

An Historian's Mailbag: © 2005 **David Hackett Fischer**, Author of *Washington's Crossing* [2005 Pulitzer Prize in History]. He is a Warren Professor of History at Brandeis University.

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In the past few years, every publishing season has brought us a bumper crop of books on the founders of the American Republic. These writings are being read in surprising numbers. Works of scholarship with quiet jackets and restrained titles in eighteenth century script have risen high on the best seller lists, above the flood of day-glo diet books, ghost-written celebrity memoirs, political exposés, and dark prophecies of impending doom.

A few years ago, Thomas Jefferson was the center of attention. Then in 2001, it was John and Abigail Adams. In 2002-03, Benjamin Franklin moved to center stage. In 2004-05, it has been George Washington. From June 2004 to January 2005, web sellers reported no fewer than 31 "new releases" of books on George Washington. Eleven were children's books. Ten were new editions of older works, even long-forgotten biographies of Washington by Woodrow Wilson and Henry Cabot Lodge. Two were volumes in the indispensable Papers of George Washington from the University Press of Virginia. Five were new works of original scholarship.

One wonders why—why so much interest in Washington and the founders, and history just now? Having recently published one of these books, I receive many e-mails and letters which are full of clues. They indicate (despite statements to the contrary) that serious history has many strong constituencies in America today, and they are rapidly expanding.

One group who writes to me are people who have long had a serious interest in history. In childhood they were taken to historic sites. In college they majored in history. In adulthood their interest in history has grown stronger and deeper. Thousands belong to reenacting groups. Many more are reached by the history channels on cable television, and the history films that are flowing out of Hollywood. The numbers are rising. History majors and course enrollments are increasing as more students are multi-majoring, and one of their majors is something historical. Reenacting groups are expanding. The history channels have multiplied on our cable system. A growing proportion of high-quality films have historical subjects, and treat history with increasing respect. All of these trends testify to growing numbers of history-buffs, of which I happen to be one.

Other readers come at history in another way. Much of my mail comes from people who are interested in family history, or some other personal connection to historical events. They write about their ancestors, or about artifacts that they own, or towns where they live. One man wrote about two revolutionary-war cannon balls that were embedded in the stone wall of an old house. He wanted to know how they got there. This constituency is growing at a very rapid rate. One indicator is the huge expansion of interest in genealogy. Another is the increasing linkage between genealogy and history. As more Americans are of mixed ancestry, problems of identity become more complex, and are often cast in historical terms.

A third constituency also appears in my e-mail. These are people who work in knowledge-industries. Some are in the traditional professions; others in new fields that expanded with the digital revolution. They tended not to major in history, but their interest has grown in maturity as they seek to make sense of a changing world. Every day they deal with complexity, and their work demands rigorous thinking. They do not want their history to be dumbed down, and they demand that it be smart, solidly-based, and thoughtful. They have little interest in historiography, which for them is the shadow of the thing, rather than the thing itself. They are appalled by the rigid ideologies of the academic left and the political right. They want their history to have balance, maturity and judgment. Most of all they want history to have the large meaning and generous spirit that they find in the founders. There are millions of these people in knowledge-based callings throughout America today, and they are multiplying rapidly. When something serious catches their eye, they buy history books in surprising numbers. But commercial publishers and academic presses have not served them well.

A fourth group of readers write about questions of another kind. They have a deep interest in large ethical problems that are increasingly urgent to them today, problems of right and wrong in public discourse, and questions about moral values. They worry about where we are heading, about the strength of our free institutions, about the quality of leadership, and the seriousness of our elections. The American founders are deeply interesting to them, more so than ever, because of the problems of our age.

These expanding constituencies overlap with many others. The base for history is very broad, and growing broader. But not all Americans feel themselves to be part of it. Many people in the United States have no interest in history. More than a few have a positive aversion to the subject. The patterns here are not clear to me, but age is clearly a factor. So is class, ethnicity, and region. Many Americans have always believed that history is an alien thing that has happened to other people but not to themselves.

All of this poses hard problems for history writers and history teachers. One problem is how to reach people who have no interest in history—how to persuade them that nations without a sense of history are like those who have lost their memory. Not knowing the past, they have no idea who they are in the present, or what they should do for the future. We have not found a way to reach these people, and much of our popular culture carries them in another direction.

We have also another problem, about how to serve the many expanding constituencies for history. Much of the teaching and writing in academe does not speak to them, and is not up to the level of their intellectual interest and urgent concern. Here is an opportunity for those of us who care about these things. The expanding future of history has never been brighter than it is today.