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Turning Pro: Reflections on the Career of J. Franklin Jameson

Peter J. Wosh

Over the past two decades archivists have moved to define and codify their own separate and distinct profession, inventing a new language, developing a more intensive and expansive training regimen, and constructing a unique theoretical base. Such efforts may have helped archivists to distinguish themselves more clearly from other disciplines, but this new professional orientation has also produced conflicts with former friends and allies over issues such as governmen-

¹ The literature on archival professionalism has become a minor cottage industry over the past two decades. For some representative samples, see the discussion in Archivaria 17 (winter 1983–1984) in a series of essays entitled "The Debate Over History and Archives." Other examples of the genre include Terry Eastwood, "Nurturing Archival Education in the University," in Tom Nesmith, ed., Canadian Archival Studies and the Rediscovery of Provenance (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1993), 475–507; and Richard J. Cox, "Professionalism and Archivists in the United States," American Archivist 49 (summer 1986). A good way to trace the increasingly disparate views of archivists and historians on a variety of issues is to consult the web site of the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History (http://www.h-net.msu.edu ~ ncc) and to review the digests for the past three years.

tal policies concerning electronic mail, funding priorities for the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, and Freedom of Information Act requests. The historical profession, too, has undergone significant changes as shifting research agendas, marketplace realities for graduate students, and the ascendancy of the race, class, and gender paradigm within historical discourse have seriously challenged the notion of objective scholarship based on meticulous archival research.² As a result archivists and historians have suffered through a somewhat strained relationship.

Although archivists have spent considerable time during this period studying the sociology of professions, they have rarely examined the lives and thoughts of individuals who actively worked to build the modern historical and archival professions. Yet a thoughtful scrutiny of the career of one such individual, J. Franklin Jameson, offers a cautionary tale for contemporary archivists who seek to refine the sorts of institutional structures that Jameson and his colleagues created within the historical profession. When one considers the messy interplay of personal, social, historical, and economic motives documented in the first two volumes of Jameson's papers,³ a complex picture emerges.

² On the decline of objective history, the classic work is Peter Novick, That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Association (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988). See also Lynn Hunt, Margaret Jacob, and Joyce Appleby, Telling the Truth About History (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994) and Bonnie G. Smith, "Gender and the Practices of Scientific History: The Seminar and Archival Research in the Nineteenth Century," American Historical Review (October 1995): 1150–76.

³ Morey Rothberg and Jacqueline Goggin, eds., John Franklin Jameson and the Development of Humanistic Scholarship in America. Volume One: Selected Essays (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1993) and John Franklin Jameson and the Development of Humanistic Scholarship in America. Volume Two: The Years of Growth, 1859–1905, edited by Morey

Without question, J. Franklin Jameson (1859–1937) served as one of the principal architects of the modern historical and archival professions and as an enthusiastic proponent of professionalization generally in the late-nineteenth-century United States. He participated in the founding of the American Historical Association (AHA) and eventually was elected its president; served as the first managing editor of the American Historical Review; conceived of and subsequently directed the Department of Historical Research at the Carnegie Institution of Washington; and spent much of his adult life building and perfecting training structures for historians. A devoted archival user, Jameson also led the fight for documentary publication projects, tirelessly advocated the construction of a national archives building, and promoted public funding for manuscript repositories.

Jameson, a Massachusetts native and Amherst College graduate, had entered virtually uncharted terrain when he resigned his teaching position at Worcester High School in 1880 to begin graduate study at Johns Hopkins University.⁴ The Baltimore-based institution, which had opened its doors in 1876 with aspirations of transforming American higher education, emphasized meticulous research and rigorous empiricism in all disciplines and relied on the German seminar method to instruct students in its ideal of scientific scholarship. Jameson's familial financial circumstances and somewhat provincial western Massachusetts origins had not

Rothberg with the assistance of John Terry Chanse and Frank Rives Millikan (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996). These are the first volumes in a projected trilogy.

⁴ The most extensive biographical treatment of Jameson is Morey D. Rothberg, "Servant to History: A Study of John Franklin Jameson, 1859–1937" (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 1982). Victor Gondos, Jr., J. Franklin Jameson and the Birth of the National Archives, 1906–1926 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981) details his lobbying efforts for the creation of a national archives.

completely prepared him for the academic competitiveness of Johns Hopkins. He nonetheless eagerly embraced the values and virtues of scientific history and cultivated a disdain for the "gentlemen amateurs" who had dominated American historical scholarship throughout most of the nineteenth century.

He graduated in 1882 with the first history doctorate to emerge from Herbert Baxter Adams's famous seminars and spent the next two decades training a new generation of graduate students.⁵ Throughout these years Jameson emphasized establishing professional boundaries and regulating scholarly standards within the historians' guild, and he devoted himself assiduously to developing institutions which would enforce such boundaries.

The scientific school of history's reliance on careful analysis of primary sources appeared to produce a natural alliance between university scholars and manuscript curators, and on the surface Jameson ardently supported a partnership between academic historians and a wide range of historical enterprises. While at Hopkins, for example, he held a membership in the Maryland Historical Society; when he accepted a professorship at Brown he quickly joined the Rhode Island Historical Society and actively participated in its programs. 5 Jameson also lectured widely at historical societies

On the rise of the scientific method in historical scholarship, see Novick, That Noble Dream, 21–46. Useful overviews of Johns Hopkins and the rise of graduate education are contained in Hugh Hawkins, Pioneer, A History of the Johns Hopkins University, 1874–1889 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1960); George M. Marsden, The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 150–66; Frederick Rudolph, The American College and University: A History (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 270–75; and Burton J. Bledstein, The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1976).

⁶ Rothberg, The Years of Growth, 187-89, 236-38, 240-43, 320.

throughout the nation and even lobbied the president of the University of Chicago to upgrade its archival and library holdings as a key element in his negotiations for a professorial post there.

Jameson's private ruminations, however, reveal a very different story. Though he made good use of the Maryland Historical Society's collections as a graduate student, the future founder of the AHA in 1884 described membership in the state organization as a "waste of money." He further declared that the society "hasn't much life or scholarship in it" and regularly derided its meetings and supporters. The Rhode Island Historical Society fared no better in Jameson's estimation. He judged an 1889 paper by William Warner Hoppin on the Peace Convention of 1861 "rather empty," and described the society's 1890 annual meeting as "a torment."

Some clues to the reasons underlying these negative characterizations can be found in a March 1887 diary entry in which Jameson recorded a visit to the New-York Historical Society to deliver a scholarly address. There a society trustee of long and distinguished New York lineage completely resisted Jameson's best efforts as a revisionist, scientific historian to demolish Edmund Bailey O'Callaghan's two-volume History of New Netherlands and rose to defend the antiquarian study rather than alter his perception of Dutch scholarship. Jameson concluded that such patrician hobbyists who "know nothing of good historical work" threatened his own goal of placing historical scholarship on a solid academic foundation and needed to be excluded somehow from the serious work of writing history.9

Throughout these years Jameson therefore emphasized regulating scholarly standards within the historians' guild. He

⁷ Ibid., 72, 182, 187–88, 316, 320.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 143.

hoped to use the AHA to erect professional barriers against men like the trustees and place the discipline firmly in the hands of a new generation of trained academicians, free of "old-fogeyism" and schooled in the methods of the German seminars. When the AHA was founded in 1884, Jameson later recalled, many individual colleges "had little more relation to the general world of scholarship than if it had been a Buddhist monastery." By placing history practitioners in regular contact with each other and providing a forum for scientific approaches to scholarship, the organization would, Jameson believed, subvert the parochial influence of the workplace and create an elite corps of agenda-setting historians who would define the professional discourse and place history within the academic mainstream. 11

Jameson's dream of professionalizing history ultimately endured a series of setbacks and produced largely disillusionment and disappointment for him. From the outset, he appeared chagrined at his slow progress and the attitude of many fellow historians. AHA meetings never seemed to live up to his expectations. A movement to affiliate the association more closely with state historical societies earned his particular enmity. Writing to his mentor at Hopkins, Herbert Baxter Adams, he observed that the only hope for the AHA "to improve the qualities of its scholarship" was not to align with the historical societies but rather to cultivate "the university and collegiate teachers." The AHA in his view should focus primarily on strengthening "the alliance with the professorial body" at the expense of amateurs whom he

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Rothberg, Selected Essays, 349-54.

derided as "of little account intellectually except as trustees of material and as possible furtherers of publication." 12

Many of his criticisms of amateur practitioners have a decidedly familiar ring for today's archivists who can sympathize with some of his positions.¹³ Few would dispute the need for archival repositories to avoid antiquarianism," for example, and many undoubtedly would nod in agreement when Jameson mocked genealogists who visit archival repositories "for no other purpose than to hunt up their genealogies and to prove their right to entrance into the charmed circle of the Sons of This or the Daughters of That." And while some might dispute his extreme view that "no historical society has a right to use its research and publication funds in furthering the purposes of these people," many curators secretly wish that their research clientele contained more scholars and fewer family historians.14

These critiques have become so professionally orthodox over the years that today they appear almost bland and unexceptional. For Jameson, however, these words constituted a revolutionary call to action. Before embracing his agenda, contemporary archivists sympathetic to his cause need to understand the source of his rebellion. Both his

¹² Rothberg, *The Years of Growth*,176–81, 188–89, 226–27. By 1897, Jameson even contemplated resigning his position as managing editor of the *American Historical Review* when the possibility loomed that such "highly popular" writers as Theodore Roosevelt, Alfred Thayer Mahan, and Moses Coit Tyler might be asked to contribute articles and thereby call into question the journal's *scientific* standing.

Jameson's low opinion of historical societies did allow for some qualitative distinctions. He expressed considerable respect for the accomplishments of the large, publicly funded southern and western societies such as that in Wisconsin. Historical commissions and organizations in such states "put their historical work into the hands of persons who know not only how such things should be done, but also what is worth doing."

¹⁴ Rothberg, Selected Essays, 255-61, 296.

public statements and his private ruminations indicate that he was uncomfortable with some aspects of modern American life and that to him professionalism appeared to be an antidote to cure what he viewed as important deficiencies in the American character. Specifically, his papers betray an intense suspicion of the twin evils of democracy and capitalism.

Theoretically, Jameson revered American democracy, and his scholarly writings generally favored the American system of an orderly, democratic tradition that had developed in the forests of Germany.15 Jameson's democratic enthusiasm dissolved, however, when he confronted the political implications of popular government that sometimes handicapped his own professional aspirations. As early as 1897 he criticized the "weak desire" of historical societies to "placate people who, it is thought, may in time, if sufficiently indulged, turn from their personal and private interest in ancestry, and begin to take an interest in history." His appraisal of the situation worsened as he got older. academic who once celebrated American democracy matured into a scholarly curmudgeon who lamented the large number of superficial historical studies on the market, most of which constituted "poor flashy things, with catchpenny titles and sensationally colored text" hurriedly slapped together to satisfy "a pathetic desire of multitudes to know more about history."16

Privately, Jameson had in fact always betrayed ambivalent feelings toward democratic culture, an ambivalence reflected in his 1882 comment about a political rally at Baltimore's Concordia Opera House organized by local "good

¹⁵ Jameson saw in the historical evolution of democracy an illustration of the superiority of the Teutonic, Anglo-Saxon character. Rothberg, *Selected Essays*, 246.

¹⁶ Rothberg, Selected Essays, 260, 292-301, 322, 338-48.

government" proponents: "It is no comforting sight to see with your own eyes the unintelligence of your fellow-citizens, and the poor quality of their leaders." Two years later he saw a seemingly competent public official face financial ruin and a middle-aged career crisis when his father, a loyal Republican and postmaster in the town of Amherst, lost his position after Grover Cleveland's election merely owing to the need for Democrats to install their own men in power. Such experiences pushed him toward a more elitist stance. Ultimately, the young graduate student concluded, "I am in danger of entertaining aristocratic feelings; the feelings, that is, of an aristocracy of intelligence, no other."

Jameson's personal life reinforced these aristocratic proclivities. His move from the small college town of Amherst to the more immigrant-influenced city of Worcester and ultimately to the cosmopolitan Gilded Age metropolis of Baltimore exposed him to the nation's extraordinarily diverse and heterogeneous population. As he struggled to come to terms with America's increasingly complex ethnic and racial make-up, he reverted to broad stereotypes and cultivated a sense of cultural and intellectual superiority, calling the 1880 valedictory address at Worcester High School where he taught "just such a speech as might have been expected from a half-educated young Irishman." While at Hopkins he derided Japanese students as "passing stupid" and characterized Baltimore as a "queer city" where "cul'd gemmen 'n' ladies abound," occasionally amusing his family by writing letters home in mock African American dialect. 18

Insecurity concerning his social position and place in the world permeated even the most private recesses of his mind. At Hopkins, judging by his diary, he led a fairly lonely and

¹⁷ Rothberg, Selected Essays, 66-7, 126-28.

¹⁸ Rothberg, The Years of Growth, 41, 50, 307, 310, 328.

unsatisfying life, punctuated by periodic bouts of depression linked to what he viewed as his own shortcomings and snubs from colleagues.¹⁹ Unable to connect with ordinary people yet scorned by those whose social eminence he respected, Jameson moved through Hopkins as somewhat of a loner, often shunning social occasions. He threw his soul into his professional work instead, and vocational camaraderie and association with historians became his social salvation. Commitment to the rigors of historical research created a community of cohorts and soul mates, whereas other personal relationships often proved disappointing, and his lifelong commitment to the historical profession served as an important source of personal satisfaction, prestige, and self-esteem.²⁰

While Jameson hoped that historical professionalism might help resolve his own social anxieties and counter the leveling tendencies of contemporary democracy, it also appeared to him to offer a way for academics to insulate themselves from the vagaries and harsher qualities of the American economy. A commitment to pure scholarship might place the professor and his collegial cohort above the grasping, competitive world of American capitalism that seemed to sacrifice quality at the altar of consumer desire and reasonable cost. He deplored the influence of capitalist culture on historical organizations generally and lamented that the societies, though "charged

¹⁹ A November 1883 diary entry, for example, dwelled on "the imperfections in my teaching, the occasional defects of my memory, the slight discomforts of my position under [Herbert Baxter] Adams the schemer, the narrowness of my groove, the insufficiency of my acquisitions, the slowness of my special work, the failure to accomplish any striking result, the smallness of my professional acquaintance, the remarkable fewness of my friends, the lukewarmness of their regard for me, the absence of delight from my life and of spirits from my nature."

²⁰ Rothberg, Selected Essays, 298-300, 304-05; idem, The Years of Growth, 99, 108-09.

with immaterial, one might even say spiritual, interests," proved subject to the compromises and concessions necessary "in this complex and vulgar world." Wealthy men, he wrote, controlled the historical societies and contributed to the superficial, amateurish nature of the historical enterprise generally. Further, the societies themselves, which needed to "win their public support, their money, and their members by devoting themselves to local history," often failed to serve the loftier goal of encouraging *pure* historical scholarship.²¹

While at Hopkins he also regularly criticized President Daniel Coit Gilman, bemoaning the constant "advertising" that he seemed to engage in, and complained that the president's effort to please donors moved the university in academic directions that stifled its graduate programs and hindered its commitment to pure research. To Jameson. scholars should remain above public scrutiny, outside American economic restraints, and beholden only to the pure world of scholarly inquiry.²² Privately, Jameson also fumed at the inequities of American capitalism. His own modest origins meant that money proved a regular source of anxiety in his life. His Hopkins student diaries reveal constant fears over losing his fellowship and continual efforts to ingratiate himself with powerful academics in order to ensure his future, and later salary considerations often forced him to delay or reconsider career moves.

Jameson developed and articulated these concepts most thoroughly after he moved to Providence, Rhode Island, to accept a position at Brown in 1888. There, issues of academic inquiry, trustee control, and the economics of educational policy rose to the fore when E. Benjamin Andrews resigned as president of the university after the trustees asked him to repudiate his support for the free silver position during the

²¹ Rothberg, Selected Essays, 258, 261, 298.

²² Rothberg, The Years of Growth, 108, 122-23.

1896 campaign. Andrews's resignation energized Jameson, who played an instrumental role in rallying faculty protests against the trustees' actions.

Jameson took dead aim at the university's governing board, observing to Columbia president Seth Low that "half of them are business men, mostly without literary tastes" who lacked knowledge of university life and did not even have strong ties to the local community. Confiding his thoughts to his father, Jameson especially criticized Worcester manufacturer and trustee Joseph H. Walker as an example of "a lot of conceited parvenus . . . who get put on boards of trustees simply because they are rich, then dictate to us what we shall say both inside and outside the college."

The public letter of protest to the board, drawn up by Jameson in consultation with colleagues at Brown, illustrated well his sense of academic professionalism and his distaste for the financial aspects of American life. He and his cohorts attacked the trustees' notion that "the material growth of a university is of more importance than independence of thought and expression on the part of its president and professors" and urged the trustees to make "the pecuniary question . . . distinctly subordinate" to broader moral and academic considerations.²³

Around the turn of the century Jameson became a principal advocate for the creation of a national archives building in Washington, D.C., in order to house the rapidly accumulating body of historical documentation produced by government agencies. In 1914 Jameson, firmly ensconced in his job as director of Historical Research at the Carnegie Institution, chose to address an annual meeting of the American Library Association on this topic. This peculiar

²³ Rothberg, *The Years of Growth*, 212, 214–21, 224. Ultimately, the faculty protest proved successful; the board urged Andrews to withdraw his resignation, and he remained as president.

oration, designed to appeal to legislators and the general public, indicates the way in which Jameson necessarily came to terms with some American realities as he moved into middle age.

Although he incorporated a bit of idealism into the address and spoke of the needs of an "enlightened democracy," Jameson focused almost exclusively on the practical in his speech. He hoped that Progressive-era America, with its emphasis on administrative efficiency, might be mobilized to create a national archives where scholarly pleas had failed, and he peppered his remarks with data concerning rental costs, fire prevention needs, and comparative administrative arrangements in comparable nations around the globe. In fact twenty more years would elapse before a national archives came into being. As Jameson had predicted in 1914, creation of the agency ultimately constituted a victory for the administrators whom he scorned as a history professor and for the patriotic and genealogical groups, like the American Legion and the Daughters of the American Revolution, whom contemptuously dismissed as a scholar. 24

Archivists continuing on their own professional odyssey in late-twentieth-century America would do well to ponder the outcome of Jameson's crusade to professionalize the practice of history. He conceived of professionalization as a process of defining boundaries, carving out turf, and creating an elite body of practitioners. Indeed, Jameson and his peers

²⁴ Rothberg, Selected Essays, 317-26. On the factors behind the eventual creation of the National Archives, see Gondos, J. Franklin Jameson and the Birth of the National Archives. Jameson's own later career, and the limits of his accomplishments, are chronicled in Morey D. Rothberg, "The Brahmin As Bureaucrat: J. Franklin Jameson at the Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1905-1928," The Public Historian 8 (fall 1986): 47-60. Volume three of the Jameson Papers will include correspondence and papers from his later career, spanning the period 1905-1937.

successfully fostered a series of institutions that continue to influence historians' practices today: a professional association, a scholarly journal, public funding, and graduate training. Viewed from a broader perspective, however, his crusade appears less successful. He had in fact helped create many of the problems which hinder historical practice today: the great divide between talented amateurs and narrowly trained professionals, the growing obscurity and popular inaccessibility of much academic discourse, and the redefinition of serious history as something that occurs almost exclusively in an academic context.

Jameson had thus achieved professional status at the cost of social influence. The tradeoff may have successfully resolved many of his personal insecurities and anxieties, but historians generally appeared less connected with American culture and were less able to influence political life than ever before. Only by building coalitions with groups they professed to disdain, from historical societies to the American Legion, could they exert any control over the important twentieth-century public debate involving heritage and memory.

In attempting to define their own professional stances, archivists should remember the popular appeal of archives today rather than repeat Jameson's mistakes. Tempests in a teapot with historical editors, librarians, academics, and records managers do little to advance archival issues, to connect with the broader public, or to promote archival professionalism generally. Rock radio stations, baseball teams. film makers, and fast food outlets often publicly proclaim the virtues of going "back to the archives" for golden oldies, memorable athletic moments, significant newsreel clips, and historical photos. Yet archivists, like Jameson, often squander this social capital when they resort to parochial, professional positions on significant issues. Instead, archivists need to determine how to harness this current, broad-based, popular interest in memory in order to promote their agenda. Advocating narrow research priorities and dismissing friendly

critics will not do it. Listening to diverse publics and thinking about common threads and cooperative ventures might.²⁵

If Jameson's papers reveal anything, they expose the danger of creating a rigidly hierarchical notion of professional practice designed to exclude those at the margins and to create an inner circle of nationally visible elites who attempt to set the agenda through professional associations and journals. Exclusiveness leads to sterility and, as Jameson discovered, social irrelevance. To be effective, archivists need to nurture diversity within their own guild rather than adopt the Jameson model. He viewed the historical profession primarily as a New England-oriented, male, Anglo-Saxon, university-based, and graduate-trained fraternity. While few archivists today would advocate such an ethnically and gender-stratified definition homogenous professionalism, other divisions continue to plague the profession: institutional archives vs. manuscript repositories; graduate-trained archivists vs. those with post-appointment training; national organizations vs. local and regional groups; lone arrangers vs. laborers in large bureaucratic organizations; archival theoreticians vs. everyday practitioners. Vital, inclusive, and alive professions constantly reflect on their own practices, scrutinize their hidden assumptions, and question their most cherished convictions. They listen closely to multiple constituencies and often obtain their most innovative ideas from the periphery.

²⁵ Examples abound, of course, of the popular appeal of archives. A recent example took place at the New York Mets-Atlanta Braves game at Shea Stadium on 15 July 1998. With rock music blaring in the background, the public address announcer screamed, "LET'S GO BACK TO THE ARCHIVES," and the scoreboard lit up with "Memorable Moments in Mets History," a series of film clips from various games played on previous July 15 games. Fans applauded wildly. Similarly, radio station WBGO in Newark, New Jersey, features "Jazz From The Archives" every Friday, hosted by archivist and director of the Institute for Jazz Studies, Dan Morgenstern.

Finally, archivists need to stay "close to the marketplace," in the language of current corporate jargon, rather than follow Jameson's model and create a supply-side definition of professionalism. His students produced monographs for which no demand existed; he recoiled at popular efforts to influence the historical agenda; and his ideal university operated outside the constraints of democracy and capitalism. Today, archivists too often engage in similar, purely internal dialogues. Repositories publish finding aids and bibliographic compilations without consulting users. Funding exists, so digitized collections appear without gauging real demand. Archivists often take professional positions without consulting colleagues in allied disciplines, or even gathering varied viewpoints within their own ranks. Archival educational "summits" focus on tenured educators and exclude those who hire archival students.

Under the misapprehension that today's archivists can control their own destiny, they render themselves powerless and cede control over the future. Jameson engaged in his own version of all of this. When he confronted reality in his crusade for a national archives, he had to admit publicly that if the national archives movement were to bear fruit it would owe more to the powerful pressure of administrators than the historical profession that he labored so hard to create. He and his colleagues, he was forced to conclude, were a "feeble folk relatively." That may be his own most telling epitaph for his professionalization agenda. Archivists journeying down the same path need to digest and contemplate these words from Jameson.

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²⁶ Rothberg, Selected Essays, 326.