History and Historians

By Eric Foner and John A. Garraty

In their writings about the American past, the nation's historians have identified and distinguished the American people. They have spelled out American ideals and institutions and explained how they originated and evolved. They have narrated America's collective memory. Because historians speak from and for the present, every age writes a different history. But American historians have over the years shared key perspectives about their past because American society, more than many others, has rested on certain premises that have been fairly consistently held. This does not mean that there have been no significant conflicts over American principles but rather that the conflicts did not mark radical changes and that, however redefined, the principles seemed to flow from one age into the next.

American historians have always said that their aim was to follow the dictates of historical science and to record the truth about the past, but in the decades after World War I some of the nation's leading historians came to believe that objective historical truth is unattainable and that in looking at the past everyone is in fact his own historian. For the larger part, American historians have not been overly preoccupied with the philosophical question of whether the past as it actually was can be retrieved. Every generation, from the Puritans' to our own, has claimed for its study the ideal and authenticity of science, but the definition and practice of historical science have regularly changed. Always guided by new methods of natural and social science, historians have consistently adapted their methods to accord with the changing paradigms of the sister sciences. The most important of these changes came, as we shall see, with the professionalization of history in the late nineteenth century.

Certain closely interwoven themes run through American historical writing, though they have been differently sounded from one age to the next. The men and women who peopled English North America were led by freedom-seeking Protestants moving under divine Providence. Trying to break away from a Catholicized English church, they wished to offer a model, a "city on a hill," for Protestant revolutionaries everywhere in Europe, and particularly in England. Providence moved the course of English Americans' moral and material condition steadily onward and upward. The principles of liberty and democracy were the pillars of their institutions. When the principles were violated by their mother country, Americans fought for and achieved their independence. Ever guided by Providence, they regularly reaffirmed these principles: in their westward expansion, in the War of 1812, in the war with Mexico, and in the Civil War. Their affinities with the Anglo-Saxon peoples, particularly the British, formed a continuous basis of their institutions. Though not riven by class warfare, American society often witnessed intense rivalries among economic interests. In the decades after World War II, the forces of history, if not necessarily the will of Providence, made the United States a commendable model for the nations of the world to contemplate. But in the course of these decades, the role their country was playing in world affairs caused many younger American historians to question the model. Others, giving up a unifying vision of the past, went their various ways in trying to understand it.
Two factors above all explain why American historians have in successive ages shifted perspective on the central themes of the nation's past: the transit, over centuries, from a religious view of the world to an increasingly secular one, and the impact of the critical developments of their own time. Significant shifts of perspective took place during major periods of American history: the Puritan years, the age of the Revolution, the early national years, the late nineteenth century, the Progressive Era, and the decades after World War II. We shall consider how, in the light of the major developments of their age, each generation of historians perceived and recorded the American past.

American historical writing begins with the early-seventeenth-century colonization of the eastern seaboard. New England was the principal habitat of the historians of the colonial age and Puritanism the informing element of their view of the past. First at Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay, and spreading from there throughout New England, they practiced their own brand of Calvinism, or what they called the reformed or true religion. The major historians were leaders in colonial society: William Bradford was governor of Plymouth Colony; John Winthrop was governor and deputy-governor of Massachusetts Bay; Edward Johnson occupied several offices in the Bay Colony; Cotton Mather and Thomas Prince were prominent Boston pastors. They did not doubt that the settlers of New England had been sent by Providence on a special errand into the American wilderness to found a new Zion, a model for Old England to emulate. As they saw it, they had fled the depraved Christianity of Europe, and of episcopal England in particular, to seek religious and civil liberty and to practice "a pure and exemplary Christianity." They wrote history as annals rather than as a continuous narrative because they believed that Providence directed the events of their lives and that their role was to record these events as an edifying account of God's wonder-working governance of his chosen people in their new Zion. The title of Mather's massive history, the most important of this genre, indicates its nature: Magnalia Christi Americana (or "The Great Achievements of Christ in America"). The Puritan premises of these historians were recast in more secular terms in the eighteenth century. Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography is a neo-Puritan's didactic account of his moral struggle for success through individual perfection.

The historians of the age of the American Revolution conducted a running debate over the justifiability of the War of Independence. Those who defended the colonies criticized George III and monarchical institutions. Providence still governed history, as they saw it, but by natural laws rather than by extraordinary intercessions. Depending heavily on The Annual Register edited by Edmund Burke, the leading English political philosopher of the time, the "patriotic" historians--William Gordon, David Ramsay, Mercy Otis Warren, and a whole school of biographers of George Washington who catered to the new nation's desire for a hero--presented the colonies' triumph as clear evidence of a favoring Providence. The most notable of those who differed was Thomas Hutchinson, the last royal governor of Massachusetts, who argued that it was an error to break with Britain, although even Hutchinson approved of New England's values and institutions.

The peace that followed the turbulent decades of the French Revolution and the War of 1812 signaled the need for American historians to ponder where their nation stood in the larger transatlantic world. They were sure that the United States stood at the high point of human progress. The lines of that progress could be traced as a westward march. Spain had opened the New World to the Old, said William Hickling Prescott, and rose to prominence by virtue of its principle of nationalism. The Netherlands had achieved greatness, said John Lothrop Motley, by fighting Spain for the principles of national independence and religious freedom. In the mid-eighteenth-century struggle over North America, said Francis Parkman, the French ideals of absolutism and Catholicism had fallen before the superior English ideals of liberty and Protestantism. It remained for George Bancroft to sum up, for his
generation, the larger meaning of America for Europe. His History of the United States showed how the Americans had realized the most progressive ideas of that age: personal freedom, civil rights, democracy. He shared with his contemporaries the sense that Americans were an Anglo-Saxon people and, as such, particularly oriented to these ideas. But more than the other notable historians of his age, he insisted that Providence was guiding America in its historical role on a universal stage.

The wreckage of the Civil War left the United States with large and complex problems. Trained in new schools of higher education and organized in chartered associations, professional classes emerged in all walks of life who could lend their expertise to help anatomize the nation's institutions and solve its problems. The special role of the new professional historians was to achieve a more informed and disinterested understanding of the historical background of the transformed American world. Unlike the patrician or "amateur" historians of earlier generations, the professionals went through a course of formal training. They studied in seminars under master historians, did research in archives and libraries on materials contemporary with the age they were studying, and published monographs that presented the product of their researches in order to help advance historical knowledge. The doctoral degree was a testimony to their expertise and professional status. Opening its doors in 1876, The Johns Hopkins University led the way in graduate studies in history and the social sciences under the direction of Herbert Baxter Adams. Woodrow Wilson summed up the role of Adams and indeed the nature of the new professionalism by calling Adams "a captain of industry." Other major centers of professional history were organized at Columbia, Harvard, and Wisconsin.

The new historians did not differ significantly in ideas from the patrician historians who continued writing in the late nineteenth century. Both sounded themes of an earlier age, but in an altered key. For them the United States was yet a special, exemplary nation, but Providence was now secularized, working its wonders in more mundane, material ways. That the Civil War had validated the key American principles of freedom and national growth was a central idea of the major historians: James Ford Rhodes, Moses Coit Tyler, Edward Channing. Stimulated by their interest in the nation's growth, which they now perceived in terms of the new Darwinian science, historians paid particular attention to the colonial origins and evolution of American institutions. An increasing rapprochement with Britain encouraged a newer view of the Anglo-American relation. Some, like Herbert Baxter Adams, argued that Anglo-Saxon political institutions, transported from England, had been directly reproduced in America's early settlements. Others, while resisting this argument, nonetheless agreed that England had been central in the colonial age. The so-called imperial school of American colonial history made it doctrinal that the age could best be understood only as an interwoven Anglo-American experience and only through a study of English public and private records. The leaders of this school were Herbert Levi Osgood, George Louis Beer, Charles McLean Andrews, and, somewhat later, Lawrence Henry Gipson.

Progressive reform and historiography responded to the problems of early-twentieth-century American industrial society. Progressive historians widened the scope of historical study. James Harvey Robinson called for a new history that would relate the past to the issues of the present, highlight change rather than continuity, and focus less on institutions and more on the daily lives of people. One significant result of Robinson's prompting was the multivolume History of American Life, edited by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., and Dixon Ryan Fox.

Two progressive historians dominated the age: Frederick Jackson Turner and Charles Austin Beard. What both said signified that America's guiding Providence had been further secularized and domesticated. History could best serve, said Turner, by "holding the lamp to conservative reform." He rejected Anglo-Saxonism as the matrix of popular institutions, insisting that America's ever-moving
westward frontier had a democratizing impact on eastern settlements. The essential American past could therefore be found, he urged, in the changing sectional interests and conflicts produced by an ever-mobile and altering frontier.

Beard sounded more clearly than most the progressive theme that the American story was one of perennial conflict between the privileged few and the democratic many. In An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution (1913) he argued that, far from resting on high-flown abstract principles, the Constitution in fact reflected the property concerns of groups of creditors and businessmen. And in his Rise of American Civilization (1927) he presented the nation's history as an epic of conflicting economic interests.

The U.S. triumph in World War II led to what has been called the age of consensus in American historical writing. With their nation at the center of world events and compelled to compare it with the European powers who were now under its sway, historians sought to explain America's centrality and history. Most useful for that explanation was Alexis de Tocqueville's Democracy in America (1835, 1840), which analyzed U.S. institutions in terms of the nation's two basic principles: liberalism and democracy. Finding validation for their own ideas in Tocqueville, historians read the American past as one of a relatively homogeneous and conservative culture, essentially free of social conflict. America's past was unlike Europe's, which they regarded as having been riven by class warfare and revolution.

The new generation of scholars challenged the premises of progressive historiography and above all those of Beard, who had perceived politics as having been regularly managed by small self-serving business interests. Robert E. Brown insisted that colonial politics was essentially democratic, Edmund S. Morgan rehabilitated the patriotic view of the American Revolution, and both Brown and Forrest McDonald rejected Beard's argument that the Constitution catered to special economic interests. Many writers in the postwar era--among them Daniel J. Boorstin, David M. Potter, and Louis Hartz--sounded the theme of an American consensus.

Historical writing took a new turn in the 1960s. To many younger historians, the United States seemed to have been a land of conflict rather than consensus. Others replaced consensus with pluralism. Why did perceptions of the American past change so significantly? Four reasons suggest themselves. One was that, if they had earlier been sustained by the idea of a beneficent Providential role in world affairs, Americans were now doubtful about their continuing involvement in overseas conflicts, particularly the Vietnam War. Moreover, the American civil rights revolution that began in the 1950s made historians wonder about the condition and status of all disadvantaged groups. In addition, the extensive exchange programs among American and European scholars that began in the 1950s made it almost inevitable that American ideas about the study of society should be Europeanized. Finally, research and writing responded to the revolution in electronic technology, particularly the use of computers.

These reasons help explain some of the principal themes and features of recent American historical writing. First: Many recent historians, particularly those of a New Left or neo-Marxist persuasion, questioning the consensus historians, found movements of class consciousness and conflict in America that they regarded as broadly analogous to those in Europe. They were dubious about the managers of the nation's social politics and of its diplomacy. Among those who advanced a newer, radical viewpoint were Sean Wilentz, writing on the New York working-class movement in the early Republic; Eugene Genovese, on the world the slaves made for themselves in the antebellum South; Eric Foner, on the class relations and class conflict of the Civil War and Reconstruction eras; Herbert Gutman, on the
Second: The civil rights revolution aimed initially at the inequalities burdening American blacks, but it soon widened to include other groups that, in a changing ethos, appeared to have been treated unfairly: Native Americans, Hispanics, other ethnic minorities, children, the laboring poor, the mentally ill, individuals of divers sexual preferences, and, in particular, blacks and women. From having been effectively screened off from active politics, these groups became increasingly visible in all walks of public life. New curricula emerged at many universities that undertook the study of several of these groups, and an interest in all of them spawned a vast literature that now came rolling off the university presses.

If blacks dug into their past more certainly at first, it was because their agencies of historical research—largely the work of Carter G. Woodson some decades before—were already in place. The exploration of the black role in American life—in antebellum slavery, in the Civil War, in Reconstruction, in the New South, in the Harlem Renaissance, to name but a few subjects—now became a massive historiographical effort, in which white historians worked zealously along with black. In the 1970s began the remarkable enterprise of women's history. In an ever-growing number of books, articles, journals, courses, and associations, women (with occasional contributions by men) showed how significantly women had figured in shaping American institutions and values: domestic, communal, associational, and public. They were particularly concerned with women's role in family life, education, the work force, reform movements and social work, religion, the nation's wars, and indeed in struggling for an equitable, meaningful role for themselves in a public life that had been almost exclusively a male domain. Wanting to extend their angle of vision yet wider, other historians sought to examine American life "from the bottom up," with the intent of correcting the earlier view of society from the top down, which, they claimed, had given an elitist perspective to American historiography.

Third: A new social history was thus emerging. It was the product not merely of the egalitarian sentiments of the younger historians but also of the lessons afforded by European historiography, and particularly by the French annalistes, led by such men as Marc Bloch and Fernand Braudel, who regarded every aspect of life and every social group as worthy of study. American historians now wrote about prisons, churches, hospitals, mental institutions, mobility, kinship systems, social structure, public places, private places, sexuality, food, the bedroom, and the nursery—indeed every aspect of family life.

Fourth: They were helped in these studies by the computer. Quantitative investigations afforded them a more secure ground than the general tenets of consensual history. From the quantification made possible by computers came a new political history, a new economic history, and in rapid sequence, a new social history.

Fifth: The focus of the newer tendencies of thinking about the past was the locality. In centering on a town, a village, a community, the historian could follow the precepts of the newer history: study the daily lives of ordinary people; concentrate on sources that had hitherto gone largely untapped; use the computer to tabulate large bodies of information; and resist the practice of letting the premises guide the facts rather than the reverse. Examples of the new local history are the works of Philip Greven, Robert A. Gross, Anthony F. C. Wallace, Willie Lee Rose, and Stephan Thernstrom.

What then are this generation's historians saying about the major themes that have run through American historical writing? They have retreated from celebrating America's Providential role among
the nations, its mission as a city on a hill, and the singularity and exceptionalism of its society. Although some have stressed the interwoven American principles of liberty and democracy, most have turned away from a larger vision, focusing instead on different aspects of society and on localities rather than the nation as a whole. In lieu of their earlier concentration on a mainstream, essentially Anglo-American politics and culture, they have been increasingly concerned with racial, ethnic, religious, generational, and sexual groups striving for civic and legal equity. If they seem to have no unifying vision of their past, that may very well be because they are too close to their own time to gain its overall measure.

Citation: