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Monographs: The Sounds of Silence

THE TRANSOM

WILLIAM W. SAVAGE, JR.

‘As the historical-scholarship industry expands,’ Benjamin Moser wrote earlier this year, ‘certain subjects, and not only the most interesting ones, have become so weighed down with bibliography that the historian wishing to create a coherent picture of a famous epoch, episode, or personage will soon be as overwhelmed as a man trying to hack his way through the Amazon with a pair of nail scissors.’¹

Soon?

Soon?

In point of fact, the Great Overwhelming has been upon us for several lustra, and certainly long enough to establish roots in academia far deeper than any to be found in the soil of Amazonia.

The foliage implied in Moser’s metaphor consists of frequently unreadable and often unmarketable (except to libraries still in possession of funds) monographs. To the late Page Smith, the preoccupation of historians with acquiring the methods of science led to the death of narrative history and thus to the rise of the monograph, a narrow exercise in dispassionate, objective analysis of some past thing. The monograph, Smith wrote two decades ago, ‘became the immutable standard in academic history,’ with ‘voluminous footnotes’ (because ‘the general assumption was, the more footnotes, the more scholarly the work’) and an ‘extensive bibliography listing all the works that the author had consulted.’² A monograph, as Smith described it, ‘was supposed to be exhaustive, exhausting the “sources” as well as the reader.’³ The monograph has succeeded in its purpose, I opine. When non-specialists like Moser take notice of the situation, the cat has not merely escaped from the academic bag, it has run amok through the literary streets, hissing and clawing at all those intelligent readers who enjoy history but are not members of the professoriate.

Of more interest to me at the moment, however, is Moser's assumption that there actually are historians who wish to create 'a coherent picture' of anything. Perhaps there are; but unless they've obtained employment, achieved tenure, been promoted, and reached what they consider an optimum salary level, they'd better not try it. Monographs secure jobs, tenure, promotion, and raises. They constitute the only case-bound presentation of history recognized and rewarded by my profession. They are high-dollar proof that historians everywhere have decided to speak only to one another. The truth, of course, is that if historians aspire to the good life, they have no choice in the matter, no viable option: They must produce those monographs.

Consider the criteria employed by a major historical journal for determining which books it will send out for review: According to 'long-standing guidelines,' the journal does not review 'textbooks, second editions or re-publications, collections of documents, most biographies, most collected editions, books pitched to a general, nonscholarly readership, and books that are largely synthetic in nature.'⁴

Or, to state the case with a bit more candour, this major historical journal mostly reviews monographs. A young scholar, hoping for the kind of job security that begins with tenure and ends with a healthy retirement package, would be foolish to risk writing anything other than a monograph, and so says his or her profession.

And so say the university presses that have presided over what must surely be the literary debacle of the last half-century, at least as far as readers of history are concerned. They do not say it because they believe in monographs, I hasten to add, but because their faculty advisory boards approve of the things in orgies of interdisciplinary back scratching. If the faculty member from history says a manuscript about burial practices in three counties in northern Idaho from 1901 to 1906 should be published, will the faculty member from, say, the English department vote against it? Of course not—because the faculty member from the English department is touting an equally unmarketable opus on the semiotics of podiatry in the works of L. Frank Baum. Yes, faculty advisory boards may prove that historians are not the only members of the professoriate who communicate only with one another; but they demonstrate, too, the utter powerlessness of university presses to influence any aspect of what passes for modern scholarship. Withal, university presses are expected to publish intradisciplinary communications and to make

money doing it. Such a thing, as the bottom lines of university presses consistently show, is not possible; but the administrative expectation remains, unsullied by rational thought.

Sometimes, I have been known to visit large chain bookstores, select a comfortable chair near the history section, and observe the browsers and the books they choose to examine. The history shelves, I note, do not contain very many items published by university presses. There are occasions when I have found none at all. This informal research suggests that university presses do not issue much in the way of history that might interest chain bookstore browsers, a suggestion reflected in the notion that chain bookstore managers have not ordered university press books because their titles (or more commonly, I suspect, their subtitles) hold no attraction. There is plenty of history on those shelves, but it is stuff published by commercial houses. Some of it is written by genuine, PhD'd historians. Most of it is written by journalists or former journalists or people whose regular line of work involves something other than being professorial at a college or university. What these books have in common, besides being 'synthetic in nature' and 'pitched to a general, nonscholarly readership,' is that they are written in clear English, free of jargon and other indicators of academic obfuscation presented in the name of scholarship.

Recently, I happened across a book that could serve as a case in point. It was *Six Frigates: The Epic History of the Founding of the U.S. Navy* by Ian W. Toll, published in cloth in 2006, issued in paperback in 2008, and in its second paperback printing by the time it reached my hands, suggesting that its commercial publishing house already had sold several thousand copies.⁵ The book had won a couple of prizes in 2007 and received high praise in all manner of print media; but no professional historical journals were quoted in the accompanying publicity, suggesting either that none had reviewed it or that their reviews were unfavourable. Or perhaps the commercial house (assuming that the book had received good reviews from academics) understood that the approbation of scholarly journals had little or no bearing on sales. I'd certainly be willing to believe that, given the state of irrelevance into which the historical profession appears to have placed itself.

Ian W. Toll, according to the publisher's copy, is not a professional historian but has done a number of things involving finance and politics. *Six Frigates*, the copy announces, is Toll's first book. It's just the sort of

thing one finds in the chain bookstores, because it's just the sort of historical writing the educated non-professional likes to read.

Historians, however, do not really care to communicate with educated non-professionals, people who have nothing to do with tenure, promotion, and all of that. If historians had attempted Toll's feat, there would have been a monograph on each of the six frigates; and no academic would have dared a synthesis involving those monographs because no professional journals would have reviewed it: there would have been a shortage of available space, owing to what would be needed for reviews of the six monographs.

So sayeth the cynic.

Toll's income from the sales of *Six Frigates* has exceeded by far the combined potential income that might possibly be derived from the sales of all six of those hypothetical monographs.

So sayeth the realist.

I raise the matter of royalties because lately I have encountered a surprising number of graduate students who believe not only that monographs actually sell but that their own will earn them thousands of dollars on their very first attempt to have their revised dissertations published. A couple of them entertained notions of huge 'advances' from scholarly houses. Well, far be it from me to throw a wet blanket over the bright flames of ambition and expectation, but I had to wonder where these youngsters acquired their information about the ways and means of scholarly publishing. Poor mentoring on somebody's part, I suppose. Or perhaps a mentor's reluctance to deal in truth, the outgrowth of a feeling that when you belong to a profession busily making itself irrelevant, you don't want to be the last one left to turn out the lights.

The fact of the matter seems most emphatically to be that hardly anyone buys monographs. I asked around among my younger colleagues, and the standard response seems to be, 'No, not unless they apply directly to my current research.' Otherwise, it's a matter of visiting the library or reading reviews in journals. That has been my own approach as well. I possess a collection of books—well, on second thought, let's call it an assemblage of books—numbering in the low thousands, and a mere ten or twelve dozen of them are monographs pertaining to my field. Of those, most were received in payment for reading manuscripts for university presses. The rest are inscribed gifts from their authors,

review copies, and purchases from remainder houses. There have been a few others over the years, of course, but I traded them at used-book stores for volumes more to my liking. Besides, as I have reported previously in these pages, scholarship nowadays has a six-year expiration date, so you can't fool around. You've got to get rid of those monographs while they're still hot.

According to historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, discussion dividing the laurels between 'accessible' and 'inaccessible' writing is an 'unfortunate and simplistic' pastime. In his judgement, 'it would not be very intelligent to insist that all academic histories must be written in prose understandable to everybody.'⁶

Nor, I suppose, would it 'be very intelligent' to think there's *anything* that could be 'understandable to everybody,' but perhaps I don't understand. Chakrabarty believes that inaccessible prose must be accommodated in the name of diversity—meaning, I gather, that different people write in different styles. Or just indifferently, the wag might say.

I can certainly agree with Chakrabarty that professional historians are perfectly entitled to write only for one another, if that is their preference. But I see no reason to drag university presses into the discourse, given their current situation. Why should presses be expected to survive by peddling intradisciplinary communication, especially since some of them have already succumbed as a result of this practice? Young historians are expected to write monographs, and so they do. In the process, however, they develop a sense of entitlement involving hard covers. As well, they assume that their activities are somehow tangled in the commerce usually associated with dissemination of the printed word, despite the intentionally limited appeal of their contributions to it. The facts—the income-to-costs ratios that any press director could provide—don't square with that kind of thinking.

Happily, there are journals and the ever-widening world of electronic publishing to accommodate historians who wish to speak only to one another. Nevertheless, it would be nice if, once in a while, they ventured forth from the realms of the jargonistas to speak clearly to the uninitiated masses about pasts that may be of interest, if not concern.

Or they might find a comfortable chair in a chain bookstore and take note of what book buyers don't buy. Then they could talk to each other about it.

NOTES

1. Benjamin Moser, 'New Books,' *Harper's Magazine* (January 2010): 65
2. Page Smith, *Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America* (New York: Viking Penguin 1990), 260–1
3. *Ibid.*, 261
4. Robert A. Schneider, 'An Open Letter to Professor X: "Please don't quit the AHA because the *AHR* did not review your book,"' *Perspectives on History* (May 2009): 21. The references in the title are to the American Historical Association and the *American Historical Review*.
5. Ian W. Toll, *Six Frigates: The Epic History of the Founding of the U.S. Navy* (New York: W.W. Norton 2008). For the record, the book has endnotes and a bibliography. Both are substantial.
6. Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Crafting Histories: For Whom Does One Write?' *Perspectives on History* (March 2010): 17