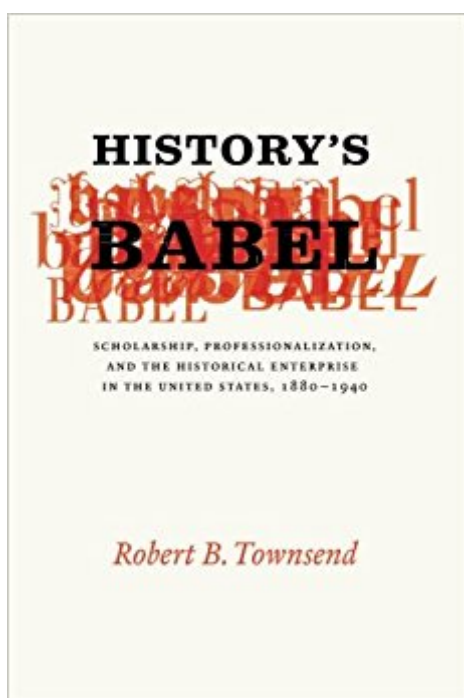


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# History's Babel: Scholarship, Professionalization, And The Historical Enterprise In The United States, 1880 - 1940



## Synopsis

From the late nineteenth century until World War II, competing spheres of professional identity and practice redrew the field of history, establishing fundamental differences between the roles of university historians, archivists, staff at historical societies, history teachers, and others. In *History's Babel*, Robert B. Townsend takes us from the beginning of this professional shift "when the work of history included not just original research, but also teaching and the gathering of historical materials" to a state of microprofessionalization that continues to define the field today. Drawing on extensive research among the records of the American Historical Association and a multitude of other sources, Townsend traces the slow fragmentation of the field from 1880 to the divisions of the 1940s manifest today in the diverse professions of academia, teaching, and public history. By revealing how the founders of the contemporary historical enterprise envisioned the future of the discipline, he offers insight into our own historical moment and the way the discipline has adapted and changed over time. Townsend's work will be of interest not only to historians but to all who care about how the professions of history emerged, how they might go forward, and the public role they still can play.

## Book Information

Paperback: 272 pages

Publisher: University Of Chicago Press (January 4, 2013)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0226923932

ISBN-13: 978-0226923932

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.7 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 2 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #246,607 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #126 in [Books > History >](#)

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## Customer Reviews

"In this impressively researched study, Robert B. Townsend conveys the intellectual energy and the distinctly American unified vision among particular historians of the time who sought a professional identity for the historical enterprise. This is an important study of the evolution of the infrastructure of

the intellectual life of the nation." (Francis X. Blouin, Jr., University of Michigan, Ann Arbor)"

Robert B. Townsend is the deputy director of the American Historical Association, where he has worked for more than twenty years.

Twenty years ago, Roy Rosenweig, (founder and director of the Center for History and New Media, 1994-2007) asked Robert Townsend how "new media" would change scholarship for historians. Townsend's latest response is a study of the historical enterprise, beginning with the tipping point reached in the late 19th century wherein the scientific method usurped traditional approaches of the "gentlemen scholars." Adaptation of the methods of the scientific community opened new lines of inquiry and analysis, permitting historians to spend entire careers in narrow and obscure areas of study. Concurrently, expansion of public and university libraries and archives democratized access to primary documents, fueling employment for professional historians, further specialization, and potentially lessening isolation between academics, educators, and "others" engaged in archival and public history work. "New media" democratizes access to primary material in ways barely imaginable two decades ago. Like any democracy, the results are messy. For each new tool, there is proper application and maladaptation. Digitally manipulated and available sources increase potential for new discovery and new myths. The vandals are at the gates of the ivory towers; peasants are erecting their own villages on the King's land and rally: "Information wants to be free!" Townsend's history tells us that the historical enterprise has experienced this before and survived, with scar tissue that sometimes limits agility. He encourages discerning leadership, better collaboration between the established professions, and assimilation of the tools, technology, and ideas of the people who bear them to the gates.

The book is elegantly structured with nine chapters - three eras each detailing the history enterprise from local history, academia, and education. The missed opportunities to create a large cooperative enterprise of many disciplines does much to explain why so many of the history "cousins" too often do not work well together today. This book is eye-opening and crucial to the understanding of why history is preserved the way it is currently.

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