

Address by Gary T. Johnson to the  
Chicago Historical Society's Reception for Historians,  
October 25, 2005<sup>1</sup>

You may have read the generous publicity about me, but still wonder about my bona fides as an historian. Your first assurance, of course, is the creation of the new post of Chief Historian and the appointment of our friend Russell Lewis to fill that post. In addition to that grand title, he also is executive vice president, a clear signal that at the Chicago Historical Society, the chief historian here also is firmly ensconced as second in command.

But you may wonder about me, especially when you read that I served as a bigfirm lawyer for 28 years. I could tell you about my civic work, especially in civil rights and legal assistance to the poor. I'm happy to do that, but that would only tell you that I am a certain kind of lawyer, and not answer your questions about my commitment to history. So let me tell you something about my love of history. Not a career in history, such as you all have had, but a love of history. Let me describe the world I was in as a history student back in the 1960's and 1970's, the world that I have been transported from after 31 years in the law. As far as history is concerned, I am still that student, with the same enthusiasms.

When I got to Yale College in 1968, there was no question that history would be my major. I remember very well when my very favorite professor at that time, Edmund S. Morgan announced that he stood corrected on something very fundamental. He had said that there would be no way to write about many aspects of the life of ordinary people in colonial New England, because the records simply were not available. Now, he told us, one of his graduate students had managed to write the very kind of history that he thought could not be written. He was very excited at the possibilities.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is the extended, written version of the remarks. Gary T. Johnson became the Eighth President of the Chicago Historical Society on August 22, 2005:

<http://www.chicagohistory.org/pressroom/CHSNamesNewPresident.pdf>

President's Page: [http://www.chicagohistory.org/pressroom/president/archive\\_index.html](http://www.chicagohistory.org/pressroom/president/archive_index.html)

<sup>2</sup> Professor Morgan, of course, was being characteristically modest, because he already had pointed the way in *The Puritan Family* (1942), a pioneering work of social history.

This, of course, whetted my own undergraduate appetite, and I began to hear about Marc Bloch -- that martyr of the French resistance -- and the French historians known as the Annales school.<sup>3</sup> I learned of the intellectual basis and the research techniques of an approach to history that turned that famous phrase from Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard" on its head: this was not the "short and simple annals of the poor," but instead, the extended history of "la longue durée." And there was nothing simple about it: the story of the poor became richly textured.

I arrived at Oxford knowing that my career goal was to become a lawyer, but relishing the idea of studying history for two years during a period of sheer intellectual pleasure. My field was Modern History, but don't draw the wrong conclusion: At Oxford back then, "Modern History" covered the period from about the year 401 -- the coming of the Anglo-Saxons -- to 1914. Anything later was dismissed as journalism. My mentor was James Campbell, now retired from teaching, whose expertise was the Anglo-Saxons. So that is where I focused as well, the early medieval period, especially in England.

This was the heyday of "history from below." In my college was Richard Cobb, the idiosyncratic urban historian who wrote of French police and prostitutes and other marginalized people and non-traditional topics. I saw the shape of the profession's future very clearly in Ronald Blythe's *Akenfield*<sup>4</sup> -- that penetrating study of an East Anglian village over the generations. History no longer was about Carlyle's so-called "Great Men,"<sup>5</sup> it also was about ordinary people over the generations. I also was excited by the emerging techniques of history. Campbell was able to tease out conclusions about an early medieval town based on evidence as small as the distribution of pennies to the poor,<sup>6</sup> and as his student, I was challenged to do the same. Tree rings became grist for the historians' mill. Then came ice cores. Anything seemed possible as a tool of history. The whole world was opening up to the historian, and there was nothing off limits.

The French social historians were never far in the background. I spent my second year at Oxford living in an establishment run by the French Ministry of

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<sup>3</sup> The group was given that name because of the name of their journal: *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald Blythe, *Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village*. Pantheon Books, 1969.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Carlyle, His lectures, published as *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History* (1841).

<sup>6</sup> See James Campbell, *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History*. The Hambleton Press. (London, 1986.) P. 142.

Foreign Affairs, where there were three very onerous requirements: we had to speak French, we were “forced” to eat three meals cooked by French chefs and we were asked to be polite to our guests. Our guests were the French intelligentsia, who came by for free bed and board at the Maison Française d’Oxford. I got to meet some of my French historian heroes this way, including Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie.

What about the museums? The Ashmolean Museum was down the street from my college, and I passed it every day. The collection, to the extent it was visible at all, mostly resided in glass cases. The curators were mandarins. The word “interactives” would have been banned, had it been coined. Nevertheless, I loved the Ashmolean and I treasure memories of visiting there.

This was the world of history that I left behind. It was a heady world of new possibilities. Imagine my surprise and delight to be able to rejoin it. I always will be playing catch-up to all of you – the professional historians, but I want you to know that I feel the same sense of expectancy and possibility that I did thirty-one years ago.

If you want to know, I consider myself lucky that post-modernism passed me by while I was otherwise occupied as a lawyer. Back in my student days, the idea that it was impossible to separate “facts” from sources was a theory that, as far as I knew, had not broken out in a big way from the philosophy faculty. Historians were not yet focused on whether, absent an adequate epistemology, history is a mere illusion. (I am reminded of something that Isaiah Berlin said: that he gave up philosophy in favor of studying the history of ideas because he wanted to die knowing more about something than when he was born.<sup>7</sup>)

In any event, my answer is this: Try to tell someone whose story is being told for the first time that history is simply a word game. Try to tell people who are recording their oral histories for the first time that memory is a shadow game. Try to tell communities whose stories have been repressed that what matters is historiography, not history.

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<sup>7</sup> For the quote attributed to Berlin, see Roy Foster, “The Function of History at the Present Time,” *Oxford Historian: A newsletter of the Faculty of Modern History for Oxford Historians*. (May 2005; 4, 7). I am indebted to this article for a survey of recent trends in history.

From my vantage point as President of an institution entrusted with the care of over twenty million objects and documents, there is nothing more “real” than a search through our attic or a foraging trip through our underground storage area. My guess is that there is no better corrective to a certain way of thinking than a plunge into the deep end of our archival resources, a plunge that so many of you have taken.

Our job, of course, is to make the historian’s work easier, not to take sides in intellectual battles. That doesn’t mean that I won’t find amusement. For example, I have been slightly startled to find that there is some contemporary interest in studying the history of museum exhibits. With apologies to Neil Harris<sup>8</sup> of the University of Chicago, let me say this: I’m only now learning about turning artifacts into exhibits, but now it’s exhibits as artifacts! That will take some getting used to, but I’ll give it a try.

As I survey the “territory of the historian,”<sup>9</sup> what do I find? I am delighted that urban history is in the good hands of Michael Ebner<sup>10</sup> and so many of you here today. It is wonderful the Lake Forest College has created a Center for Chicago Programs, and that so many academics, even outside of our metropolitan area, choose Chicago as their subject matter for understanding urban life.<sup>11</sup> I am proud that leading historians have collaborated with us in our projects, such as Carl Smith of Northwestern University.<sup>12</sup> I can hardly wait to read the new history of Millennium Park written by Timothy Gilfoyle of Loyola University with collaboration from the Chicago Historical Society.<sup>13</sup> I am very interested

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<sup>8</sup> See his website for a list of his works on the evolution of American cultural life, including the history of museums and libraries,, <http://history.uchicago.edu/faculty/harris.html>

<sup>9</sup> See Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Le Territoire de l'Historien*. Volume I appeared in 1973 and Volume II in 1978.

<sup>10</sup> Professor Ebner is a Trustee of the Chicago Historical Society. See his biography: <http://www.hnet.org/~urban/teach/syllabi/ebner2000bio.htm> The Center for Chicago Programs is at: <http://www.lakeforest.edu/about/chicago.asp>

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., the seminar on Chicago taught by Elliott J. Gorn at Brown University. <http://www.brown.edu/Departments/History/faculty/egorn.html>

<sup>12</sup> Carl Smith <<http://www.english.northwestern.edu/people/smith.html>> is the curator of the online Chicago Historical Society exhibitions, *The Great Chicago Fire and the Web of Memory* (1995) <http://www.chicagohs.org/fire/> and *The Dramas of Haymarket* (2000) <http://www.chicagohistory.org/dramas/>

<sup>13</sup> This work will appear in the Spring 2006 catalogue of the University of Chicago Press in collaboration with the Chicago Historical Society. It was generously supported by our Jo Minow and her husband, Newton Minow. Regarding Tim Gilfoyle himself, I can only stand in admiration of someone who leads an annual midnight bike tour of Chicago’s historic sites. <http://www.luc.edu/depts/history/gilfoyle/BIKERIDE.HTM>

in the work of William Cronon, whose work, such as Nature's Metropolis<sup>14</sup>, reminds me of the trends I saw in my early years of taking a region and considering all the factors, such as supply chains. (The work of Fernand Braudel on the Mediterranean region comes to mind.<sup>15</sup>) I have told him that his book is the best guide to the forces that have shaped my own family since it first came here from Norway to Chicago in the 1850s. And of course I am gratified that, more and more, the profession is writing the history of communities in Chicago whose stories have been neglected. I cannot thank each and every one of you, but know that I am grateful to the community of scholars that collaborates with us.

Based on my two months here at the Chicago Historical Society, what can I report to you about us? On the collections and curatorial side, I can tell you what I suspect you know, that the collections are a treasure and that our staff – including our younger staff members – are very talented and very dedicated. That's the good news. The bad news is that we have fallen behind in our work in some respects, and catching up with our collections is one of the key goals of my presidency. On the side of exhibitions and education, again, dedicated staff and fine work, but the issue is a different one: finding new ways to engage the public each and every day. A recent conversation with a foundation president reveals just how challenging this can be. He told me of how he had needed to develop strategies as an educator to interest inner city school children in the story of Martin Luther King: they thought of him as just another distant figure from history. This is very hard for me to understand as an American who was born in 1950, but it reveals to me how great the challenge is to engage with young people, whose generations change very quickly.

Later this week, Russell and I (and others on our staff) will serve as principals for a day in Chicago public schools. It is tempting to think of museums and programs as a kind of vacation from the daily grind of state standards, test preparation and a packed curriculum. That is a temptation we cannot afford if we want to reach teachers and students where they live, in the heart of their work. We understand that museums need to engage teachers and students each and every day, not only when they are ready to take a break and receive the "gifts" that museums want to bestow.

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<sup>14</sup> William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, W. W. Norton, 1991. His biography: <http://www.geography.wisc.edu/faculty/cronon/welcome.html>

<sup>15</sup> *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, 3 vols. (Originally appeared in 1949; revised several times.)

These, then, are the two ways that I propose to measure the success of this presidency. We will succeed to the extent that we can make a difference in the lives of Chicago public school children from each and every community and help them to form lifelong habits of learning and curiosity. And on the other end of the educational spectrum: when you all have retired, and your festshrifts are written, will you be able to say that Russell and I, and all of us at the Chicago Historical Society, have been of some help to you in your important work? If we can pass both of those two tests, then I am confident that we will pass every other test, as well.

History, for me, is a cause. Because of my personal background in civil rights, I don't take that word lightly. Why? Three reasons: with history, we are all in it together, history has the power to change lives, and there is a call to action.

**We are all in it together.** History is not confined to the splendid halls of universities and the temples we build for our national archives. When you ask a family member to recall a memory from childhood, that's history. When you help a community group to tell the story of its people, that's history. When you volunteer for your local museum, that's history. When you write a term paper, that's history. When you lead a field trip to the Chicago Historical Society, that's history. In a world of snap judgments, sound bites and characterizations, those of us who wonder how we got here and where we are going have a tie that binds us together. We need to help each other out. We are all in it together for the cause of history.

**History has the power to change lives.** The need to know where you came from is a fundamental human urge, and learning where you came from gives you an identity. The need to tell your story is a basic human impulse, and knowing that you will be heard gives you a voice. The need to know where you are going is a defining characteristic of human consciousness, and deciding where you are bound gives you a mission in life. These are the three transforming tasks of history: helping individuals to find an identity, a voice, and a mission.

Finally, with history there is a **call to action**. As you know so well, history is not a spectator sport! Without meticulous care in preservation, an artifact will deteriorate. Without setting a document aside, it will be lost or destroyed.



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Without recording a story, it will be gone forever. Without dedication from staff, help from volunteers, and financial support from generous donors, a history museum will die. There is no way to recover from the loss of evidence and stories, if we fail to do our part in our own time and place.

So I make this pledge to you, the community of scholars, that at the Chicago Historical Society, we will dedicate ourselves in our time and in this place to the cause of history. I thank you all.