

Everyman His Own Historian: Carl Becker as Historiographer

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FIFTY-THREE YEARS AGO, Carl Becker delivered his presidential address, titled "Everyman His Own Historian," at the Minneapolis meeting of the American Historical Association. It received a standing ovation and created shock waves in the historical profession that have not yet subsided. Becker was pleased with the approval he received from his colleagues. W. Stull Holt, then at Johns Hopkins, hailed the address as grand and glorious treason and a well deserved sacrilege against the goddess of scientific history; Ferdinand Schevill of the University of Chicago was delighted that Becker had exploded the "hokum of scientific method and historical truth"; Frederick Jackson Turner, who received a published version, called it one of Becker's "characteristically fine piece[s] of writing." Preserved Smith, one of Becker's colleagues at Cornell, wrote that "Everyman" was the best presidential address within memory, and praise came, too, from Charles A. Beard and J. Franklin Jameson. Outside the profession, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., after reading the essay, wrote Becker: "I have heard you called the finest historian in the country."¹

Becker himself was not so sure. After he wrote the address, he said "blast the thing," and after it was delivered, he expressed concern that it wasn't up to what he had in mind; but in characteristic Becker fashion, he concluded that since it went over fairly well, while it was not as good as it might have been, it was as good as he could make it.²

This paper was delivered before a session on Carl Becker at the 1984 meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago.

His ambivalence about what was a major event in American historiography typifies the man, and the man is the key to understanding Becker the historian and the historiographer. He was somewhat of a puzzle to his own students, and he has remained a complex, enigmatic, frustrating, and fascinating subject for biographers and students of American history ever since. His life and work are filled with the strains of irony and paradox. He wrote 15 books, some 75 articles, and almost 200 book reviews on history and current affairs, yet he claimed his chief merit consisted in having thought a good deal about the meaning of history rather than in having achieved any erudition in it.³ He wrote one of the best and most popular high school history texts, but when he was asked to speak to a session of the American Historical Association in 1928 on the social studies in the schools, he declined on the ground that he had “no ideas on the subject of history teaching in the schools” and had “never thought much about it.”⁴ He was one of the consulting editors of the Schlesinger-Fox *History of American Life* series, but he blandly informed Schlesinger that he had “no enthusiasm for the kind of thing these books attempt to do.”⁵ And in 1935, when he had achieved eminence in the profession, he refused nomination for the Harmsworth Professorship of American History at Oxford because he said he had never taught American history and did not think he knew enough of its details to be able to teach it.⁶

Becker seemed intrigued by dualities in history and in life. He spoke of two histories, one real and the other in the imagination; he described two “heavenly cities,” one of the Middle Ages and one of the Enlightenment; he wrote about two American revolutions, one external and the other internal. His analysis of that revolution often took the form of opposing personalities, representing its dual nature: John Jay and Peter Van Schaack, the principals in one of his famous essays; Jeremiah Wynkoop and Nicholas Van Schoickendinck in another. The protagonists of his book *The Eve of the Revolution* were Sam Adams and Thomas Hutchinson. His lectures on contemporary affairs all bear the same hallmark of dual forces: progress and power, freedom and responsibility, new liberties and old. The dualities may be seen as those of the perennial seeker and skeptic, at best, or of the constantly uncertain and confused, at worst.

Becker's concern about the nature of history seemed to arise naturally from his own personal insecurities, his diffidence about his scholarly attainments, and his perplexity about the human condition. He seemed never sure of anything, or, at least, seemed not to want to be sure of anything, lest he be disappointed — because he was certain that life was filled with disappointments. He asked searching

questions about the nature of history but was never satisfied with the answers he found. He once described a professor as “a man who thinks otherwise,” and he admitted that by nature he was a nonconformist.⁷ The theory of history he expounded so brilliantly in “Everyman” was a perfect mirror of his own unremitting skepticism.

The “Everyman” address has been called the fullest expression of the philosophy of historical relativism. The term is not one that Becker particularly welcomed; he decried all labels as confining, saying they told him little that he cared to know about a historian.⁸ But he insisted that knowledge derived from historical facts and that the inferences drawn from those facts were relative, not absolute; that facts by themselves were lifeless — they were given meaning by the historian; and that in the process the historian was influenced by his own preconceptions and values and by the social outlook of the age in which he lived. Hence, for the relativist, “old views are always being displaced by new views.” If subscription to this approach to history made him a relativist, he would accept the designation. But, at the same time, he denied that he was a relativist in not believing that there was a “considerable body of knowledge,” indeed, an “increasing body of knowledge,” that was “objectively ascertainable.”⁹

One reason for the electrifying response to Becker’s “Everyman” address was its contrast with the dominant theory of historical writing that had controlled the profession from its beginnings in the 1880s as a scholarly discipline and was still in the ascendant. This was the “scientific school,” which defined history as a “science of investigation” much like the natural sciences, studied its subject in seminars much as biologists examined insects in laboratories and prepared histories with “as much supreme indifference” as if they were written on another planet. The intrusion of the historian into the process of recovering the past would debase history, it was said, to the level of philosophy and compromise the historian’s contact with the integrity of past reality.¹⁰ For Albert Beveridge, “Facts when properly arranged interpret themselves.” For George B. Adams, “The field of the historian is...the discovery and recording of what actually happened.”¹¹ The goal of scientific history was encapsulated in Henry Adams’s challenge to historians to dream of the immortality that would come to the one who successfully applied Darwin’s method to the facts of human history and reduced all history “under a law as clear as the laws which govern the material world.”¹²

Becker’s rejection of scientific history came earlier than his “Everyman” address, and it was built on the work of his teachers, James Harvey Robinson and Frederick Jackson Turner. Robinson’s *New History*, published in 1912, proclaimed the need for a past that

was useful to the present. "The present," Robinson declared, "has hitherto been the willing victim of the past: the time has now come when it should turn on the past and exploit it in the interests of advance." The New Historians did not reject the old goal of objectivity, but they recognized that the contemporary world would dictate the historian's view of the past. Turner went further in challenging scientific history and in redirecting Becker's thinking. For Turner, history was the "selfconsciousness of humanity," facts were important only as they served to "solve the everlasting riddle of human existence," and "Each age writes the history of the past anew with reference to the conditions uppermost in its own time."¹³

His teachers whetted Becker's curiosity about the historian's craft. He was especially affected by Turner's caution that it was very difficult for a historian not to have a world view. "The question," Turner had advised his students, was "not whether you have a philosophy of history..., but whether the one you have is good for anything." Becker himself conceded early in his career that "it is difficult to write history without having any theory about it."¹⁴ Two years later, in 1910, he announced his own full retreat from scientific history in an article in the *Atlantic Monthly*. He boldly asserted that historical reality was the product of the historian's own present, that historical facts were mental images created by the historian—indeed, they did not exist until the historian fabricated them, and that detachment on the part of the historian in reconstructing the past was impossible. Detachment "would produce few histories, and none worthwhile; for the really detached mind is a dead mind."¹⁵

For the next two decades, Becker mounted a continuing attack on the premises of scientific history, and in book reviews and essays he set forth almost all the ideas that were more felicitously advanced in his "Everyman" address. In a review of Robinson's *New History*, he criticized all so-called definitive histories. "Why study a subject about which nothing more can be learned?" he asked playfully? And he dismissed the accounts of the scientific historians with the contemptuous query: "What is the use . . . of so many learned volumes which nobody reads?"¹⁶ An address to the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in 1912 permitted Becker to reemphasize that historians selected those aspects of the past which reflected their contemporary interests, and that there was always a close connection between the historical writing of a period and "the fundamental prepossessions" of the time during which it was written. Becker went further in defining the function of history: it was a "social instrument, helpful in getting the world's work more effectively done."¹⁷ He shortly made clear, however, that he did not

expect history to become an active instrument for social reform. Its value, he explained in 1915, lay in “liberalizing the mind, . . . deepening the sympathies, . . . fortifying the will” and thereby enabling us to live more humanely in the present and better prepare for the future.¹⁸

Three central ideas in Becker’s relativism were the subjectivity of historical facts, history as a product of the historian’s imagination, and the influence of the contemporary “climate of opinion” in shaping the historian’s view of the past. They were all pungently expressed in a book review in 1921 and an address to the American Historical Association in 1926.¹⁹ “The historical fact,” he declared, “is in someone’s mind”; otherwise it lies inert in the records, lifeless, useless, making no difference in the world. Facts do not speak for themselves: “they don’t care what they say; and with a little intelligent prompting they will speak . . . whatever they are commanded to speak.” Historical writing, it followed, cannot eliminate the personal equation. Every historian and every age writes history to satisfy a contemporary need. “The past is a kind of screen upon which each generation projects its vision of the future.” In this sense, all people have their history, informal and unrefined though it be. Professional history seeks merely to correct the cruder image of the past held by laymen by bringing to it “the test of reliable information.”

To those, then, who had read and heard Becker before 1931, his “Everyman” address was no surprise; it was merely a richer, more refined, and more elegant restatement of the ideas he had been professing for the past twenty years. To paraphrase “Everyman” would do injustice to its beautifully beguiling language. All one can do is quote some of its more luminous passages:

There are two histories: the actual series of events that once occurred; and the ideal series that we affirm and hold in memory. The first is absolute and unchanged . . . ; the second is relative, always changing History conceived as the memory of things said and done . . . enables us . . . to push back the narrow confines of the fleeting present moment so that what we are doing may be judged in the light of what we have done and what we hope to do.

[Everyman has his own history] which he imaginatively recreates as an artificial extension of his personal experience, . . . an engaging blend of fact and fancy.

[Professional historians] are . . . of that ancient and honorable company of wise men of the tribe, . . . bards and story-tellers and minstrels, . . . soothsayers and priests, to whom in successive ages has been entrusted the keeping of the useful myths.

In the history of history a myth is a once valid but now discarded version of the human story, as our now valid versions will in due course be relegated to the category of discarded myths.

Neither the value nor the dignity of history need suffer by regarding it as a foreshortened and incomplete representation of the reality that once was, an unstable pattern of remembered things redesigned and newly colored to suit the convenience of those who make use of it.²⁰

Becker's resounding repudiation of objective history ushered in an era of relativist historiography that has not yet run its course. If he himself was not the founder of the school, he nevertheless provided it with its fullest theoretical expression. Despite his initial diffidence about the quality of his "Everyman" address, he recognized that there was some "dynamite" in its message, and he conceded that it was the best thing he had written on the subject.²¹ But for the remainder of his life, he qualified what he had said, sometimes contradicted it, and often departed from his own theories in his writings. He had warned against all final truths, but during the crisis of World War II, he confessed that the "glittering generalities" of the democratic faith were indeed "fundamental realities" worth fighting for. When critics charged him with intellectual nihilism by denying the possibility of objective knowledge, he responded that some facts were indeed truly knowable; but then he quipped to a former student that "all thinking was a falsification for a good purpose," and to Felix Frankfurter he confided that truth was only the most convenient form of error.²² He said that detachment for a historian was illusory, but in his own writings he seemed to cultivate the art of detachment with literary perfection. Some of his students were awed by his ability to "sit on the moon and unconcerned but interested watch the world go by." His own preference, Becker once tantalizingly remarked, was to sit on the Olympian Heights with the Greek gods, looking down on the human scene with the detachment of one who did not share the fate of Earth Creatures.²³

Becker was sure that history could enlarge the sphere of human intelligence and fortify individuals for the work of solving the complex problems of an industrial society, but he also expressed his distrust of a "mass intelligence that functions at the level of primitive fears and tabus."²⁴ He insisted that all historians had a philosophy of history, spoken or unspoken, yet he admitted to a colleague that no philosophy impressed him: "I study what interests me and don't inquire too curiously whether it is worth doing." But in the introduction to his high school textbook, he assured his readers that history was indeed worth knowing because it would permit them the

better to manage their affairs.²⁵

What, then, shall we make of this perennial skeptic, this bundle of contradictions, who possessed such an acute and imaginative mind? And what did he contribute to American historiography? He surely taught the historical guild to be critically introspective and to constantly reexamine its own premises and purposes. "The trouble with so many contributions to knowledge," he once wrote jocularly, "is that they are made by scholars who know all the right answers but none of the right questions."²⁶ He himself raised questions of persistent significance. He reminded historians of their fallibility, cautioned them not to expect too much of the historical enterprise, but urged them to pursue it enthusiastically. He asked historians to study the relationship between the rational and irrational, the conscious and subconscious, impersonal forces and human motivations, the social sciences and intellectual thought. He helped to free history from the shackles of scientific determinism and expanded the scope of the historian's craft. He inspired historians to believe that historical study was one of the most important of human activities, intimately connected with the process of improving human intelligence.

Withal, however, he left Clio's image in a state of suspended indecision. If historians today are neither quite relativist nor determinist or partly both, it may be because they have become sensitive to Becker's warning not to be too certain of anything in the business of historical writing. He reminded historians that knowledge alone without some notion of the end to which it could be put was useless, but he never defined those ends to anyone's satisfaction, including his own. Perhaps it is enough that he placed American historiography on the path of intelligent skepticism—although he himself once said that "it is just as vulgar to be parading one's skepticism . . . as to be parading one's fanaticism."²⁷

Michael Kammen, who edited a selection of Becker's letters, concluded his introduction to that volume by asking "what more can we ask of any man" than that he should have raised questions of transcendent importance and sought new perspectives on "eternal verities." My own response to this plea was contained in a review of Kammen's book that I wrote ten years ago. Perhaps in a paper on Becker, who so often repeated himself in his own writings, I may be permitted the privilege of doing the same. What I said in 1974 I can say no better now:

In a world where humanity is struggling for affirmative reassurance even more than in Becker's day, one may well inquire whether skepticism however informed or abdication however erudite is

enough to ask of a humane intelligence. As the historian and philosopher of the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel, has so movingly reminded us: 'One may despair at human truth, but despair is not the truth.' Did the gentle Becker recognize the subtle difference? ²⁸

Notes

1. Burleigh T. Wilkins, *Carl Becker: A Biographical Study in American Intellectual History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), 192; Robert E. Brown, *Carl Becker on History and the American Revolution* (East Lansing, Mich., 1970), 154-158, 160.
2. Becker to Leo Gershoy, Oct. 21, 1931, and (early 1932); Becker to Frederick Jackson Turner, Jan. 19, 1932, in Michael Kammen, ed., "*What is the Good of History?*" *Selected Letters of Carl L. Becker, 1900-1945* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1973), 149, 153, 154-155.
3. Becker to George Lincoln Burr, Jan. 4, 1917, in Kammen, ed., *Becker Letters*, 47; *American Historical Review*, XLIV (1938), 20.
4. Becker to August C. Krey, (November 1928), in Kammen, ed., *Becker Letters*, 131.
5. Becker to Arthur M. Schlesinger, Feb. 14, 1933, in *ibid.*, 174.
6. Wilkins, *Becker*, 145 and note; Becker to Felix Frankfurter, Jan. 10, 1935, in Kammen, ed., *Becker Letters*, 212.
7. Becker, *Everyman His Own Historian* (New York, 1935; Chicago, 1966), 131; Phil L. Snyder, ed., *Detachment and the Writing of History: Essays and Letters of Carl L. Becker* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1958, 1967), 209.
8. Becker to Merle Curti, Oct. 12, 1935, in Kammen, ed., *Becker Letters*, 226-227; *Everyman*, 135.
9. Becker, Review of Maurice Mandelbaum, *The Problem of Historical Knowledge*, *Philosophical Review*, XLIX (1940), 363.
10. On scientific history, see John Higham, *History: Professional Scholarship in America* (Baltimore, 1965, 1983), 92-103; W. Stull Holt, *Historical Scholarship in the United States* (Seattle, 1967), 15-28; Edward N. Saveth, "Scientific History in America: Eclipse of an Idea," in *Essays in American Historiography*, eds., Donald H. Sheehan and Harold C. Syrett (New York, 1960), 1-19.
11. Holt, *Historical Scholarship*, 23; *Am. Hist. Rev.*, XIV (1909), 236.
12. Henry Adams, "The Tendency of History" (1894), in *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma* (New York, 1920), 127.
13. Robinson, *The New History* (New York, 1912), 24; Becker to Turner, May 16, 1910, in Kammen, ed., *Becker Letters*, 15-17; *The Early Writings of Frederick Jackson Turner* (Madison, Wis., 1938), 52, 53, 57.

14. Becker, book reviews, *The Nation*, LXXXVII (Nov. 5, 1908), 441, *Am. Hist. Rev.*, XLV (1940), 593; *Everyman*, 207. Becker reiterated Turner's views as his own in his "Reviewing of Historical Books," American Historical Association *Annual Report for 1912* (Washington, D.C., 1914), 136: "in seeking to avoid having a philosophy of history the historian does not succeed in not having one; perhaps after all he succeeds only in having a bad one."
15. "Detachment and the Writing of History," *Atlantic Monthly*, CVI (1910), 524-536; reprinted in Snyder, ed., *Detachment*, 3-28.
16. *The Dial*, LIII (1912), 19-22.
17. "Some Aspects of the Influence of Social Problems and Ideas upon the Study and Writing of History," *American Journal of Sociology*, XVIII (1913), 641-675.
18. *The Dial*, LIX (1915), 146.
19. "Mr. Wells and the New History," *Am. Hist. Rev.*, XXVI (1921), 644-656; "What Are Historical Facts?" *Western Political Quarterly*, VIII (1955), 327-340, reprinted in Snyder, ed., *Detachment*, 41-64. The latter essay was first read at a meeting of the Research Club of Cornell in April 1926 and then again to the American Historical Association annual meeting at Rochester, New York, in December 1926.
20. *Am. Hist. Rev.*, XXXVII (1932), 221-236; The quotations are from the reprinted version in *Everyman His Own Historian*, 234, 242, 247, 253-254.
21. Becker to W. Stull Holt, (January 1932), to Carl Van Doren, March 9, 1934, in Kammen, ed., *Becker Letters*, 155, 201.
22. Becker to Felix Frankfurter, June 2, 1927, to Leo Gershey (July 1928), in Kammen, ed., *Becker Letters*, 119, 127.
23. Becker, *Progress and Power* (New York, 1949), 19-20; Brown, *Becker*, 190.
24. *Progress and Power*, 105.
25. Becker to Richard A. Newhall, Apr. 14, 1919, in Kammen, ed., *Becker Letters*, 63; *Modern History* (New York, 1931, 1942), vi.
26. *Am. Hist. Rev.* XLV, (1940), 593.
27. Becker, "Wild Thoughts Notebook," Jan. 9, 1895, quoted in Charlotte Watkins Smith, *Carl Becker: On History and the Climate of Opinion* (Carbondale, Ill., 1956, 1973), 13.
28. "Progressive History's Curmudgeon: The Enigmatic Carl Becker," *Reviews in American History*, II (1974), 299.