

CONCLUSION: THE ACADEMIC AS PUBLIC HISTORIAN*

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People involved in the public humanities share qualities with those engaged in academe. While monastic vocation is not a requirement of either, a missionary spirit and the passion for teaching and sharing ideas is essential.

My explorations in this essay are of the ways this spirit of outreach and education can be seen in one very important public activity of Richard E. Sullivan, my teacher and mentor, whom we honor in this volume. As such, my topic is not medieval, but rather that of a medievalist and the broad national public humanities movement which he was instrumental in helping to establish in Michigan in the 1970s. This essay also provides me the unique opportunity to join the two parts of my career—that of Sullivan student and early medievalist with my current position at the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) working with the 56 state and jurisdictional humanities councils.¹

In 1965 when the National Endowments for the Humanities and the Arts were signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson, the United States embarked on a remarkably uncharacteristic movement of government support for learning and culture. In the early years of the Republic, the quintessential American penchant for practicality had led Congress to reject an offer to purchase for \$5,000 the first major collection of Old Masters paintings that existed on the North American continent.² Thomas Jefferson, assuming that members of Congress

* A version of this article was presented at the 37th International Congress on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University, May 2003. I have benefited greatly over the years from sharing thoughts and ideas with Amy Livingstone, but especially in thinking about this essay and its presentation at the International Congress.

¹ My views are my own. The National Endowment for the Humanities bears no responsibility for the material and interpretations presented here.

² *Mistress of Riversdale: The Plantation Letters of Rosalie Stier Calvert, 1795–1821*, ed. Margaret L. Callcott (Baltimore, 1992). The Stiers, Belgian emigrés to Maryland escaping the French Revolution, were descendants of Peter Paul Rubens. Their collection

would be as intellectually astute as he, was surprised at the controversy sparked by his effort to sell his extensive library to the Congress. As we know all too well from our experiences of the last decade, neither Jefferson's ultimate success in forming the nucleus of what became the Library of Congress nor the creation of the two National Endowments signaled the end of debate over the role of the government as patron of the country's cultural life. By the time of the humanities crisis of the mid and late 1990s, however, the government had itself played a significant role in helping to transform the institutional structure and focus of the humanities and the arts.

In the years following the founding of NEH, Senator Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island mounted an effort to guarantee the support of grassroots humanities and arts activities through the creation of state-based public programs that would specifically address the needs, interests, and resources of each individual state.

What resulted was, in essence, federalism for the humanities and the arts—the National Endowments representing the top-down governmental approach; and the state programs, the bottom-up populist approach. Nothing like this had ever before been attempted. The initial audience for NEH itself was the familiar and readily identifiable academy. In contrast, as one can read in a 1972 memo, “no one in the country quite [knew] what a public program in the humanities [was], nor [did] they know what kinds of resources they [needed] to draw upon in order to mount one.”³

To initiate the state-based humanities experiment—a word frequently encountered when one reviews documents from the 1970s—NEH drew in large part upon the familiar. Although it created *de novo* small independent volunteer citizens' groups made up of leaders of a state's humanities institutions, many of the people upon whom it called were academic administrators. This was certainly the case in Michigan, and as an historian and dean at Michigan State University, Richard Sullivan was invited to serve on the committee to found the Michigan Humanities Council. A team that also included the provost of the University of Michigan and colleagues from Wayne State and Cen-

included several of his paintings as well as other major works now scattered all over Europe.

³ Memo from John Barcroft to Ronald Berman, 26 January 1972, p. 1 (cited in Jean Feerick, 'A History of the Division of State Programs,' unpublished NEH manuscript (1990), there 12).

tral Michigan Universities wrote a proposal to organize the Council, submitted it to NEH, received an implementation grant, and hired an interim director.

Many intricacies were involved in getting the state humanities councils off the ground, and while the Michigan Humanities Council which was founded in 1974 was not one of the first councils formed, Richard Sullivan was indeed present at the creation of a new kind of institution—a nonprofit founded at the instigation of a federal agency and dedicated to fostering thoughtful discourse between the academy and the citizenry. He served on the board for the first several years and found it to be, in his words, a “natural fit” for his interests and inclinations.⁴

As a board member, Richard was a guiding force in shaping the Council’s approach to the humanities. Ron Means, the interim director who became the founding director—himself one of Richard’s students—told me that Richard “set the tone” both for board meetings and for the directions the Council would go.⁵ Those of us who have been guided by Richard know what that statement means and know how truly it reflects his overall approach.

The “tone” that Richard set was one of honor, integrity, respect for others’ ideas, fair play, a responsibility to teach (and not just graduate students), kindness to students, and the confidence to let students seek their own interests. He was a master of “gentle mentoring.”⁶ He was above all a teacher—a teacher who guided but did not command. He gathered communities around him—the *comitatus* of his students and colleagues is only one manifestation of this. His scholarship and teaching embodied a commitment to service.

Richard Sullivan was a scholar. He was a department chair, a dean, a provost, a founder of annual conferences—one regional, one international. He was a master of governance and policy. His professional networks crossed many disciplines. He and his students have participated in helping to change the nature of the study of the Early Middle Ages. This one would expect. But the *comitatus* also includes classroom teachers, academic and public administrators, librarians, an Episcopal priest. One is an editor of a significant encyclopædia. One who took many of his seminars reaches huge audiences by writing highly acclaimed mys-

⁴ Telephone conversation, March 2003.

⁵ Telephone conversation, April 2003.

⁶ A term that emerged frequently in many conversations with Amy Livingstone.

teries about the Middle Ages. The intellectual world Richard presented to us was not narrow, and the role model he gave us was one of wide-ranging engagement and possibility. As individuals, we have found our own ways. What unites our approaches is that we are all fundamentally and, I think it would be fair to say, profoundly, teachers. While the arena in which most of us work is the academy, I think it is also fair to say that none of us resides in an ivory tower, and that we consider this to be good!

As we look around at our own careers and those of our classmates and colleagues, we can readily see what Richard wrought. He was a patriarch whose academic offspring now reach to several generations. But he has other descendants as well, the fruit of his public-spiritedness.

As we reflect on Richard's career and the qualities of professionalism and service that he instilled in his students, it makes sense that he would have been one of those who participated in the founding of state humanities councils. As such, he was an alumnus of an illustrious generation of public-spirited humanists and civic leaders. In the context of Richard's career, his involvement as a frontiersman in the founding of a new kind of institution of public education is indeed part of a whole.

There is a humanities council in each of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and Amerika Samoa—geographical diaspora that takes the unique American approach to the public humanities half-way around the globe. What these 56 councils share is a very loosely defined legislative mandate that each “furnish adequate programs in the humanities.”⁷ Each council, in its unique way, brings together citizens of its state by means of the humanities. Here are a few examples to illustrate how a common idea can have many manifestations.⁸

In Michigan, the humanities council has formed a strong partnership with the Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs. This is actually a rarity among humanities councils and shows a kind of confidence that it is willing to share its workload with the arts and thus expand its capacity to reach the public. This partnership has formed Michigan's Arts and Humanities Touring Program which takes cultural programs, services, or resources to communities and schools. Since 1997

⁷ ‘National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities,’ Sec. 956 (f)(1).

⁸ See Kathleen Mitchell, ‘Working Together,’ *Humanities* (July – August 2002), 8–9.

the Michigan Humanities Council has partnered with the Michigan Public Radio Network to produce hundreds of radio reports. In the 2005 fiscal year, the Council awarded almost \$400,000 in grants to strengthen Michigan humanities institutions. The connection between the public and the academy can be seen on its board where a leader of the Odawa tribe, for example, has worked closely with the director of the Michigan State University Museum.

The Alaska Humanities Forum runs Leadership Anchorage. Of all the civic leadership programs around the country, this one is unique because all of its training is based on the humanities. You can imagine that Machiavelli's *The Prince* could spark a fiery discussion between two community leaders, one, a native woman, and, the other, a white man, over the meaning and effects of power and how it is wielded. The Forum recently orchestrated a legislative mandate that Alaska History be a high school graduation requirement, a goal heretofore unsuccessfully sought by civic leaders and educators for over thirty years. It is now turning its attention toward the development of a statewide initiative to enhance childhood literacy.

The Maine Humanities Council brings year-long reading and discussion programs into hospitals. Having read a common body of literature, doctors, nurses, community health workers, policy makers, hospital trustees, and allied staff meet monthly, along with a scholar, to reflect on their relations with their patients and colleagues. Sometimes, aided by Shakespeare and *King Lear*, doctors and nurses find themselves talking to each other as human beings for the first time in their careers.

The Guam Humanities Council serves an island community devastated in 2002 by two super-typhoons. Guam is caught by the grip of both the Asian and American economies. It also maintains a highly diverse population that encompasses the native Chomorro, people from all over Asia, two huge U.S. military bases, and one of the oldest Spanish civilizations in the United States. Magellan visited Guam in 1521 and a Spanish colony was established there in 1565. The Council offers its community public forums on ethics, supports a highly successful literacy program for families, and provides traveling exhibitions for an island that no longer has a single functioning museum.

Councils proved their nimbleness as responsive community organizations in the aftermath of 9/11. Located one block from Ground Zero, the New York Humanities Council took to the web with articles, teaching guidelines, reading lists, and bibliographies on such topics as the history and culture of the Middle East, Islam, Islamic fundamental-

ism, Arab-Americans, civic issues, and terrorism, as well as material on grieving and coping.

In the aftermath of 2005's Hurricane Katrina, the Mississippi Humanities Council found itself to be the only organization in the state that could convene every single agency engaged in the support and reconstruction of both local cultural organizations and their communities.

Book festivals, school teacher professional development, publications, capacity-building for small museums and historic sites, oral history collection, cultural tourism, educational programs in prisons and reform schools, college-level courses in the classics for people below the poverty line—these are just a few of the other kinds of activities carried out by state humanities councils. On the same weekend the International Congress on Medieval Studies took place in 2003, the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities hosted a major symposium on Ireland, one of whose participants was Ireland's president. There are ranchers in the west with more cattle than people for company for whom humanities councils provide one of their most dependable links to ideas and the life of the mind.

It would approach overstatement to suggest that creating institutions to provide the general public with high quality humanities engagement was the modern intellectual equivalent of sending Christian monastic missionaries to convert the Avars and the Danes. To call the movement that founded the state humanities councils, however, a bridging of a frontier and those who participated in it explorers may not be overstatement. In his 1979 article 'The Medieval Monk as Frontiersman,' Richard reflects on the frontier as "a place apart and different." We have seen that those who embarked on the state humanities council endeavor did indeed see the public arena as fairly uncharted territory. Richard also suggests that the frontier "produces and feeds back into the old society new concepts of leadership, repeated calls for moral reform, and a radical view of human nature."⁹ This idea does mirror the effects of cross-disciplinary public humanities which provide intellectual leavening of both the civic and the academic spirit.

Richard Sullivan's *comitatus*, his family, is indeed a large and impressive one. The student of civilization-builders and pushers-out of fron-

⁹ Richard E. Sullivan, 'The Medieval Monk as Frontiersman,' in *The Frontier: Comparative Studies*, ed. William W. Savage, Jr. (Norman, OK, 1979; repr. Aldershot, 1994), there pp. 35 and 39.

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tiers, he helped to build a new civilization of public engagement characterized by thoughtful reflection and discussion, the provision of safe places for people to exchange differing ideas, and the intellectual opening up of big wide worlds—sometimes to audiences innocent of the knowledge that they will, in fact, enjoy the humanities. Richard instilled in us the love of intellectual exploration, the pursuit of diverse interests, the value of public spiritedness, and the joy of mentoring. A rich legacy.