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EDITORIAL WELCOME

The Age of Public History

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What is public history – now? Definitions of public history have evolved over the past four to five decades. Some choose to represent it narrowly often to the exclusion of people without formal, academic training in history. Others say that it is an impossible term that is too broad and elastic – it can be stretched over almost anything. A more expansive characterisation sees public history ‘as a process by which the past is constructed into history and a practice which has the capacity for involving people as well as nations and communities in the creation of their own histories.’ Discussion ‘of the process is an integral part of the practice’ in this definition.¹ But however defined two things are clear. Public history is a complex, nuanced, non-traditional field that is multi- and cross-disciplinary. And it is rapidly emerging around the world.

Undoubtedly debates about the nature of public history will continue into the future, though some have questioned their utility.² These will be shaped by specificities in particular countries and cultures.³ But public history has come of age. Public historians and others have developed institutional and other infrastructure in several countries including Australia, Canada, Britain, Indonesia, Italy, New Zealand, Scandinavia, South Africa and the United States. Founded in 2010, the International Federation provides a network of public history programs, academics and practitioners and produces a refereed journal, *International Public History* – though some would argue that there is not necessarily a ‘global’ public history practice. Academic and other publishers have also embraced the field as have cultural institutions of all modes and sizes.⁴

Patricia Money-Melvin noted over twenty years ago that for many professional historians ‘the definition of historian is treated as a fixed category, unrelated to time and place. The only time and place of importance in the defining process, at least as far as the professional historical community is concerned, is that of the period when the professionalizers’ construct of historian emerged and took root.’⁵ She was concerned with ‘the dynamic tensions between

past, present, and future and of the opportunities as well as the constraints [in the culture] inherent in that tension' for professional historians, both inside and outside the academy.⁶ More recently Marnie Hughes-Warrington has noted similarly 'that there is no "history" apart from historical practices. Nor... is there any logical, universal or unchanging reason to talk of one practice as "more historical" than another... our views on what history is are themselves historical... [and] are subject to re-evaluation and change.'⁷

While public history has come of age, it has done so at a time of great uncertainty in a world that changes constantly. Old binaries of producer/consumer and professional/amateur have blurred in a post-colonial, digital world. Historical authority which was monopolised by academics in the mid twentieth century, has been democratised, though democratisation is also an unstable process. Neoliberal managerialism also continues to undermine the role and practice of history in most of its manifestations in many countries, especially in universities.

Jorma Kalela argues convincingly that academic historians need to see themselves as consultants. 'Rather than just transmitting knowledge of the past,' he wrote, 'it is our task also to encourage and support other people engaged with history making and to be available when assistance is requested.'⁸ Some historians have stepped up to these challenges. They have acknowledged that historical knowledge and consciousness have multiple sources – film, documentaries, public art, heritage, exhibitions, historical novels, family history and community history, re-enactment and schools. Established in 2011, Historypin has shared hundreds and thousands of sources and memories with thousands of archives, libraries and museums.⁹ Taking a lead from citizen science, citizen history is booming across the world. As Alana Piper has written, 'digital humanities are... revolutionising the ways that history is transmitted to, received by, and – perhaps most importantly – performed with public communities.'¹⁰

History from above is obsolete. But this does not mean privileging 'history from below'. Rather, there is a strong and growing recognition that history in general comprises a wide spectrum of practices across a vast number of agents, actors and audiences, none of which are necessarily superior to one other. Public history will continue to evolve in different places, in different ways and for different reasons – conciliation, reconciliation, renewal, recognition, revival. Some speculate that the term public history may perhaps disappear if it is stretched beyond its elasticity. 'Urban history' dominated the western history profession in the late 1960s and 1970s in the context of environmental crisis. It ultimately fragmented and was absorbed into the new social history in the 1980s. Public history on one level has grown out of rights movements – human, Indigenous, labour, gay and lesbian, green and minority: will it eventually melt into air? Perhaps public history might be best thought of as an ongoing, entangled negotiation – as a set of evolving relationships – cultural, economic, environmental, political and social – involving a range of knowledges and a diversity of people, groups and organisations.

Endnotes

1 Hilda Kean, 'Introduction', in Hilda Kean and Paul Martin (eds), *The Public History Reader*, Routledge, London and New York, 2013, pxii.

2 Robert Weible, 'Defining Public History: Is it possible? Is it necessary?', *Perspectives on History*, March 2008, available at <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/march-2008/defining-public-history-is-it-possible-is-it-necessary> (accessed 31 May 2021).

3 See, for example, Paul Ashton and Alex Trapeznik (eds), *What is Public History Globally? Working with the Past in the Present*, Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2019, Part I, which explores conceptions and practices of public history in eleven countries. See also, for example, Marko Demantowsky, Marko, 'Public History in, from and about Russia', *Monthly Editorial*, October 2019, in *Public History Weekly*, no 7, 2019, 28, DOI: [dx.doi.org/10.1515/phw-2019-14340](https://doi.org/10.1515/phw-2019-14340).

4 See, for example, the public history series recently launched by de Gruyter: <https://www.degruyter.com/serial/PHIP-B/html> (accessed 31 May 2021) and Bill Adair et al (eds), *Letting Go? Sharing authority in a user-generated world*, The Pew Centre for Arts and Heritage, Philadelphia, 2011.

5 Patricia Mooney-Melville, 'Professional Historians and the Challenge of Redefinition', in James B. Gardner and Peter S. LaPaglia (eds), *Public History: Essays from the Field*, Krieger, Malabar, 1999, p7.

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- 6 Patricia Money-Melvin, 'Professional Historians and "Destiny's Gate"', *The Public Historian*, vol 17, no 3, 1995, pp9-24. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3378750>
 - 7 Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies: Studying history on film*, Routledge, London and New York, 2007, p32. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203390948>
 - 8 Jorma Kalela, 'Making History: The Historian as Consultant', *Public History Review*, vol 20, 2013, p31. <https://doi.org/10.5130/phrj.v20i0.3631>
 - 9 Paul Ashton and Meg Foster, 'Public Histories', in Sasha Handley, Rohan McWilliam and Lucy Noakes (eds), *New Directions in Social and Cultural History*, Bloomsbury Academic, London and New York, 2018, p162.
 - 10 Alana Piper, 'Crowdsourcing: Citizen History and Criminal Characters', in Paul Ashton, Tanya Evans and Paula Hamilton (eds), *Making Histories*, de Gruyter, Berlin and Boston, 2020, pp199-210. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110636352-017>