

A FUTURE FOR PRACTITIONERS OF THE PAST? “DOING HISTORY” IN THE 1990s

In these pages a year or so ago, Paul Laverdure provided a plea for “a new role for the CHA” as an expeditor for those of us who are historians outside the halls of academe. Dr. Laverdure touched on a number of aspects of the life of the historian as consultant while making his case. My purpose here is to let his argument stand without comment - apart from expressing a hope that it is being pondered with some seriousness by the CHA - while providing some thoughts of my own on the business of doing history in the new age of entrepreneurship that is the 1990s.

As a recent doctoral candidate at the University of Ottawa, I had ample opportunity to consider life after the Ph.D. Pulled strongly toward teaching, I came to realize that the jobs were not going to materialize, despite all the demographic predictions that were so popular only five years ago. Other avenues would have to be explored. The obvious choice was working as a consultant, to use this federal civil service town’s buzzword for those of us who hang out our own shingle and seek work on a contract basis. Since more and more graduate students are considering this tour, perhaps a few pointers from someone who has set out along that path will be timely.

Almost thirty years ago, the American historian J.H. Hexter wrote a book with the simple yet evocative title, *Doing History*. Hexter was expressing his ideas about and ideals for the profession of history as practised by the academic historian. His title has always held a fascination of its own, however, capturing as it does the notion of history as an activity, as a mode of work. As such, it need not be confined to the special challenges facing the academic, but can move out into a wider world that requires one to do history as a business. The economic constraints of the 1990s have produced much agony over the relationship between the university and the corporate world, so the suggestion that history can be a business may meet with some resistance. Yet anyone considering a career choice as a consultant is a business person who offers services involving the practice of history. A second fundamental tenet is that those who are interested in these services need have no inherent interest in the topic on which the graduate student has spent so much time and effort.

From these fundamentals flow a number of other principles and practices which the nascent consultant needs to consider. An important key, I believe, is to rethink the place and importance of our specialties and how we go about “doing history”. Too few people are interested in the specifics of our specialties to provide work in our chosen fields. The trick is to think more generally about the skills we use as practitioners of history and to add to these the skills required if we are to be in business

for ourselves. As historians, we can think of ourselves as highly skilled researchers, writers and editors, as analysts and synthesizers of large amounts of information. In short, we have a set of skills that we can identify and apply in a general way as long as we think of ourselves as more than specialists.

Once this new appreciation of our skills has been made, we are ready to get down to “doing business”. As business people, we have to market our skills and a good first step is to find out who needs them. Next, we need to learn how to approach the market and how much to charge for our services. Being in business requires consideration of myriad practical considerations, from how to do book-keeping to the question of whether or not to incorporate, from tax strategies to setting styles for final reports. Many of these are best resolved with the assistance of other professionals. But the mechanics of being in business (and I have only touched on them here) must be underpinned with an array of other abilities if we wish to stay in business. The following is a discussion of some of the most important of these abilities.

Establishing and maintaining a network of contacts is essential. It is still a personal world and sending out 500 copies of one’s resume can produce less than a few well-placed phone calls and meetings with people you have identified as needing your services. Think of the people you know less in terms of their functions and more in terms of their needs; does Professor Jones need some research done for that new book? Think of the requirements of certain groups of people. How do lawyers or heritage conservationists, to name only two, meet their needs for historical information?

Setting standards for professional activities is essential as well. Consultants are in a position of trust. When one works in a home office all day or in an archives with no one to see just how long one takes for breaks, how do clients know they are getting value for their money? If you cannot trust yourself to keep track of your working hours and to be honest at the end of the day, then chances are your client won’t be able to trust you either. Respecting the confidence of your client - indeed, respecting your client - is also an essential standard. Your work for them is their property, not yours, and they may have reasons for wanting it done that you do not always fully understand.

Learning to work on the task is an ability that, ironically, may need some polishing after spending a number of years on a dissertation. Many of us wanted to believe our dissertations were a magnum opus that would offer the last true word on our topic. Actually, a dissertation is a study of particular length, built upon historical sources, that both contributes to the growth of knowledge and meets the degree requirements of our programme.

In contrast, most contracts are short-term and have highly specific questions dictated by the needs of the client. If negotiations with a client result in, say, three months of work at the end of which a report is to be produced addressing those questions, then at the end of three months the report is produced. The report must adhere to the questions from the client rather than going off on tempting tangents. (If further questions are uncovered, these may form the basis for negotiating a second contract.) Learning to estimate the requirements of a particular task comes with experience, but attention has to be paid to it for every task.

Communication with the client can easily be under-rated as an essential requirement for the success of a project. Historians are often an independent lot, accustomed to working in relative isolation on their projects. But this doesn't do much good if the consultant's conception of the project differs in any significant way from the client's. Good communication is necessary at every stage of the project, from the frank, delicate yet necessary discussion of the terms and limits of the contract (in which time and money can become blurred), to the nature of the research that is to be done, to the style and appearance of the final product. Maintaining good communications helps prevent problems from developing, catches early those that do, and keeps the client informed of progress. Having you as their consultant should reassure the client, not be a source of anxiety.

Many of these abilities can be found under the rubric of professionalism. Consulting is an unregulated industry and has its share of charlatans and opportunists as well as sincere, hard-working people. Professional standards can both be learned and acquired through experience. One of the first things I did after submitting my dissertation was to sign up for a couple of courses on consulting. They proved valuable in framing my thinking about doing history as a business. But learning to think through the potential difficulties and evaluating experiences critically yet constructively are disciplines gained through experience. Don't just pat yourself on the back if successful or punish yourself if not. You are learning about yourself as much as about historical problems and small business techniques.

The small business entrepreneur is the new economic saviour of the stripped-down 1990s, if the multitude of media items on the topic is any indication. The insecurity of the jobless world can be transformed for the consultant into the stimulation of working on an ongoing series of interesting tasks with people of varied backgrounds. The availability of new communication and information management technologies adds to the possibilities, enabling the consultant of the 1990s to provide creative solutions to a wide variety of problems. Here the notion of the "virtual firm" comes into play: people with different knowledge bases and skills can join forces to provide particular sets of skills and expertise as required by particular projects. In other words, one's network should include not only potential clients but also

people with different skills who can be called upon for aspects of a given task. The virtual firm ebbs and flows around those tasks, coming together in its different permutations as the particular tasks require.

One needs a high tolerance for continued learning and unpredictable change to work as a consultant, whether on one's own or as part of the variable virtual firm. Development of the business skills required takes place largely outside the hallways and seminar rooms of academe. But as increasing numbers of highly trained graduates undertake the business of doing history, the academy and its supporting organizations such as the CHA would do well to consider the implications for the nature and purposes of history. It is no longer confined to the intellectual sphere alone but has entered the more prosaic and practical realms in which live those who have problems historians can help solve. The historical consultant produces a good deal of history for specific purposes, but applied history is history nonetheless. That growing knowledge base will remain largely unavailable to the academy unless creative efforts are made to recognize it for its merits.

Dr. Barry Cottam practices the business of doing history as an Ottawa-based consultant on Aboriginal historical and legal issues. He is also the editor of the bulletin SSHARE - Social Sciences and Humanities Aboriginal Research Exchange. He can be reached for comments by e-mail at cottam@msn.com.

HISTORIANS IN THE NEWS

Dr. Valerie J. Korinek, a recent graduate of the University of Toronto, has been appointed to a tenure-track position in modern Canadian history at the University of Saskatchewan. A specialist in women's, social, and cultural history, Korinek is currently working on a manuscript entitled, "Roughing it in Suburbia: Reading Chatelaine Magazine, 1950-1969."