

Gentlemen and Scholars: Harvard's History Department and the Path to Professionalism, 1920-1950

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***Abstract:** Before World War II most history departments were largely gentleman's clubs with few or no Jews, Catholics, women, or African Americans among their faculty. While most leading departments had some serious scholars, in many cases their members were chosen on the basis of their connections or the quality of their company at lunch, rather than their scholarly qualifications. This article explores how Harvard University's history department was among the first to hire Jews and to make its appointments on the basis of scholarly production and promise. Author William Palmer is Professor of History at Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia and author of the forthcoming *From Gentleman's Club to Professional Body: The Rise of the Modern History Department*.*

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The history of the history department is a little-studied subject. Historians have generally been very good about charting the intellectual changes that have occurred across the profession, but few have paid much attention to how history departments have actually developed. This article is an attempt to remedy part of that deficiency by examining several aspects of the history of the Harvard history department from about 1920 to 1950.¹

In the 1920s, most history departments at leading universities in the United States were gentlemen's clubs, with very few women, if any, African Americans, Jews, or Catholics admitted. While most departments had serious scholars in their ranks, most faculty members did not have a serious scholarly vocation and were often chosen for their devotion to undergraduate teaching, their agreeable company at lunch, or their connections to the institution or highly placed persons inside it. As early as 1927, Charles McLean Andrews, a distinguished historian at Yale, warned Wallace Notestein, a new faculty member about to join the department, of the need to improve the quality of the Yale history faculty.² And, in the 1930s, the Princeton medievalist, Lynn White, recalled that the Princeton history faculty was the most intellectually conservative body he had ever encountered, with no interest in novelties like anthropology or geography.³ Several departments, even at Harvard and Yale, had faculty members known as "dollar a year men," referring to men of independent wealth who took only a nominal salary from their university while teaching.

The Harvard history department was perhaps the first to break out of this paradigm. The department began taking decisive steps to improve the quality of its faculty in the 1920s. At the beginning of the decade, the history department already possessed some famous names, including Albert Bushnell Hart, Archibald Cary Coolidge, Edward Channing, Samuel Eliot

¹ For the history of Harvard University generally, see Morton and Phyllis Keller, *Making Harvard Modern: The Rise of America's University* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Andrew Schlesinger, *Veritas: Harvard College and the American Experience* (New York: Ivan Dee, 2005); and Richard Norton Smith, *The Harvard Century: The Making of a University* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

² Charles M. Andrews to Wallace Notestein, December 21, 1927, Wallace Notestein Papers, Yale University Department of Manuscripts and Archives, Sterling Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

³ Lynn White, Jr., "History and Horseshoe Nails," in L.P. Curtis, Jr., ed., *The Historian's Workshop: Original Essays by Sixteen Historians* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1970), p. 50. For some information on other departments, see William Palmer, "On or About 1950 or 1955 History Departments Changed: A Step in the Creation of the Modern History Department," *The Journal of the Institute of Historical Studies* VII, 3(September, 2007): 385-405.

Morison, and Frederick Jackson Turner. But its critical step was probably the appointment of Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., in 1924. Schlesinger's initial appointment came about when Morison, who was attending Oxford for a year, recommended Schlesinger as his replacement on a temporary basis. Schlesinger made such a good impression during his time at Harvard that he was invited to stay after Morison returned.⁴

Schlesinger's appointment was critical because he was perhaps the preeminent social historian of his time and a cutting-edge scholar within the discipline. As a student at Columbia, Schlesinger had been greatly influenced by James Harvey Robinson and "the New History." Uncomfortable with the traditional emphasis on political and diplomatic narrative, Robinson sought a redefinition of history that encompassed all aspects of human behavior and incorporated the social sciences and their methodologies into historical study. His goal, no less than that of the French *Annalists*, was the creation of a unified approach that would explore connections between politics, economics, religion, culture, the family, and ideas. Schlesinger was perhaps the scholar in the 1920s who best embodied "the New History."⁵ His books, *Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution* (1918), *New Viewpoints in American History* (1922), and *The Rise of the City, 1878-1898*, (1933) reflected its influence and marked him as an innovative scholar. *New Viewpoints in American History* even contained a perceptive essay on the role of women in American history.

Other appointments made in the department around this time included William Langer in central Europe, William Scott Ferguson in ancient history, Frederick Merk in the history of the American West, and Gaetano Salvemini, an able historian of modern Europe and an anti-fascist who had fled from Mussolini. Harvard also had faculty in areas that would have been considered unusual at the time: Clarence Haring taught Latin American history; Michael Karpovich taught Russian and East European history; Robert Howard Lord taught Slavic history; and Langer also taught Eastern Europe.⁶

By the 1930s, the department was quite distinguished. Seven past and future presidents of the American Historical Association graced

⁴ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *A Life in the Twentieth Century* (New York and Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), p. 37.

⁵ James Harvey Robinson, *The New History: Essays Illustrating the Modern Historical Outlook* (New York: MacMillan, 1912).

⁶ William Langer, *In and Out of the Ivory Tower* (New York: Watson Academic Publications, 1977), p. 101.

the corridors of the Harvard history department.⁷ At the same time, the department offered many specializations that transcended conventional time periods and geographic boundaries. In addition to the social history taught by Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., there was also intellectual history taught by Crane Brinton and economic history taught by Abbott Payson Ussher.

Students had the opportunity to explore many different interdisciplinary connections. Medieval studies was particularly strong, possessing Charles Homer Haskins, the premier American medievalist of his time, as well as E.K. Rand in classics, and George Sarton, the historian of medieval science. When Oscar Handlin arrived in Cambridge in the fall of 1934 to begin his graduate studies, his original intention was to study medieval history.⁸

There were many other options. From the Department of History and Literature, Perry Miller dispensed a beguiling mixture of literature, history, and religion. Joseph Schumpeter, a European émigré, combined economics and sociology and, within the department, Crane Brinton was a pioneer in historical sociology and comparative method.

Despite its brilliance, the department still had a group of “Waspish” (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) faculty at its core. Morison’s aristocratic pedigree was impeccable, and he and Roger Merriman were two of several faculty who were independently wealthy. Merriman’s social position was a key factor in his selection as an early master of Eliot House, the most preppy of Harvard’s residential houses. Other faculty members were wedded to patrician rituals. Mason Hammond, another department member of private wealth and a specialist in Roman history, regularly served afternoon tea to interested students. And, while Jewish graduate students began entering the department in the 1920s and 1930s, there were no Jews on the history faculty, although two, Charles Gross and Julius Klein, had served earlier, and Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., was descended on his father’s side from German Jews.

Moreover, in the 1930s, Harvard did not yet enjoy a reputation as one of the world’s foremost universities. Edwin O. Reischauer, the great scholar of Japan, who arrived in Cambridge for graduate study in 1932, recalled that Harvard was “still an aristocratic, parochially New England institution . . . heavily centered on the undergraduate college, which was populated largely by preppies . . . a few bright New York Jews and Middle Westerners were tolerated, but not really welcomed.”⁹

⁷ The former or future A.H.A. presidents at Harvard in the 1930s included Morison, Langer, Schlesinger, Ferguson, Merk, McIlwain, and Crane Brinton.

⁸ Oscar Handlin, “A Career at Harvard,” *American Scholar* 65 (Winter, 1996): 47-8.

Some steps toward change had been taken in the 1920s under the leadership of A. Lawrence Lowell, president of the university from 1908 to 1933, and a true New England aristocrat. When asked by his successor, James Bryant Conant, what his salary was, Lowell replied that he had no idea; he always returned it to the university. As president, Lowell initiated many reforms in undergraduate education, such as specific concentrations, required courses, tutorial instruction (based on the Oxford model), and the construction of residential houses.

But several of his policies betrayed his position as a member of the New England elite. He opposed aid for graduate students on the ground that such a policy would attract more students from the lower classes. He was a member of the review committee that upheld the death sentences of Sacco and Vanzetti, and he tried to restrict the number of Jews admitted to Harvard as well as to keep black freshmen out of Harvard housing.¹⁰

The most decisive steps toward change were taken by the chemist James Bryant Conant, who succeeded Lowell as president in 1933. Conant served as president of Harvard until 1953 and was in many ways Lowell's antithesis. Conant was a Bostonian who could trace his ancestry back to the Pilgrims, but he was no aristocrat. He grew up in working-class Dorchester, where his father was a photoengraver and part-time construction contractor. Conant, however, soon revealed many signs of academic promise. He was the first person in his family to go to college where he displayed enough brilliance as a chemist to earn a Harvard Ph.D. and an appointment in the Harvard chemistry department. As a faculty member, he quickly established a reputation as an excellent chemist and able administrator.¹¹

Conant's selection as president testified to his upward mobility. The favored candidate, Kenneth B. Murdock, possessed the social position expected in a Harvard president; he was the Dean of Arts and Sciences and the son of a prominent Boston banker. Moreover, Conant had other obstacles beyond his class to overcome. As chair of the chemistry department, he had clashed repeatedly with Lowell, and relations between the two were decidedly icy. But Conant's ability was undeniable, and he was eventually chosen.

⁹ Edwin O. Reischauer, *My Life Between Japan and America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), p. 40.

¹⁰ Morton Keller and Phyllis Keller, *Making Harvard Modern: The Rise of America's University* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 14.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

Conant's aim as president was to transform Harvard into a meritocracy by which he meant that Harvard's goal should be to recruit students and faculty on the basis of their ability and achievements rather than their social position. Such lofty goals meant that Harvard should abandon its traditional role as the educator of the New England elite and endeavor to attract the ablest students and faculty from across the social, religious, and geographic spectrums of the country. Conant further believed that excellence in research was the most desirable quality for a Harvard faculty member. He waged an intense campaign to compel Harvard departments in all disciplines to make appointments based on excellence in research.¹²

In many ways, the history department already came fairly close to matching Conant's vision. At this time, modernizing history departments were characterized by three things: increasing emphasis on research, appointments in areas outside western Europe and the United States, and the appointment of qualified Jews to the faculty. All three were present in the Harvard history department in the 1930s. First, the emphasis on research is evident in the scholarly production of Schlesinger, Langer, Morison, Merk, and several others. Second, it was during this time that the great Asianists, John King Fairbank and Edwin O. Reischauer, began their Harvard careers. Finally, in 1940, the department appointed Oscar Handlin to a junior position. He was the first Jew to become a member of the Harvard history faculty since Julius Klein in the 1920s.

Despite the variety of approaches to history among the department members, the department was, generally speaking, a harmonious place. Department cohesion was sustained through regular Thursday lunches where Morison regularly appeared in riding breeches. History faculty, and others from related disciplines, competed in hotly contested, late afternoon games of fistball, a variant of volleyball, in the dingy women's gymnasium. William Langer, one of the department's most distinguished members, could not recall "any fundamental difference of opinion or effort at factional conflict."¹³

Despite Harvard's reverence for pedigree and position, the department was staffed to a significant degree by talented young men from the provinces, and several of its leading figures had relatively modest backgrounds by institutional standards. Merk and Schlesinger, perhaps the department's stars, had been undergraduates at state universities. Schlesinger did not

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹³ John King Fairbank, *Chinabound: A Fifty-Year Memoir* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), p. 144; Langer, *In and Out of the Ivory Tower*, p. 165.

hold a Harvard degree, nor did Turner, Haskins, Ferguson, or Karpovich. Merk had only come to Harvard for graduate study because Turner, his Wisconsin mentor, came to Harvard late in his career and brought Merk with him. Paul Buck, author of *The Road to Reunion*, a Pulitzer Prize-winning book on the American South, was, like Schlesinger and Merk, a native of the Middle West.¹⁴

Not everyone celebrated the department's recruiting practices. Elliott Perkins, another member of the department who owed his appointment to social position, was probably referring to the department's preference for scholarship over pedigree when he wrote Wallace Notestein in 1940 that "if Archie Coolidge and Haskins could see this place now, they would have a fit."¹⁵

The appointment of Jews was another important step in establishing the meritocracy and breaking down the gentleman's club atmosphere. Anti-Semitism was a fact of American academic life in the 1930s. Harvard openly discriminated against Jews in its undergraduate admission policies in the 1920s and remained for the most part a college of white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant males whose fathers, uncles, and grandfathers had gone there. The Jews who were admitted to Harvard were often discouraged from pursuing certain career paths. When John Morton Blum, who entered Harvard as a freshman in 1939, was trying to decide between a career in history or in law, he was advised by Elliott Perkins to pursue a legal career. "You better go to law school," Perkins advised. "Hebrews can't make it in history."¹⁶

The prevailing anti-Semitism at Harvard makes Oscar Handlin's appointment as a junior faculty member in 1940 even more remarkable. Handlin was many of the things that would normally count against someone who aspired to join the Harvard faculty. While he did hold a Harvard Ph.D., he was Jewish, had no pedigree or "old boy" network connections, and he had been an undergraduate at Brooklyn College, a classic "street-car" college in the phrase of the time, for the lower classes. But his brilliance was almost universally acknowledged, and brilliance rather than pedigree was increasingly the standard for faculty appointments in the history department.

Despite the shifting of emphasis toward research and graduate education, undergraduate teaching remained the department's primary mission. All of

¹⁴ Schlesinger, Sr., *In Retrospect: The History of a Historian*, (New York, 1963), p. 99.

¹⁵ Elliott Perkins to Wallace Notestein, March 22, 1940; Wallace Notestein Papers.

¹⁶ John Morton Blum, *A Life with History* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004), pp. 62-3. It should be noted that Oscar Handlin remembers Perkins as a man without prejudice, see p. 20.

the senior faculty taught undergraduate courses and often left memorable impressions on their students. For many students, Frederick Merk, the historian of the Westward movement, was the ideal Harvard lecturer. Organized, lucid, and obviously impassioned by his subject, Merk could hold a room full of even the most indifferent Brahmin gentlemen on the edge of their seats, as he explained how the West was won.¹⁷

Equally compelling, although for different reasons, was Charles McIlwain, a distinguished scholar of English constitutional law. McIlwain was not a showman; he simply talked. But, like Merk, he could have a class enthralled with his brilliant analyses of the critical documents in English history. Several generations of Harvard students could recall McIlwain's magnificent elucidation of the meaning of the Magna Carta, meticulously examining the text almost word by word, and, lingering particularly over Article 39 of the charter, where he pondered the possible meanings of the Latin "vel . . . vel." Did the conjunctions mean "either" or "both?" In McIlwain's view, the entire interpretation of the Magna Carta hinged on the answer to this question.¹⁸

Perhaps the most memorable teacher in the department was Roger B. "Frisky" Merriman, one of Harvard's great patrician characters. A crusty, opinionated instructor of the old school, Merriman taught History 1, a whirlwind tour of the history of Western Europe from its ancient origins right through the Treaty of Versailles. Theodore H. White, a Harvard undergraduate in the late 1930s, called History 1 with Merriman "vaudeville in thirty-six acts." Always pacing, sometimes whispering, sometimes shouting, and determined to capture the full sweep and majesty of his subject, Merriman was outrageous, full of prejudice, but never dull. He closed every lecture with the call of "unity, gentlemen, unity."¹⁹

Teaching at Harvard could be highly individualized. For example, the most memorable experience of Carl Schorske's education there was an in-depth tutorial with the classicist William Scott Ferguson he received while beginning his graduate study. Schorske was not a classicist, but had been advised by Langer to take courses in as many different areas as possible. Meeting for two hours every Sunday afternoon at Ferguson's house, Schorske explored a variety of approaches to the ancient world and began to see the possibilities of what a dedicated teacher could do for an

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28. In his memoir, Blum refers to article 24 of the Magna Carta; however, given its content and importance, it is almost certainly article 39 to which he is referring.

¹⁹ Theodore H. White, *In Search of History: A Personal Adventure* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), pp. 44-5.

engaged student as well as for the integrated cultural analysis that later characterized his own work.²⁰

In addition to lectures, Harvard undergraduates also enrolled in tutorials, small group classes, usually taught by recent Harvard Ph.D.s and advanced graduate students. The idea behind them was that instead of simply taking courses, the Harvard undergraduate would also have an experienced teacher to guide them and give coherence to the experience. Many Harvard undergraduates who later became distinguished historians received some of their best teaching here. John Blum had Carl Schorske as a discussion leader and was rewarded with an experience as unforgettable as the one Schorske had with William Scott Ferguson. Blum had another memorable tutorial with the medievalist Barnaby Keeney, who later became president of Brown University, but in 1941 was a graduate student teaching Harvard tutorials.²¹

In the late 1930s, Theodore H. White was a Harvard undergraduate assigned to the young John Fairbank for his tutorials. Fairbank later became one of the world's greatest China scholars, but at the time, he was a junior faculty member trying to prove himself. He was already engaged in a grim battle with the Sinologists of Harvard's Oriental Studies Department, some of whom insisted that the history of China ended with the Ch'ien-lung dynasty in 1799; everything after that was journalism. Fairbank contended that history was also about understanding the present and was probably the only person in Cambridge in the 1930s to recognize the importance of Mao's Long March. As a tutor, Fairbank devoted himself to developing White's historical vocation by giving him regular assignments beyond his classroom work. The assignments he gave White were often not about China. Under Fairbank's direction, White read works by St. Thomas Aquinas and Alfred North Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World*.²²

If students are the standard by which the success of a department should be judged, the Harvard history department was extraordinarily successful. Harvard produced outstanding students during every period. But during the 1930s, it produced a group of students that seem to be exceptional even by its standards, including such outstanding undergraduates as Barbara Tuchman, Daniel Boorstin, Edmund Morgan, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. As a freshman, Schlesinger was one of 613 students who submitted an essay for the Le Baron Russell Briggs prize. His essay won. He was

²⁰ Carl Schorske, *A Life in Learning: The Charles Homer Haskins Lecture* (Washington, D.C.: American Council of Learned Societies, 1987), pp. 2-5.

²¹ Blum, *Life with History*, pp. 24-5, 29-30.

²² White, *Search for History*, pp. 49-51.

later chosen for the Society of Fellows, Harvard's unique organization for students considered too bright to be bothered with the tedium of doctoral study. Like Schlesinger, Daniel Boorstin was an intellectual prodigy, entering Harvard at sixteen. During his senior year, Boorstin was editor of the Harvard *Crimson*, won the Bowdoin Prize for his essay on Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and was awarded a Rhodes Scholarship.²³

But many of the history department's sterling undergraduates in the 1930s found their greatest stimulation not from history, but from the History and Literature Program, and from the dynamic teaching of Perry Miller and F.O. Matthiessen. For the next quarter century, Miller and Matthiessen formed a combination that dazzled many of Harvard's ablest undergraduates. In the 1930s, an air of excitement swirled about them as they were working on what would become their seminal works, Miller's *The New England Mind* and Matthiessen's *American Renaissance*. Their approaches to history and literature, however, were quite different, and their relationship was often tense. "Perry, you alleged that you might want to read a sentence in this book. Perhaps you can use the rest for kindling," Matthiessen caustically inscribed the copy of one of his books that he gave to Miller. Other figures of distinction in history and literature included Howard Mumford Jones from the English department and Ralph Barton Perry from philosophy.

But it was Miller and Matthiessen who provided the most electrifying experience. Edmund Morgan, who later became one of America's most distinguished colonial historians, entered Harvard as a freshman in 1933. At the time, he intended to concentrate on English history and literature, until he took a course in American Literature in which Miller was one of the lecturers. Morgan was captivated by Miller's enthusiasm and engagement with his subject. He quickly changed his major to American history so he could have Miller as a tutor.

He was also charmed by Matthiessen, but for different reasons. Miller was dynamic and charismatic, if sometimes profane and intemperate, teaching by the power of his intellect and personality. Matthiessen, by contrast, was quieter, more serious, more forgiving about student lapses, but equally inspiring.²⁴

²³ William Palmer, *Engagement with the Past: The Lives and Works of the World War II Generation of Historians* (Lexington, Ken.: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), pp. 32-3.

²⁴ David Courtwright, "Fifty Years of American History: An Interview with Edmund S. Morgan," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 44(April, 1987): 338-41; See also Kenneth S. Lynn, "Perry Miller," *American Scholar* 52 (Spring, 1983): 221-27; and *Idem.*, "F.O. Matthiessen," *American Scholar* 46 (Winter, 1976-7): 86-93.

The situation, however, was less ideal in graduate education. Despite Harvard's increasing emphasis in this area, many graduate students in the history department found the experience desultory. The most frequent complaints concerned snobbery and anti-Semitism among the history faculty. "Faculty members at Harvard," J.H. Hexter, who received a Ph.D. from Harvard in 1937, once recalled, "were not much addicted to speaking to graduate students in the good old days." H. Stuart Hughes found advanced study at Harvard dispiriting and, unlike many of the undergraduates of the time, thought that the Harvard lecture style "exuded staleness and desiccation." John Hope Franklin, a black graduate student at Harvard in the late 1930s, did not experience racism, but he did discover anti-Semitism among his fellow graduate students and watched with dismay as faculty verbally abused students and on one occasion failed a graduate student because he did not look like a Harvard Ph.D. While Franklin himself felt well-treated at Harvard, when he left in the spring of 1939, he knew that he did not wish to spend even another day there.²⁵

George Mosse experienced the best and the worst of being a Harvard graduate student in the years before 1950. Soon after arriving in Cambridge in the fall of 1941, he and his fellow graduate students were informed by Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., that the department had no obligation to find them jobs; its only duty was to train them. Mosse was also dismayed to find evidence of faculty members sniping at each other; and his oral examination, despite Langer's claim of a perfectly harmonious department, was more about departmental rivalries and politics than Mosse's performance.

On the other hand, he admired and respected his principal mentor, Charles McIlwain. Not only was McIlwain's learning impressive, but he cared deeply about his students, personally as well as professionally. He was the inspiration for Mosse's dissertation, *The Struggle for Sovereignty*, which also became his first book. David Owen, a historian of modern Britain, was also a compassionate teacher, encouraging Mosse to publish a paper written for his seminar and instrumental in finding him his first teaching job.²⁶

But a clear sign of the department's progressive values was that it could tolerate unconventional behavior from a graduate student, if that student's brilliance was incontestable, as the early Harvard career of Oscar Handlin

²⁵ J.H. Hexter, "Call me Ishmael; or, a Rose by Any Other Name," *American Scholar* 52 (Summer, 1983): 342; H. Stuart Hughes, *Gentleman Rebel: The Memoirs of H. Stuart Hughes* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1990), p. 109; John Hope Franklin, *A Life in Learning: The Charles Homer Haskins Lecture* (New York: American Council of Learned Societies, 1988), pp. 5-6.

²⁶ George Mosse, *Confronting History: A Memoir* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), pp. 122-6.

can attest. Despite seeing an early plan to study medieval history crumble and making poor grades in his first term, Handlin quickly became a Harvard legend, disdaining to take notes at lectures and constantly hectoring even Harvard's most distinguished faculty. To William Langer, he "seemed to seize upon every occasion to differ." Graduate students normally challenge senior faculty at their own peril, and for Handlin, a Brooklyn Jew at patrician Harvard, the risks of defiance seemed even greater. Handlin believed that he escaped the repercussions of anti-Semitism largely because he made no attempt to conceal his identity. Occasionally he heard jokes from peers and faculty with references to Brooklyn and the Dodgers, delivered in "Toid Avenue" accents. If there was an anti-Semitic connotation to them, Handlin chose to ignore it. In any event, the faculty with the most exalted pedigrees, Morison, Murdock, and Elliot Perkins, went out of their way to be helpful. Handlin's dazzling performance on his comprehensive examinations established him as a student of unquestioned brilliance, destined for greatness in the profession.²⁷

For his dissertation, Handlin chose Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., whom he admired greatly, as a supervisor. Schlesinger suggested that he study the role of Boston's immigrants, a topic abandoned by another student, as a subject for his dissertation. The suggestion proved to be enormously fruitful. Handlin's doctoral thesis, supported by a Sheldon Fellowship to pursue his research in Dublin and London, allowed him to receive his Ph.D. in 1940. He published the dissertation as *Boston's Immigrants*, and, after a year of teaching at Brooklyn College, returned to Harvard as an instructor.

Over the next decade, the department appointed a new cluster of promising faculty, including Fairbank, Handlin, and Schlesinger, Jr., a harvest almost as impressive as its appointments in the 1920s. In several cases, the department benefited from the presence of the Society of Fellows, the body created by Lowell to spare exceptional students the drudgery of graduate school. Several of its junior fellows, including Schlesinger, Jr., and Crane Brinton, became department members.

During the 1930s, Conant also introduced the "up or out" principle of faculty appointments at Harvard and also introduced a more rigorous approach to promotion and tenure across the university. Before Conant, Harvard had many faculty who had served for years on temporary appointments. Fearing that problems might arise for the permanent

²⁷ Richard Bushman, et al, eds., *Uprooted Americans: Essays to Honor Oscar Handlin* (Boston: Little Brown, 1979), p. 4; Handlin, "Career at Harvard," p. 49.

faculty if they were surrounded by embittered drones who would never receive permanent appointments, Conant introduced a rigid system of appointments. The positions of lecturer and instructor were reserved for fixed-term appointments; theoretically, there was no possibility of advancement. A more promising appointment was that of assistant professor, where the appointee received a five-year contract. By December of his fourth year, the appointee came up for review by the department, which either recommended him for promotion to associate professor, a rank that carried tenure, or declined to do so. The rejected candidate would then have a year-and-a-half to find another position.²⁸

From the point of view of the candidate, the most unnerving component of the fourth-year review was that the department opened up the position to an international search, and the candidate would be considered in terms of the world's finest scholars in that particular field. Harvard expected to hire the best. Even candidates who won the support of the department still had hurdles to clear. To prevent departments from becoming networks of friends and protégés, the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences formed an ad hoc committee of outside experts in the field and Harvard faculty in related disciplines. The committee consulted other outside scholars to evaluate the field, assess the work of the possible appointees, and make recommendations to the university appointments committee. If it was decided that a superior scholar was available, the inside candidate was denied promotion and the associate professor position would be offered to the outsider.

After World War II, Conant also accelerated his campaign to establish research as the prime qualification for advancement at Harvard. The faculty's task was not simply the dissemination of knowledge but the creation of it. This emphasis on research, based on Conant's conviction that good teaching was product of distinction in research, became the defining characteristic of faculty appointments at Harvard and in the history department.²⁹

During the post-war period, Harvard made several critical promotions to associate professor, especially those of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and Oscar Handlin, with its decisions based mostly upon scholarship. In 1946 Schlesinger was twenty-nine years old, the author of a Pulitzer Prize-winning study, *The Age of Jackson*, with the prospect of greatness before him. Since his father was a senior member of the department, a committee

²⁸ Richard Pipes, *Vixi: Memoirs of a Non-Belonger* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 78-9.

²⁹ Kellers, *Making Harvard Modern*, pp. 23-4.

consisting of historians from outside Harvard was appointed to evaluate his record. The committee concluded that the young Schlesinger was the best historian in the country under fifty.

Oscar Handlin's record was almost as impressive. At age thirty-five he had published three major books, including *The Uprooted*, a Pulitzer Prize-winning study of the immigrant experience in America. "Once I thought to study the role of immigrants in American history," Handlin wrote, "then I realized they were American history." But Handlin, himself the child of immigrants, lacked the pedigree and polish of Schlesinger, and he was Jewish. The department was eager to promote him, but Conant, of all people, initially expressed doubts. Should Handlin be promoted immediately? Perhaps the department should prefer Richard Hofstadter, then teaching at Columbia and the author of the recent critical success, *The American Political Tradition*. In the end, the committee appointed to consider Handlin's professorship voted unanimously to support him. Handlin's promotion was a clear testament to Conant's vision of meritocracy. In the 1930s, anti-Semitism might have derailed his career path; now he could sail through. Even his principal rival was Jewish. In 1954, both Schlesinger and Handlin were promoted to full professor. In the words of Dean Paul Buck, the promotions should "guarantee Harvard distinction for many years."³⁰

Appointments in non-Western areas are another characteristic of modernizing departments. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Harvard made several promotions of importance in these areas. The first of these was John Fairbank in Chinese history, and the second was Richard Frye in Middle Eastern history. While the appointments testified to the presence of an increasing level of awareness of the need for more courses in non-Western areas, they also revealed some limitations in the department's commitment to areas outside the West. For years, Fairbank and Frye were the only non-Western specialists who were full-time faculty members of the history department. Even Reischauer, a distinguished historian who taught Asian history courses with Fairbank (popularly referred to as the "rice paddy" courses), was housed for many years in the department of East Asian languages and never held an appointment in the history department.

Yet, by the early 1960s, despite the self-directed nature of its graduate programs and limited commitment to hiring specialists in non-Western areas, the Harvard history department enjoyed an enviable position. There

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 86, 223.

appear to be two main reasons for its success. First, the university itself, under Conant's leadership, was already moving in that direction and the department clearly embraced Conant's values. Not only did it make appointments and promotions based on research potential and achievement rather than pedigree and position, but it expanded its curriculum and, through History and Literature, continued its traditional interdisciplinary strength. Second, in the 1940s and 1950s, it was able to replace its star faculty, such as Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., Samuel Eliot Morison, and Frederick Merk with equally estimable figures, such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Bernard Bailyn, and Oscar Handlin.

Basing appointments on research and the hiring of qualified Jews, however, was only one step in the transformation of the Harvard History Department. The department still did not have African Americans or women among its faculty members. It would take several decades to achieve that.