective (often coming at a subject by way of biography). They have difficulty gaining access to research resources, which are jealously guarded by research institutions. It is automatically assumed that all 'early career historians' are following an academic path, so biographers and other creative non-fiction writers – who potentially will have more impact than any other historians of their generation – receive no help. There are archivists, local historians and independent scholars among the Fellowship but the Society does nothing to aid their career development (to the best of my knowledge). In addition, most marks of professional eminence and distinction are denied to non-academics. It is very rare that an independent scholar or a public-facing historian is invited to be a VP or elected to serve on the Council. I am sure that at some time the Society *has* invited a non-academic writer to give a prestigious paper at a meeting of the Society but I cannot recall an example in recent years. On top of all this, non-academic historians have no professional representation (unless they are teachers represented by the Historical Association). What do members of the Council even know of the pressures and priorities of those historians who are not employed in higher education?

We need to break down this division as a matter of urgency. It is obvious to me that closer ties can only be to the benefit of both sides, just as deeper divisions are to our mutual detriment. But how we start pulling together when the Council of the Royal Historical Society, the organisation that provides sector leadership, is exclusively composed of academics, who have little understanding of the problems facing the rest of the profession, is open to debate. Myself, I would recommend that the Council be reformed to include an equal number of non-academics – including representatives of the archives and museums professions, as well as independent scholars and more than the token public-facing historian (ideally a couple of household names, to bring the public on board).

My third priority is closely related to the previous one, only it concerns *what* the Society does rather than whom it represents. It is that **the Society needs to**

place itself at the forefront of history in this country, so it can take a lead on all the other areas of advocacy and standards-setting that are required.

One way to do this would be to champion historical literature, which otherwise only our two leading popular history magazines do, *History Today* and *BBC History Magazine*. Another would be for the Society to associate itself with the production of landmark historical events. Perhaps a series of lectures aired on the BBC that are the historical equivalent of the annual Christmas lectures inaugurated by Michael Faraday at the Royal Institution? Only one of the awards administered by the Society is for a work aimed at the public, and that is spread across all the various media that history touches. In marked contrast, there are half a dozen for early career academics.

The key point is that the Society is almost exclusively concerned with academic debates; it does not represent the historical interests of the ordinary people of this country. The Society's lectures on the public understanding of history are academic views on that wider appreciation, not attempts to raise historical awareness among hundreds of thousands of people via TV or radio. Often I look at the calls for papers in the Society's circulars and I do not understand the convoluted titles of some of the conferences – and this is despite having four degrees and professional interests across eight centuries. Sometimes I suspect the conference titles are deliberately abstruse in order to accentuate the academic character of the event, separating it from anything that smacks of popular history, displaying its Eltonian credentials on its sleeve. This is nothing short of madness when academics depend on public support for a large proportion of their funding. If the public don't see the benefit, why should they pay for the research? If, on the other hand, the public could see the Royal Historical Society at the cutting edge of presenting exciting new findings or explaining aspects of our collective culture in a new way, there would be a very different view of the merits of the profession, and the extent to which the government and other grant-awarding bodies should continue to fund it.

A fourth priority is that of **the enforcement of standards**. Over the years I have discovered that some senior historians (a small minority, I hope), feel they can disregard the Society's standard on ethics with impunity. They make recommendations about the publication or non-publication of research without disclosing an interest – contrary to the statement on ethics – and no one holds them to account. They offer verdicts without explaining them, and advance opinions in order to belittle careful arguments, and they suffer no repercussions. This is not good practice in any profession. It is also unfortunate that there is no complaints mechanism for malpractice – for instance, when editors of journals accept biased reports in contradiction to the Society's statement on ethics. It stands to reason that there is no purpose to an ethical code unless someone is prepared to enforce it. What is the point of having a speed limit if no one takes action against people speeding? As we learn from history, the existence of laws does not in itself guarantee good behaviour. A mechanism for reporting malpractice to the Society should be considered as a matter of urgency. If, for example, a historian were to complain today about an editor who has clearly transgressed the statement on ethics, what is the Society going to do? No action will simply highlight the weakness of the Society. In some quarters, it may even be taken as indicative of apathy. Were this to touch upon matters of racial or

sexual prejudice, such perceptions of apathy could be very damaging to the Society. But it should not just be those transgressions that spur the Society into action. Indeed, if historical scholarship acquires a higher profile – if academics are encouraged to take centre stage and engage in more controversial debates that have public resonance – the maintenance of standards will become even more important.

My fifth priority, which runs throughout everything said above, is that **the Society should have more fun**. It is very serious and po-faced in all its scholarly dealings. Archaeology has won many hearts through demonstrating on TV the excitement of discovery, and I don't see why the Royal Historical Society should not also support the use of fun to demonstrate the benefits of history. Let there be high standards of scholarship, yes, but let there be jokes too! Let us remember that we stand for remembering all the experience of mankind down the centuries – the wonderful as well as the miserable, the joyous as well as the harrowing, the romantic as well as the horrifying, the absurd as well as the banal. History is not a schoolroom – it is the study of everything that ever happened involving human beings – and therefore we should make as much space for laughter as erudition. To this end, lively debates should be encouraged about such thought-provoking questions as when was the best time to be alive, or the worst, or 'What if?' questions, or questions that stray across subject boundaries such as 'When did beauty start to matter?' I like the idea too of amusing prizes. I have long thought the profession should celebrate annually whichever publication has the highest score when you multiply its number of endnotes or footnotes with its UK sales figure – with honourable mentions to all those that score more than twenty million. We really could lighten up a bit as a profession, and it would not diminish our scholarship one jot were we to do so.

In conclusion, decades of concentrating on the 'tedious but necessary' model of historical scholarship and pursuing inappropriate metrics at the expense of encouraging exciting historical literature have damaged both the standing of history as an intellectual discipline and the Society. The Society finds itself weakened with regard to commanding public attention, safeguarding academic department budgets, attracting more young people to the profession, upholding its own ethical code, and even guaranteeing high levels of methodological rigour. And while the Society remains committed to an almost exclusively academic agenda, there is a significant danger of this continuing. I do not imagine that reform is going to be easy; in fact, I am sure that it won't be. However, it is vital for our profession. If a programme of reform along the lines above were to be undertaken, the Society would find itself in a position to take responsibility for the profession as a whole. Then it would be able to present the government with a statement of expectations for history on behalf of the whole of society, not just an interest group. It is in this spirit that I address this letter to you, and congratulate the three Fellows who were elected to serve on the Council recently, and wish them, and you and the rest of the Council, the very best of luck.

Yours sincerely,

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