

Foreword

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This special collection came out of an excellent conference organised by Sarah Marshall, Michael Sewell, Lewis Smith and Jessica Fure at the University of Essex in October 2017. The articles presented here give us a sense of the temporal, geographical and topical range of public history, a domain of practice that eludes the periodic attempts to define its parameters. The capaciousness and porosity of ‘public history’ is at the same time a source of great intellectual energy and a potential obstacle in the pursuit of attention and esteem within the wider academic discipline. Collections such as this – and particularly those authored and edited by historians early in their careers – play a vital role in shifting the balance towards the former quality. These scholars are often the most active and creative in developing open, boundary-spanning approaches to historical practice, approaches in which engagement and collaboration with publics of various kinds are understood as inherent, rather than subsequent, to research. As these historians progress professionally, the question of whether universities are willing to reflect these disciplinary shifts in their recruitment, probation and promotion arrangements will become pressing, and rightly so.

One important such shift in the discipline is captured in the collection’s title: the ever-present past. Historians have long argued that historical perspective is invaluable for understanding the world of today, often as part of a project to defend the field from charges of irrelevance (the ‘ornamental’ or ‘elective’ humanities having been set up in a fabricated but nonetheless prevalent opposition with the ‘essential’ STEM subjects) (British Academy 2008; Olmos-Peñuela et al. 2015; Szretzer 2001; Tosh 2008). At the same time, we have tended to regard ‘present-centredness’ as a serious scholarly infraction. We have placed ourselves in something of a quandary here; we want to secure our discipline’s societal status while maintaining a judicious distance from any demands society may make of us to put our expertise to work. The characterisation may be too starkly drawn. Nonetheless, it is public history that has provided a space – at the periphery of the academic discipline – in which the presence of the present can be actively and constructively addressed. Public history projects are conceived precisely because a particular past matters now, whether it is marking the anniversary of a local business or the rather more challenging, and potentially dangerous, task of taking history

onto the streets to confront the racism built into the civic environment.¹ The same observation could be made of public history projects pursued in a purely scholarly domain. One important reason, even imperative, for researching confederate monumentation, the public representation of the Third Reich, the politics of school history textbooks or public inquiries into historical injustice is their impact on the present and on people's lived experiences today.

The conference and the papers presented here show the value of historians giving serious attention to the ways in which the past appears to intrude on, make demands of and claim authority over the present. Such contributions draw public history into bigger conversations about the future of the discipline that concern us all – not just those who identify themselves as 'doing' public history. Indeed, professional identity is central to these conversations. We are all products of the choices and chances we have encountered so far. It is hard to anticipate what will fire our intellectual imaginations, or who the people will be who change the way we think in radical ways. We cannot know which opportunities will arise along the way or which routes we expected to follow will prove impassable. These moments can be transformational; they influence not only our historical interests or the subjects we study – so, what we do – but also shape our practices: how we do history, why and for whom. Each of us is a cartographer, drawing our own intellectual map, the contours and features of which we continue to trace throughout our lives as historians. My point here is two-fold. First: once we acknowledge the complex, subjective and contingent influences on all scholarship, it is harder to dismiss public history as self-evidently distinct from 'proper' or 'academic' history – at worst, the deintellectualisation and commodification of the past, neatly and appealingly packaged for and presented to mass audiences. Second: the metaphor of the map allows us to view – to read and so to recognise – very different terrains of historical practice as historical practices without necessarily incorporating them within (or excluding them on principle from) our own cartographies. This acknowledgement is important, because there is more, we have in common as historians than divides us. I prefer, therefore, to think of public history not as a field, sub-field or specialism, but as history with 'public purpose': disciplinary-history animated by a commitment to the world and tuned into the needs and questions of the present (Green, 2016).

Practising history in this way is a form of academic citizenship, a duty of service. Offering service does not, however, mean being servile (Mandelbaum, 1991). There is no genuine public purpose in providing ready confirmation of cherished myths or affirmation of received wisdom. If a more critically-minded, historically-informed society – one highly suspicious of myths and received wisdom – is a 'good thing' then one vital task for a history with public purpose is to give people access to the tools by which historical understandings are made. We can show them how we use our raw materials and on what basis we make our selections and interpretations – whether they are found in a museum exhibition, a documentary, or a book. Indeed, focusing less on the formats in

¹ I am referring here, by way of an example of public history at the 'sharp end', to the work of *Historians for a Better Future* and the group's 'Free History Lessons' initiative conducted by Confederate monuments in North Carolina, see: <http://ncph.org/history-at-work/q-sir-would-you-like-a-history-of-this-monument/> [accessed 27/07/2018].

which historical interpretation is presented, a habit that tends to create subdivisions (including academic/public, high culture/mass market) and more on the underlying history-making process should help reinforce a sense of the value and integrity of history. If anything, this kind of historical endeavour asks more of us as historians than do conventional modes of production. It is far from a second-class or 'plan B' alternative to some academic mainstream. I hope that collections such as this will prompt further, open and inclusive explorations of the forms history with public purpose can take, the questions and problems it can address and the ways in which it can, in turn, shape the future of the discipline itself.

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