



# US History, Page by Page

George Fuller

*"The difference between tradition and history is that history lies in a more dignified way. The first writer of a lie is ever after accepted as authority. If actual history should be written, mankind would blush in shame of itself."*

—Opie Read

Page Smith has written a portion of actual history. But his motivation is far beyond making mankind blush in shame of itself. Perhaps the first step toward resolution is a blush of shame. Indeed, American history is not always pretty. What Page Smith attempts is courageous: to return a sense of humanity to Americans. "What I do is read all sorts of autobiographies, diaries, and reflections, things of that sort. They determine the shape and nature of the history. I start with the experience of people."

Page came to Santa Cruz in the mid '60s to begin and develop Cowell College, the first link in the UCSC chain. It was under his guidance that many of the policies which distinguish UCSC were instituted: the pass/fail system, interdisciplinary fields of study, and others. An historian by vocation, Page is author of many books, including a two-volume biography of John Adams, winner of the Bancroft Prize; *Jefferson: A Revealing Biography*; and *Daughters of the Promised Land: Women in American History*.

His major new book, *Trial By Fire: A People's History of the Civil War and Reconstruction*, paints a captivating story of the American Civil War, the people who lived it, the circumstances and events which led up to it, and its devastating after-effects, some of which, like the Ku Klux Klan, are still with us. By "starting with the experience of people," Page brings history alive, makes it colorful and interesting, using the testimony of the people living it.

But writing history isn't the only thing Page Smith does. His activities within the Santa Cruz community, and within the state of California, also reflect his creative and progressive mind. As co-founder, with Paul Lee, of the William James Association, Page has worked to help many traditionally under-employed people find work. William James Association has also placed strong arts programs in some of California's prisons. The impressive results can be seen in the yearly publication of inmate writing, *About Time*. "William James Association was our zero point," he says, "our way of freeing ourselves from dead institutions. We ask 'What is the relation between the life of the mind and the life of the active world?'"

Along with Mary Holmes, Page conducts the Penny University, which meets Monday evenings at 5:00 at Cafe Pergolesi. "The Penny fills the crevices of the University," discussing and considering topics ranging from the computer in our lives to the failure of modern education.

We had a chance to talk about all this at Page's house in Bonny Doon shortly before he was off to Los Angeles on a National Writers Union recruitment mission. Page is an integral part of the Santa Cruz Chapter of the Writers Union, and was instrumental in its foundation.

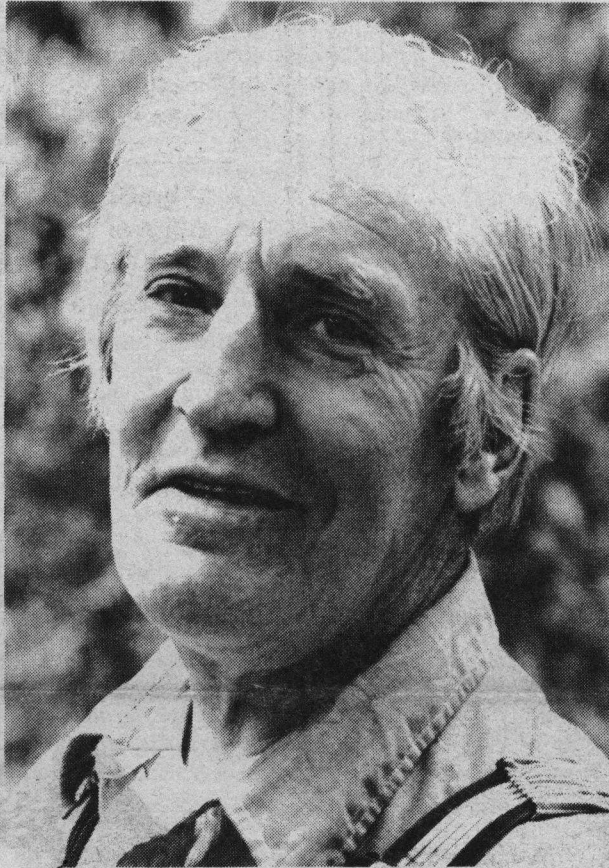
**Page, what is your ultimate goal with *A People's History*?**

Well, one goal is to create a new sense of the relationship between the past and the present. I feel that the great figures in history — and by that I don't necessarily mean the most famous — but the powerful, compelling figures exist in our future as much as they do in our past. They are incentives, they are inspirations. There's a hymn by Charles Wesley, one of the founders of Methodism, in which he speaks of a screen that separates the living and the dead, but that all are part of the same company. I suppose in Christian terms, the company of saints. In my terms "the company of all faithful people." To me, that has the larger notion of all those who labored in the cause of humanity, without regard to racial or religious or national divisions. I suppose that more than anything else I

would like to convey the potency of that company of all faithful people.

Whitman said Americans should "learn to better dwell on her [America's] choicest possessions, the legacy of her great and faithful." I'm mildly obsessed by that theme. It has the potential to give a much deeper sense to living people of the company that we belong to. Ian Hamilton, in his biography of the American poet Robert Lowell, quotes an Englishman, Jonathan Miller, who says that "for Lowell, an exciting conversation was one in which all history becomes a simultaneous event, where it was possible for everyone to meet everyone." That has been the most exciting part of working on this history for me. I've really enlarged my friendships, so to speak, with all these deceased people. It's been an enormous stimulus, and a very reconciling experience. That's what I'm so anxious that the reader feel. If the reader doesn't feel the reality of the lives of the people, then the history has failed.

PHOTO: KENT EATON



Page Smith

*You begin and end *Trial By Fire* with the statement that "the nation could not truly begin until the twin issues of slavery and secession had been laid to rest." You also hint at the feeling that slavery has never really been resolved, with the birth of the Klan immediately after the Civil War, and the present state of affairs for Blacks in this country. Do you feel that in some basic and formidable way this nation is not yet begun?*

Well, it certainly seems to me unfinished. One of the phrases that echoes in my mind is Lincoln's phrase "this almost chosen people." When I began this volume I thought I should read Nevins' multi-volume history of the U.S. But when I opened it, and on the very first page it said, "In the tragic and unnecessary Civil War," I just shut it and never read another line. I don't think it's a legitimate case. The tone of that was so remote from what I was doing.

I think this whole issue is clearer in my earlier volumes. I stress this theme, and try to make clear how everyone lived under the horror of slavery, and the threat of disunion. George Templeton Strong wrote that Civil War had always been like a nightmare, but something that would happen in the future. So when it did happen, there was a sense of waking up into a nightmare. But it seems to me that the issue was settled, despite the fact that Blacks then lost ground for another 75 years. That was perhaps the most dramatic decade in American history. An extraordinary number of Black leaders appeared during that decade. Despite the fact that the dreams and expectations that the war had aroused for a more humane society were one by one defeated, I'd say the two huge issues of slavery and secession were resolved.

*My question was triggered by the fact that your next volume of *A People's History* is centered around the capital/labor problem. Perhaps slavery as a moral issue was resolved*

*because of the Civil War, but slavery as an economic issue goes beyond slaves and landowners. Economic slavery, particularly amongst Blacks is quite a huge problem now.*

I don't think you can ever devise an economic system that will be proof against shocks and setbacks. There is a entire "underclass" of underemployed or semi-employed people that have been created almost inadvertently by the system. It's interesting that attention is being directed to that and people are aware of it as a problem.

But I also don't want to say that every problem can be solved. I try to emphasize in *A People's History* that there are these tragic dilemmas we, humanity, get ourselves into that can't be gotten out of by some practical, reasonable solution. The Civil war was one of them. The Indian/White relationship was another.

**Do you consider that you're re-writing history by combining sociological and personal aspects, with historical fact?**

History has been so fragmented. My argument is that history cannot be understood. It's as though it has been set out with the deliberate intention of being either wholly obscure or irrelevant. Because what you get is a lot of clever, specialized studies that give you no sense of what was really going on. So I really want to ignore these parochial lines and divisions that exist everywhere in the academic world. I'm treating a whole host of problems that historians commonly don't treat, or treat in very separate, specialized ways. That's very threatening to the academic world.

The academic world is upset and hostile to my enterprise for a wide variety of reasons, one of them being that the academic world is a marvelous model of intellectual capitalism: you work a long time at the university, you get a degree. It takes five or six years, it costs a lot of money. Then they give you a piece of paper that says you're a certified expert in some field. Now that's your capital. That has to last you the rest of your life. So you dole it out to students, you dole it out to other scholars in books. You're very alarmed and uneasy if anybody threatens that. If someone has spent their life working in the field of Civil War and Reconstruction, and I have said things in my book which they haven't yet formulated or understood, even if they have, and I did it without spending six years in graduate school and thirty years in research, that threatens their capital. Like I'm stealing their money!

Also related to that is the sense that you don't write a book until you know everything. But for me, every book that I've written, I've started quite ignorant. What made it worth doing was that each was a marvelous discovery. So the whole question arises of what intellectual activity is. Is it a distribution of knowledge already acquired, which the academic world holds it to be; or is it a process of discovery, which is closer to what a poet or painter or creative person might think it to be?

*You've talked quite a bit about nuclear disarmament, and a couple of years ago felt that there wasn't a constituent support for it. Do you feel differently now?*

Oh yeah. I think it's fascinating how quickly that's happened. In that sense Reagan is one of the heroes of our time. He scared the shit out of us. He's probably more responsible for the anti-nuclear movement than anybody. He's worth a dozen dedicated pacifists, because he really has, by his crazy behavior, stirred up a hornets' nest all over the world. I'm very encouraged. Did you hear what the Catholic bishops said? They said it was immoral to even talk about nuclear war!

**Would you care to address yourself to the future? Do you have any visions?**

I think the nuclear war issue is a 'put up or shut up' issue. People have been dreaming and hoping for hundreds of years for a world without war. We're in a strange race between our capacity for a larger humanity, for a genuine sense that the peoples of the world are brothers and sisters, and the ancient, atavistic impulses to power, domination and war. I do see history as progressive. I think that we have gained some sense of what the implications of love are.

We have to make it past this nuclear issue. It has happened in the past with issues as important. History properly told allows you to breathe deeper, to regain your equilibrium. That is in the back of my mind with *A People's History*. That when people read it, they might feel the restoration of their own humanity. Not through me, but through these marvelous people I am lucky enough to be a voice for. □