



History Alumni News

Queens College

Volume 6, No. 1 Spring 2005

A Letter from the Chair

For the History Department, the past year has been a year of accomplishments and a year of great sadness. Last October, Professor David Syrett died suddenly. David was the leading scholar of the Battle of the Atlantic in World War II, as well as a major scholar of naval history during the American Revolution. Students were attracted to his classes by his outspoken and dynamic style. Elsewhere in this issue, you will find more about his accomplishments. For me, I have lost a friend of many years. Very soon after David's death, one of our most accomplished senior majors, Ruchama Jaeger, died. A brilliant and sensitive student, her death further saddened the department. In February, we learned of the death of Y.C. Wang, who taught Chinese history for many years. Y.C. had been retired for over twenty years, but the alumni of the 1970s and early 1980s will remember him. Compounding last year's death of Stanley Hirshson, his wife, Janet, died in January. Finally, in March, the husband of Francine Kapchan, whom many recent graduates know well as our student-friendly secretary, died suddenly.

On a positive note, we have continued to hire new and exciting faculty. Kristin Roth-Ey, a specialist in Russian history, joined the department in the fall. And

next fall, Peter Conolly-Smith in United States and Grace Davie in African history will join the faculty. Sarah Covington has been on leave this semester with a Getty Fellowship. Julia Sneeringer has won one of the CUNY Mellon Fellowships. She is the fourth member of our department to win this fellowship. Kristin Roth-Ey will also be on fellowship leave next year on a Harvard post-doctoral fellowship. Although these fellowships mean that the recipients will be away from teaching for a semester or a year, it is an honor and an indication of the quality of the young faculty that we have been able to hire in recent years.

In May, Jyotsna Uppal, our specialist in South Asian history, will be leaving the department, and Professor Leo Hershkowitz, our long-time specialist in colonial and New York City history, will be retiring, although he plans to continue teaching as a part-time adjunct.

Among the retirees, I am in e-mail contact with Jay Kinsbruner, who has a new book. I speak occasionally to Paul Avrich, Andy Whiteside, Alan McConnell, Zvi Yavetz, and Ralph Della Cava, and often to Mike Wreszin and Vivian Gruder. Marty Pine is teaching a course this spring and continues to take a deep interest in the department. And Jon Peterson also continues to help in a variety of academic and office matters. We get occasional notes from both Stuart Prall and Keith Eubank. So, although the composition of the department has changed from when many

of you attended, the retirees are still active and doing interesting projects.

Premilla Nadasen's book, *Welfare Warriors*, has recently been published by Routledge. It is a compelling and moving history of the Welfare Rights Movement. Early this year, I was pleased to receive from Professor Frank Merli's widow a departmental copy of Frank's posthumous book on *The Alabama*, which has been edited and completed by his close friend, David Fahey. For anyone interested in purchasing the book, it is entitled *The Alabama, British Neutrality, and the American Civil War*, and is published by Indiana University Press. Indiana has also reissued in paperback Frank's first book, *Great Britain and the Confederate Navy, 1861-1865*.

With Leo Hershkowitz's retirement, only Professor Edgar McManus and I date back to the early 1960s, although Isaac Alteras and John O'Brien joined the faculty soon after. How much longer I will continue is a year-to-year proposition, but whenever I do decide to leave, I will know that the department remains in good hands. Although I am far from a chauvinist politically, I am chauvinistic about our department. I have always felt it was the premier history department within the CUNY system, and I think it remains so today.

What else will you find in this issue? As noted above, there is a memorial statement about David Syrett. Kristin Roth-Ey has written a piece about her first year at Queens. And Elizabeth Ingram, the graduating president of Phi Alpha Theta, has written a piece about her years at Queens. Elizabeth is both an excellent student and an energetic and hard-working president. We will miss her presence in the department.

My final word for this year is to once again thank you for your support and generosity, for your continued interest in the department, and for the letters from you that I receive. And please stay in touch with what is happening at the college by going to the Alumni Affairs Web site at www.qc.cuny.edu/alumni_affairs.

Frank Warren



Left: Arnold Franco '43 congratulates student Elizabeth Ingram, the winner of the Wreszin Writing Prize Essay. At right, the History Department Faculty at the 2004 Spring Honors Party

Professor Kristin Roth-Ey: My First Year at Queens College

I grew up about 25 exits down the LIE from Queens College, but I also grew up with stories about Queens spun for me by my grandmother, known to the family as “Tea.” Daughter of immigrants from the Baltic region, Tea was raised to be fiercely American and to make her family proud. At 91, she can still sing the fight song from Jamaica High, and when she tells you for the umpteenth time how close she came to graduating (and with honors!), you can still hear the bitterness in her voice. Tea had dreams of college. She wanted to be a teacher, but when the Depression walked in the door of the family house in Queens, Tea walked out and found herself a job in “the city” as a cashier. “There were six of us. I was the second oldest. What could I do?”

Eventually, Tea would marry, move to Nassau County, and leave Queens behind as *her* “old country.” It was her son, my father, who would be the first person in the family to graduate from college, working two and three and four jobs along the way to make it happen. And it was also Tea’s son who would wind up making his career as a teacher even farther out on the Island, in Suffolk County. I grew up there, went away to college, then to Europe for five years, and returned to get my doctorate in history (another family first) starting at the CUNY Graduate Center and eventually transferring to Princeton and graduating in 2003. The following year, I was lucky enough to be invited back to the “old country” as an assistant professor of Russian history at Queens College.

I’ve thought a lot about my grandmother and my father this year as I look out at the faces of my students. Many of them are working full-time or almost full-time, like my father did. And although I’m sure they’d be shocked to hear it, more than a few of them remind me of Tea; they’ve got a certain fierceness about them, a certain lack of sentimentality and a full-speed-ahead determination that is truly impressive. Among my students in the MA program, I also have a good number of teachers who arrive to class after a long day in classrooms of their own, and I’m often reminded of my dad.

It’s a tough crowd—and I mean that in the best sense of the word. What I’ve found at Queens are students who are

pushing themselves in their everyday lives and who push me in the process. They’re not flatterers and, by and large, they resist indulging in what looks to them like idle contemplation. And so when I told a group of students that I was writing a book about mass media in the postwar Soviet Union, what they wanted to know was *why*. (They were savvy enough to know it had little chance of being an *Oprah* pick.) It’s a good question, and it’s good that they ask it. It’s also good for me to hear it. Because while I know how lucky I am to have been welcomed into a department of working historians—a department that both values *and* supports scholarship—the ideal of the historian who teaches is to make the connection between the world of archives and libraries and that of the classroom.

Sometimes, that connection can happen in a very direct way; this semester, my undergraduate survey class in Soviet his-

tory watched a Stalinist-era movie musical that I’ve written about in the past, and it was interesting and instructive for me to hear their reactions. But there’s another, less direct connection between scholarship and teaching that I do feel is worth striving for, and that is finding a way to answer my students’ questions about why I love studying history and why I might choose to write a book that will make no money. What I’m talking about is explaining why contemplation isn’t idle, explaining and demonstrating the value of what my own father fought hard for, but enjoyed too little of—that elusive thing he would have called “the life of the mind.”

My dad passed away last December, but I know he was proud of me when I was hired at Queens, and I know he would have been proud of my students, too, for keeping me on my toes. It’s not for nothing that Tea still sings that fight song.



Retiring Professor Jon Peterson holds a plaque showing the various buildings the History Department called home during his years at the college.

Inset: Frank Warren and Professor Peterson.

Adventures of a College Returnee **By Elizabeth Ingram**

Eager to earn a formal college education, my first day of school at Queens College in the fall of 2002 was exciting yet nerve-racking. Admittedly, I had a case of butterflies in my stomach in preparation for my big day. I was enthusiastic to learn and had set a goal to be the best student possible, a better student than in my youth. The typical “first day of school” jitters and “what if” scenarios flew into my head. Will new friendships be made? What were the expectations of the professors and would they accommodate my full-time work schedule? Where should I sit in the classroom? For that matter, where were the classrooms? I even wondered what to wear.

Wanting to start off on the right foot, all the necessary precautions were taken. I familiarized myself with the campus the week before and utilized the online campus bookstore. Then it was off to the local Office Max where I proceeded to buy out the entire selection of school supplies. My wardrobe from my days in the corporate world made me worry I’d be overdressed. So it was off to the Gap, which I surprisingly found to be less expensive than Ann Taylor. My pre-college homework accomplished, the first day of school had finally arrived. I was ready for the academic challenges that lay ahead. Yet, as soon as

I entered the classroom in Razran Hall for my History 101 class, one of the students noticed me and asked, “Oh . . . are you the professor?” Needless to say, my heart sank down to my toes!

My worst fear had become a reality. Like any mature person returning to college, I wondered if I had done the right thing by becoming a student again in my thirties. Certainly, I had already led a fulfilling life. My 16-year career in the airline industry had taken me around the world with exposure to new cultures and I had easily adjusted to being relocated to several of the largest cities in the United States. I had also been fortunate to build on my career, working my way up the corporate ladder, managing multimillion dollar projects in addition to training and managing an often factious unionized workgroup. Yet, with all these experiences and exciting challenges, the one thing that had eluded me in my quest for personal and professional growth had been my completion of a formal college education.

This June, I will graduate with honors from Queens College with a Bachelor of Arts degree in European History. Though my “first day of school” experience is now a laughable memory, it pales in comparison to what I have gained throughout two and

a half years as an involved and academically committed student at Queens College. From the beginning, my experiences and interaction with both faculty and administration has been one of support. Even during the initial enrollment when I thought my past academic performance might hinder future educational pursuits, I was pleasantly surprised by the administration’s ability to put me at ease. On one occasion after reviewing my college transcripts from the 1980s while a student at the University of North Alabama, the Director of Transfer Admissions stated, “Miss Ingram, remember . . . who you are now is not necessarily who you were then.” What a relief! But it is with particularly great appreciation that I acknowledge the faculty of the Department of History at Queens College for their encouragement in recognizing talents that I had not known to previously exist.

My decision to return to complete a college education had come about after a business trip to Normandy, France, in the summer of 2001. While attending an anniversary celebration of D-Day, I had the pleasure of meeting World War II veterans that author Stephen Ambrose made famous in his book, *Band of Brothers*. As an eyewitness to oral history, I listened, laughed, and shared in the veterans’ tears as they retold stories of a unique camaraderie experienced only as one could in wartime. Taking their experiences to heart, I came to realize that I had an obligation to learn more not only about our country, but how as a citizen of the world one should heed the lessons and mistakes of the past.

I was told that returning to college, especially as an adult, is considered brave and admirable. When initially leaving college the first time around, I was told that if I quit, I would never go back. Fortunately that was not the case. I will forever be indebted to my family and friends for their loyalty and encouragement.

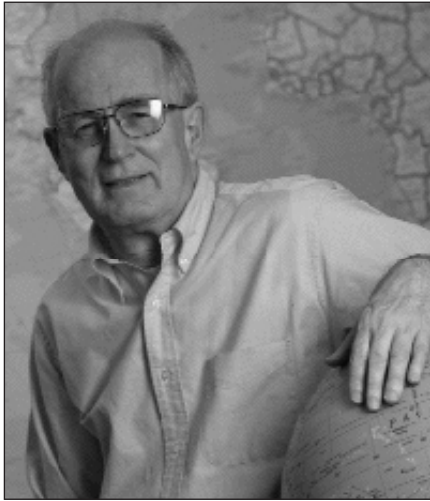
As I aspire to fulfill a long-awaited goal of finishing my studies at Queens College, I have gained more than an education. I’ve gained the confidence to move forward in my life with my eyes wide open to new possibilities and opportunities never before realized. I can now say that I have finally earned that “rite of passage” that Queens College helped me to obtain.

Elizabeth is a graduating senior and president of Phi Alpha Theta



Left: Patrick Toomey receives the Arnold Franco Essay Prize Award from the award’s namesake. Right: History chair Frank Warren congratulates Ronit Stern on winning the department’s Pinson Prize.

In Memoriam: David Syrett



Distinguished Professor David Syrett, who joined the History Department in 1966 and became Distinguished Professor in 2000, died of a heart attack on October 18, 2004.

In 1970, David published his first book, *Shipping and the American War, 1775–1783: A Study of British Transport Organization*. A study of the multidimensional aspects of the logistics of British shipping, it remains the standard work on the subject, having changed the nature of the debate over the British defeat. Ac-

cording to leading military historian Jon Sumida, the focus shifted from “poor British generalship to one based on a complex set of shipping circumstances and dynamics revolving around the relationship between strategy, logistics, and shipping resources.” Ten books (with others in press) and over eighty articles would follow in the succeeding years as David established himself as one of the major figures in both the naval history of the American Revolution and of the Battle of the Atlantic in World War II.

Becoming an expert in two periods of history separated by two hundred years was unusual, but, then, David was unusual in his dedication to his research. His output was both prodigious and meticulous. Richard Kohn, another well-known military historian, would call him one of the “half-dozen most distinguished practitioners of military history in the United States and the best in naval history.” Perhaps David’s most well-known book, a work that was based on researching 49,000 decrypted radio messages from German U-boats, was *The Defeat of the German U-Boats: The Battle of the Atlantic* (1994). Of it, Richard Kohn wrote: “In thoroughness of research, perseverance in archives, careful use of evidence, cautious but certainly not

understated interpretation and synthesis, and perceptive analysis of people and events, Syrett set a standard amongst military historians.”

It is hard to overestimate the impact of David’s work on the field of military history. Looking at his career as a whole, Jon Sumida would write that David was “a leading practitioner of what is becoming the dominant activity in military history as a scholarly field—the integration of institutional and operational history as the basis of a fundamental reconceptualization of basic narrative.”

David’s colleagues in the department will remember him, of course, for far more than his distinguished scholarship. They will remember him for his honesty, for his passion, and for his generosity. He will be deeply missed.

In his honor, the department has established, with the generous help of his wife and our colleague, Elena Frangakis-Syrett, a student prize in his name. Contributions can be made to the Queens College Foundation earmarked for the David Syrett Memorial Fund and mailed to Mario Della Pina, Queens College Foundation, Kiely 1306, Queens College, 65-30 Kissena Blvd., Flushing, New York 11367.

**QUEENS COLLEGE
HISTORY ALUMNI NEWS
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
65-30 KISSENA BOULEVARD
FLUSHING, NY 11367**

**NON-PROFIT
ORG.
U. S. POSTAGE
PAID
FLUSHING, NY
PERMIT NO. 48**