
History From The Hill

Newsletter of the History Department at Tufts University

April/May 2000

Volume VI Issue III

What's News in East Hall

The department bids farewell to Professor **Yvette Monga**. Thank you for a superb job and best of luck in the future!! You will be greatly missed.

On April 3, 2000 Professor **Jeanne Penvenne** appeared on *The Newshour* with Jim Lehrer as part of the discussion, "In the Aftermath of the Floods - Mozambique," anchored by Senior Correspondent Gwen Ifill. The text and real audio are available at www.pbs.org/newshour/. You can locate the discussion by entering either Mozambique floods or Penvenne in the search feature of *The Newshour* homepage. Eventually photographs will be added to the text copy to

make the website more closely resemble *The Newshour* discussion on Mozambique.

The *History Channel* came to the Tufts campus on April 6th to film an interview with Professor **Ina Baghdiantz McCabe** on the political life of the British traveler Gertrude Bell. The forty-minute interview was filmed in the Murrow Room at the Fletcher School under the supervision of the Tufts Press Agent Christine Graham. The documentary on Gertrude Bell will air on the *History Channel* and on the *History Channel International* in Europe sometime next winter. The dates will be announced in the newsletter.

Professor **Reed Ueda** recently

chaired and moderated a session on "Ethnic Identity and International Crises," at the Annual Meeting of the Organization of American Historians which was held on March 31 in St. Louis.

Professor **Virginia Drachman** will be on sabbatical during 2000/01. She will be a Senior Fellow at the Schlesinger Library of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies where she will work on her project, "Enterprising Women."

In addition, Department Chair **Howard Malchow** will also be on sabbatical for fall 2000. Professor **Gerald Gill** will serve as Acting Chair starting at the end of this semester.

New England Historical Association Comes To Tufts

On April 15, 2000, the Department of History hosted the spring meeting of the New England Historical Association at Tufts. The conference met for morning panels on a wide variety of topics in Olin Hall, followed by a reception and lunch in Pound and Wren Dining Rooms, and a closing series of lectures on the "Archaeology of the Big Dig" in Barnum 104. James Hanlon, executive secretary for NEHA and the ongoing conference coordinator, was pleased with the attendance of roughly one hundred people, and the sold-out luncheon.

Thanks go out to a number of people who helped to make the confer-

ence go well. Dean Leila Fawaz invited NEHA to campus over two years ago, and provided financial support from her funds, as did History Department Chair, Howard Malchow. Members of the department, including Professors Gerald Gill, Pierre Laurent, Daniel Mulholland, and John Brooke, chaired or commented on panels. John Brooke coordinated the local arrangements, with able assistance from department administrator Annette Lazzara, and students David Proctor, Jennifer Searcy, and Christina Szoke. Thanks also go out to Jean Agati in Catering and Ed Dente, the curator of Olin Hall.

History Department University Archive Intern Chosen

The History Department recently chose **John Bennett** LA'01 to serve as the first departmental University Archive Intern for the 2000-2001 academic year.

The internship is given to a senior History major who has shown extraordinary abilities in the interpretation and use of primary source documents. Bennett will assist with researching and writing brief biographical sketches of famous Tufts' personages in preparation for Tufts' 150th Celebration in 2002.

Manz to Serve as Director of New Interdisciplinary Middle Eastern Studies Major

Professor Beatrice Manz has been chosen as Director of the new Middle East Studies Major which includes many courses offered at through the History Department. History faculty involved in this new program are Professors Leila Fawaz, George Marcopoulos, Deina Abdelkader, Ina Baghdiantz McCabe, Ayesha Jalal and of course Beatrice Manz. The History Department offers over a dozen courses relevant to the newly created major, which makes it a good candidate for a double major with history.

The major requires a student to take a total of ten courses, two in a Middle Eastern language at the 21 or 22 level (Hebrew, Arabic, Turkish, Farsi and Armenian for example or which Hebrew and Arabic are currently offered at Tufts),

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Perspectives

The *Perspectives* feature attempts to provide various responses to the question every historian and student of history must eventually face. What is history? In this series, department faculty, graduate students and undergraduate history majors will be asked to share their views and outlooks on history and the historical process. In this issue, Professor Steven P. Marrone offers his perspective on history.

What kind of knowledge does history provide? An important question, and one that ought to be central to contemporary debates about what historians do. Instead, I believe, most current discussions about history argue over the truth-value of historical propositions. And here all sides, from skeptical relativists to historical realists, seem to agree on an ideal type to which historical statements should conform if we are to take them as being true.

The ideal envisioned is effectively that of statements typical in the natural sciences: assertions like “The freezing point of water is 32^o Fahrenheit” or “The momentum of a moving object is equal to its mass times its velocity.” Since such statements are seen as descriptive of an objective reality independent of both observer and description, their truth is determined either by probing that reality directly for confirmation or seeing whether the statement fits into a web of interlocking statements forming a system itself capable of being tested by similar, if more complex, empirical means.

Historical realists say that the reality to which history refers, though no longer existent, did once exist and has left reliable traces of itself in documents and material artifacts. They believe that the methods of interpreting such documents and artifact--turning them into evidence and deciding whether they confirm or discredit the statements--are relatively straightforward and noncontroversial, perhaps even commonsensical. They likewise insist that this kind of representational truth is what history aims for, the standard to which history should be held to prove worthy of the name.

On the other hand relativists, post-modernists in this era when all things academic take a linguistic turn, recognize the same standard as necessary for truth but deny that it can be applied to what historians actually do. Even if there were a real past, which many doubt, there is no way of making contact with it. Instead, historians construct a description that, while pretending to represent reality past, is in fact shaped to fit current sensibilities, ideas of right and wrong, acceptable and taboo, and can in no way be measured against a separate body of evidence to which it must be seen to conform. At its best, history is a simple narrative which must be judged by largely aesthetic criteria, especially the power to please or displease. Truth-value is not a legitimate historical concern.

While I believe it is worth asking whether history tells the truth or not, my sense is that all sides in the debate I have briefly characterized are missing the point. They are trying to answer the wrong question first. Starting from a single conception of true knowledge, they offer differing estimations for how likely it is that historical analyses approach the ideal. But assuming a singular ideal presupposes that we know what kind of knowledge history, if true, might claim to furnish. As I suggested at the beginning, I think that rather than make such an assumption we ought instead to ask: What kind of knowledge should we understand history as attempting to provide?

As I see it, the reason we pay attention to history is not because it offers an objective representation of an independent reality that is separate and past, or pretends to do so as a charming exercise in entertainment. It is instead because history tells us who we are by laying out a specific relationship between us and what is past. This marks it as a special kind of knowledge, not at all like a natural-scientific description of the reality of the world. It more closely approximates the way we explain to ourselves why we choose the friends we do or how it is we came to be lawyers rather than electricians, or follow baseball rather than ballet.

If this claim of mine is true, then the value of history, perhaps its truth-value, cannot be ascertained by the methods presented above. Instead of purely empirical confirmation, we need to apply a set of standards combining an objective sense of external reality, à la realism, with a subjective notion of what satisfies our needs, à la post-modernist relativist. Coming up with such a set of standards is neither fantastic nor even very far from our grasp. For I believe that we daily traffic in a type of knowledge the value of which is determined much more by standards of this sort than by anything resembling the ideal of scientific method.

There are two ways to think of knowledge of this kind. One is to conceive of it as a story we tell to explain where we came from and why we do what we do. The other is to picture it as a sort of collective psychoanalysis. The former model recalls what the post-modernists have in mind by stressing the narrative character of history, and indeed it concedes that history in one of its primary guises is simply story, a story told about the past. But where post-modernists view this in almost negative terms, as if entailing a falling-away from a presumed standard of truth, I don't take it as having negative connotations at all.

Sure enough, there is no hiding the fact that a story or narrative constitutes a construction of the teller, ordered in great part according to rules of rhetoric or aesthetics of presentation dependent more on audience than subject matter and to that degree non-objective. But we must never forget that all descriptions, even scientific ones, are constructions of intellect, tailored to principles of organization reflective much more of the community of discussants than the subject matter discussed. Recognizing the constructed nature of a description should not, therefore, be taken as sign in itself of subjectivity or any peculiar lack of

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objective detachment. Or if it should, it is only because one has honestly concluded that all descriptions are such, and all knowledge suspect, not because the descriptions we call “constructions” fall short of some normative cognitive ideal.

In fact, just as natural scientists construct descriptions of nature, but still generally concur on the criteria whereby valid constructions can be separated from invalid, so story-tellers have their ways of sorting out veridical from fantastic tales. We ourselves employ them habitually in conversations with family and friends. Historians have recourse to these same methods; they need only be more circumspect about applying them carefully and consistently.

The model of history as collective psychoanalysis may seem an even weaker reed upon which to rest a defense of history’s value, but it no more demands apology than the admission that historians tell stories. The analyst, or the self-examiner in the privacy of the mind, seeks meaning in the past by searching through memory for what resonates with the urgencies of the present. In doing so, she builds an understanding simultaneously of self and of precedent conditions and causalities. The historian does the same thing, though in her case the memory is collective, typically written down in documents and texts, and for self is substituted group, class or community, sometimes even several at once. Historical understanding is thus about how such a collectivity is at any particular time largely a product of what has happened before. Here, too, there are standards for judging veridicalness, standards no more relativist or unreliable, I would argue, than any others used to evaluate descriptions, even those of the scientific ideal laid out before. Striking, however, is how plainly this model reveals the special nature of the historical account, calling upon a complicated dance between past and present, between earlier and later, to produce a description with a power to engage our attention no simple objective representation could ever rival.

In either case, I find it easy to claim that the historian is imparting knowledge, telling us something we didn’t know before. And I think we possess reliable standards for judging the value of such knowledge, distinguishing the truthful from the false. If not, there would be no reason to call such mental constructs “knowledge.” The standards are not those of natural science, but they still require poring over evidence—sifting through memory, we might say, with a critical eye—and reasoning about whether our story or analysis is compatible with it or not. And here the very subject-bound and present-oriented quality of one side of the historical perspective, which might otherwise be derided as a sign of its subjectivity, represents an authentic intellectual strength. For it relieves us of having to explain all possible outcomes, leaving us to account for only one, in the present or leading to it. Moreover, since historians are wont to tell tales of their own societies or with their own societies in mind, it is likely to be an outcome we know about in exceptional detail.

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three courses drawn from a category which includes art history, comparative religion, literature, Judaic studies and music, three courses from a category which includes history, anthropology and political science, one advanced research course and one course that places the Middle East in a global perspective. For more information on this exciting new major, visit their website at <http://ase.tufts.edu/mes>.

Graduate News and Notes

Ph.D. candidate **Chitralkha Zutshi** GS’00 has been offered and has accepted a tenure-track appointment in South Asian History at the University of South Alabama beginning in the fall 2000.

MA Candidate **Ted Hutchinson** GS’00 has been accepted into the American History Ph.D. program at Boston University for this coming fall.

Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences Robert Hollister recently announced that two History department graduate students have been chosen to receive awards recognizing Outstanding Academic Achievement. The two students are Ph.D. candidate **Chitralkha Zutshi** who works with Professor Sugata Bose, and MA candidate **Federica La Nave** who works with Professor Steven P. Marrone. The awards will be presented at a reception to be held Monday, May 1 in the Coolidge Room, Ballou Hall at 5:00 P.M.

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Special thanks to Steve Marrone for taking on the Perspectives feature this time around, and to Department Secretary

New Courses For Fall 2000

History 0001-IBM

Travel Accounts and the Writing of History

This foundation seminar examines the literary roots of historiography. Travel accounts and their major influence in shaping historiography, from Marco Polo, to colonial reports, to travelogues and journalism today. The focus is on how cross-cultural encounters and exchanges shaped historiography, revolutionary writing and political philosophy in Europe and how narrative style and description still shapes historical text. Travel descriptions of Europe, the New World, Persia, India, China, and Africa, some integrated into later historical texts, are used as primary sources. There is a comparative segment with readings of some Muslim and Chinese travelers. Sources which include text, early maps, photographs and documentary film are analyzed. Several short oral and written papers. Sources are analyzed for views of the "other," views of the world, post-colonial issues of representation, Orientalist discourse, expressions of racism, sexism, imperialism and colonialism.

Baghdiantz McCabe

History 0089

Rewriting America: The Twentieth Century

REWRITING AMERICA (History 89), an innovative new history course, will be offered in the Fall 2000.

It is an "active survey" of the history of the United States in the 20th century, according to history professor Martin Sherwin, the course's instructor. "I refer to the course as 'active' because it will be organized around student-run publishing companies. Each company will publish a bi-weekly magazine set in the past," Sherwin said. As the term progresses, the publication dates of the magazines will advance chronologically through the century.

History and Journalism

The course will combine historical research with journalism experience. Students will rotate positions as editors and reporters. The editors will write editorials and coordinate the writing and production of the magazines. Reporters' bylines will identify their articles. Professor Sherwin (publishing mogul) will oversee his publications empire. Kinkos will print the magazines.

IR Majors

Each publication will cover issues chosen by its editors and reporters. Thus, IR majors who are using the course for the foreign-policy requirement can focus on diplomatic and foreign economic issues.

Students interested in gender, ethnic, family or others issues can specialize in reporting about those topics. Grandparents, parents or other "witnesses" may be interviewed for stories. Sherwin expects the publications to cover a cross-section of 20th-century

American life.

The class will read all the magazines and write letters to the editor in response to stories in each other's publications.

Grades

Grades will be based on each student's published reporting, editorials, and letters to the editor.

For more information contact: martin.sherwin@tufts.edu

Sherwin

History 0183

Nationalism and Its Critics

One of the aims of this course will be to put history back into theory. Beginning with an assessment of early anti-colonial resistance, the bulk of this research seminar will be devoted to rethinking and reformulating the history of nationalism from the late nineteenth century to the present. In exploring the history of South Asian nationalisms in particular, we will draw distinctions between patriotism and nationalism and unravel the historical construction of nationalism's "Other" in the form of that peculiar South Asian entity called "communalism." Readings will include primary sources available in print and the more important theoretical and historical books and articles.

Jalal

Past & Present Wrap Up

Past & Present enjoyed a highly successful year marked by a wide array of historical films presented by department faculty including Professors George Marcopoulos, Steve Marrone, Martin Sherwin, Gerald Gill, Sugata Bose and Yvette Monga, and a successful lecture series featuring Research Professor of Classics and Art History Miriam Balmuth and Dadian/Oztemel Chair of Armenian Art and Architecture Professor Lucy Der Manuelian.

The highlight of the year however, has been the formation of the Past & Present Graduate Student Excellence Award. This award recognizes a history graduate student who has shown outstanding commitment to their fellow graduate students, to the department and to undergraduate education. We are pleased to announce that this first annual Excellence Award has been presented to MA candidate Anita Gombos in recognition of her efforts in all the afore mentioned areas over the course of the last academic year.

Keep an eye out for the second volume of the Past & Present research journal, *History on the Hill*, due out in late summer.

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