



Queens College

History Alumni News

Volume 7, No.1, Summer 2006

A LETTER FROM THE CHAIR

Dear Alumni,

I fear that this newsletter will arrive later than even previous late issues. It's not the lack of good intentions; it's the busy spring. I want to start out thanking you for your continued support of the department.

In the hope of making the newsletter more enjoyable for older alumni, last summer I wrote to alumni from the early years of the college and asked how I could make the newsletter more appealing for them. The most common theme that came back was that they would like more remembrances of their professors. I have tried to answer this desire with a remembrance of Jack Hexter, written by my friend Larry Kaplan from the Class of 1955. If there are alumni out there who would like to write remembrances of professors such as Henry David, Koppel Pinson, Gaudens Megaro, and others, I will try to print them in future newsletters.

Like many of the past years, this year has been a mixture of sadness and pleasure. Since I wrote last spring, we have lost three of our professors or former professors. Phil Cannistraro, our Distinguished Professor of Italian History, died in June 2005. Professor Emeritus Andrew Whiteside died in August 2005, and Distinguished Professor Emeritus Paul Avrich died in February of this year. I have written some thoughts about each in this newsletter.

One of the pleasures of being chair is to see exciting new hires join the department. Peter Conolly-Smith in United States Immigration History and Grace Davie in African History joined the department this fall. Sadatru Sen in South Asian History and Bob Wintermute in United States Military/Diplomatic History will be joining the department this coming fall. In addition, Peter Vellon, who has been a substitute professor for the past two years, will become a full-time member in the fall. All these hires mean new ideas and new approaches to history. It is exciting. There are, of course, a few of us who date back to the 1960s (Alteras, McManus, O'Brien, and Warren, with retirees Pine and Hershkowitz teaching as adjuncts), and thus we have a blend of old and new.

Our faculty continue to publish books and win awards. Joel Allen's book *Hostages and Hostage-Taking in the Roman Empire* has just been published by Cambridge University Press. Julia Sneeringer has been on leave with a Mellon CUNY Fellowship. Kristin Roth-Ey is completing the first year of a two-year Harvard



Professor Emeritus Jan Peterson, Professor Joel Allen and Arnold Franco at the Spring 2005 Honors Party.

Fellowship. Elisheva Carlebach has been on reduced schedule while developing the Jewish Studies Program at the CUNY Graduate Center. Premilla Nadasen will be on a one-year leave in the fall; she was chosen as the first Visiting Professor in Women's Studies at Brooklyn College.

One of the most gratifying activities in recent years is taking place this spring. The college is planning a restoration of the back of Jefferson Hall with a memorial to the Queens College students who served in World War II. Through the generosity of history alumnus Arnold Franco, there is going to be a special memorial to those students who were killed in the war. Arnold was eager to make this a student project, and with the help of Joel Allen, the advisor to Phi Alpha Theta (the History Honors Society), eight of our students are researching the Queens archives to find out who these students were. Richard Facundo, one of the students involved, has written about the project for this newsletter.

In addition to Richard's article and Larry Kaplan's remembrances, you will also find brief articles by Peter Conolly-Smith and Grace Davie about their first year at Queens, and an overview of Mark Rosenblum's teaching project that has drawn national attention.

Finally, let me wish you well for the coming year. I enjoy hearing from you, even though I am notoriously delinquent in acknowledging your good letters.

Frank Warren

Thoughts on Three Colleagues Who Died in the Past Year

Phil Cannistraro joined the History Department in 1996 under what could have been tension-producing circumstances. He was chosen by a college-wide committee rather than the depart-

ment, which was only asked to approve. And anyone in academia knows how protective departments are of their rights to choose their faculty. He came as a Distinguished Professor into a department where others might have felt they had equal scholarly claims. But from the very first moment he entered the office, all possibilities of tension disappeared. Phil was so down-to-earth, so friendly, so unassuming about his accomplishments that everyone welcomed him. He quickly joined the Thursday afternoon discussions in Jay Gordon's office where Professors Merli, Kinsbruner, and Syrett (joined occasionally by Warren) held forth. The department only wishes that his stay had been longer and that while he was with us, he would not have had to suffer such a long battle with cancer. But in that short period he was with us, he was one of the best colleagues we have had—thoughtful, considerate, and with a great appreciation of the humor and ironies of academic life.

There was probably no colleague I disagreed more with on political and social issues than Andy Whiteside. Royalist vs. egalitarian might best—if simplistically—describe the conflict. Andy delighted in throwing out the most outrageous opinions in the face of my liberal pieties. And yet we were good friends. He said that "creeping Warrenism" was taking over the world. I answered that I wished it were so, but unfortunately it was not. So there was a lot of good-natured banter. I think one thing that brought us together was his impatience with academic stuffiness and the rhetoric of bureaucrats. And I will always remember Andy's kindness to me and my family. When I went on a year's sabbatical to Cambridge, Andy cleared the way with introductions to friends and to Cambridge faculty. A few years later he offered us free of charge his summer home when he was going to be in Europe, and we spent a wonderful summer there. In all our visits to his summer home, he delighted my children with his wit and humor. Despite our differences, he was a good friend whose company I miss.

Paul Avrich was a Distinguished Professor in every sense of the word. He was distinguished as a scholar. He was the world's leading authority on anarchism, and the succession of his books on the various anarchists and the events associated with them is unparalleled. He had the ability to write both brilliant narrative history and insightful analytical history. Paul was distinguished as a teacher. He loved Queens College's undergraduates, and they responded with equal



With attendees at his Spring 2005 Retirement Party, Professor Leo Herszkowitz poses with Professor Edgar McManus, Professor Emeritus Michael Wreszin, and Professor Benny Kraut.

affection by flocking to his classes. He had the ability to make history come alive. Dramatizing the personalities of history, combining historical analysis and understanding with wit and humor, he educated and entertained undergraduates and senior citizens equally. And Paul was distinguished in his personal dealings with his colleagues: thoughtful, respectful, honest. When Paul retired, we lost one of the central figures in the department. We have established a student prize in his memory. Contributions may be made to the Queens College Foundation earmarked for the Paul Avrich Memorial Fund.

Frank Warren

Remembering J.H. (Jack) Hexter (1910-1996)

The historian Jack Hexter taught at Queens College from 1939 to 1957. Students who took his two-semester survey course in English History remember him as a demanding instructor (five short papers, one major research paper each term, and a long list of required readings) who had the reputation of being a low grader. These traits do not always motivate large numbers of students to enroll in a professor's class. Hexter may have preferred it that way, because his discussion method of teaching worked best in smaller classes. Perhaps this also made it possible for him to be fully available to his students, several of whom became professional historians under his guidance.

Down-to-earth in appearance and in interactions with students, Hexter never dressed with the formality that characterized his colleagues during those years. He carried his possessions in a green rucksack which he slung over his shoulder when strolling around campus, flinging it onto the desk when he arrived in the classroom. What students did not appreciate was that the green rucksack carried status along with books: it was the mark of a Harvard man.

Also, few of his students realized that this most informal instructor already possessed an international reputation as a productive scholar. Now, after all these years, a claim can

be made that he was probably the most prominent historian ever to teach at Queens College. This is not just because of his well-regarded books. In addition to those he wrote many essays, the most famous of which attacked and undermined historical orthodoxies. Hexter enjoyed taking on the giants of the profession, and some of them ended up with reduced stature after his onslaughts. He wrote beautifully, with an ironic touch. A few decades ago a European historian observed in the book review section of the *New York Times* that Europeans respected only two U.S. historians, one of whom was Jack Hexter.

Toward the end of his career Hexter held titled chairs at Washington University, St. Louis and at Yale University. But he never forgot his early teaching experience. Years after he left, Hexter wrote in one of his essays that the best students he ever had were those in his classes at Queens College.

Lawrence Kaplan, PhD
Queens College Class of 1955
Professor Emeritus of History,
City College of New York

My First Semester at Queens College: Two Perspectives

1. My first semester at Queens in the fall of 2005 coincided with my tenth year of teaching. I received my American Studies PhD back in 1996, and I've held two full-time positions prior to this one. My arrival here last September thus marked the end of a long journey, and a happy end it's been. Here I am, in a real history department with published historians, many with interests and backgrounds that complement my own, a department that values and encourages scholarship and that has (in comparison to my previous jobs) a realistic teaching load and built-in release time for junior faculty: I've arrived!

In addition to the professionalism of the department, its high standards, and the diverse interests of its faculty, I am also pleased by the teaching opportunities at Queens. It has been years since I've had the pleasure of teaching in my actual area of specialization—turn-of-the-twentieth-century urban immigration to the

United States—and it was this I was specifically hired to teach. At the same time, the department is also encouraging me to continue my scholarship.

Of course, to a scholar of immigration, teaching at Queens is an object lesson not to be missed. "Crossing [Queens] Blvd." today is, after all, the twenty-first-century equivalent of walking through the Lower East Side one hundred years ago. I find my students to be disarmingly direct and authentic, hardworking (although, alas, not necessarily at their school-work), interested (some, anyway), and eager to succeed (if not necessarily always fully equipped to do so). As my caveats indicate, I'm not wearing my "best-job-ever" goggles as I contemplate our students: their life challenges and the ways in which our public school system have failed some of them are glaringly obvious (first and foremost basic skills, but also—more troubling—critical thinking). Nevertheless, the best among them are as good as the Ivy League undergrads I taught as a T.A., and the worst are no worse (or better) than the students I have taught in my full-time gigs at two-year and polytechnic schools.

Most, of course, are somewhere in between, a perfect position from which to rise above the mean, if they desire. I have always felt that, as a teacher, it is my role to help the needy students more so than those who are already advanced. The A students, after all, will make it no matter what, and I will of course happily instruct and I hope stimulate them, write them letters of recommendation, and do whatever else is appropriate to ensure they fulfill their promise.

But it is those who are in the *middle* to whom, in great part, I dedicate myself and, even more so, those at the *bottom* of the achievement scale, some of whom are barely literate, ESL speakers, fresh off the boat or from low-income, neglected school districts, or in other ways disadvantaged. It is to their cause in particular that I am committed, because it is they who (often) work the hardest, yet reap the fewest benefits despite their often great potential. An immigrant myself (I'm a Brit who grew up in West Berlin), I understand well the limits, pitfalls, and frustrations of the American Dream, and the courage it takes to start over, whether in a new country or as a first-generation college student.

I look forward to continuing my work with the students and faculty of the Queens College History Department; I'm delighted to be on board.

Peter Conolly-Smith

2. Since joining the faculty of the History Department, I have been impressed by the "life experience" Queens students bring to the classroom. Some are parents, even grandparents. Many hold full-time jobs. They have lived in other countries, or been made worldly

simply by living in this polyglot city. And they find resourceful ways of interpreting unfamiliar material using what they already know as working people, as immigrants, and as people of faith.

I teach African History. This year I assigned *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*. After being passed down orally since the thirteenth century, an ethnographer recorded the story in the 1960s. My students were quick to notice the religious syncretism evident in the book. The characters talk about witchcraft, sorcery, and ancestral spirits, while also praising the prophet Mohammed. One student remarked that in her family they worship Hindu deities, but still exchange gifts at Christmas.

When I showed my class photographs of migrant workers living in compounds on the gold mines of South Africa, one student exclaimed: "My family immigrated to this country, but we would never have stayed in a place like that!" Although I try to dissuade my students from making anachronistic comparisons, I was glad my lecture promoted some in the class to think differently about their own family history.

Making the strange familiar and the familiar strange—this is one way of summing up the historian's task. As a teacher and a researcher, I hope to make little-understood people and practices better understood. But making the strange familiar can also mean refusing to allow perplexing, even terrifying events—like the 1994 genocide in Rwanda—go unexamined, explained away as mass insanity, or worse, dismissed as inevitable or atavistic "tribal" violence. In reality, the genocide had a history.

What about making the familiar strange? I leave that up to the reader's imagination, except to say that all of us who love history remember moments when our favorite teachers opened our eyes to things we had previously taken for granted. I now look forward to teaching at Queens knowing that my students will continue to surprise me. And I feel honored—and sometimes taken aback—to have been given the responsibility of helping my students see how parts of the world came to be the way they are today, how things could have been different, and perhaps how they still can be.

Grace Davie

A Brief Overview of the Project "The Middle East and America: Clash of Civilizations or Meeting of Minds?"

Project Origins

Two successive historical developments in the fall of 2000 and 2001 had a dramatic and divisive impact on many Muslim and Jewish students at Queens College. The collapse of Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations at Camp David with the subsequent murder and mayhem that was unleashed at the end of September 2000, coupled with the suicide terrorist attacks against the United States on 9/11, polarized our campus and compromised civil discourse. Many students on both sides became entrenched in their own *a priori* assumptions and preordained conclusions about the causes and solutions to the turmoil and carnage. More often than not, their own side was portrayed as the righteous victims and the other side as vile perpetrators.

It was in this troubling environment that I along with two other Queens College colleagues, Professors Michael Krasner (Political Science) and Jack Zevin (Secondary Education), began to develop a four-year public educational experiment, "The Middle East and America: Clash of Civilizations or Meeting of Minds?"

Dual Pillars

This project is founded on two pillars. The first is the building of an ethnically, religiously, ideologically, and generationally heterogeneous "Learning Community," one that reflects the rich diversity on our campus and in the borough of Queens. This Learning Community includes faculty, undergraduate college students (with similar numbers of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian students), high school teachers, and senior citizens. It also incorporates a broad range of American and Middle Eastern scholars, diplomats, peace negotiators, journalists, religious leaders, and military and security experts. The Learning Community has the empowering opportunity to study with and learn from "newsmakers" and "insiders," as well as from scholars who record and analyze their historical impact.

The second pillar is the development of a thought-provoking and challenging curriculum that requires each of the students to cross over the divide and "walk in the other side's shoes." This exercise is designed to examine the pains and claims of the side with which students are least sympathetic and least knowledgeable. This requirement of crossing lines has manifested itself in a number of different forms in our curriculum. Students' personal affinities are identified at the beginning of the course in a baseline questionnaire that is subsequently compared to an exit questionnaire that allows us to measure any change students may have undergone.

The first exercise requires each student to develop the most compelling case statement/national narrative for the side with which they have the least affinity. The most recent exercise required students to select one Middle Eastern media source from the other side and monitor how it covers and frames the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with particular reference to the Palestinian legislative council elections in January and the Israeli national election in March. Each student examined the other side's electoral process and its outcome from the perspective of its own media.

Observations

First, the goal is not to get students to make an ideological U-turn and join what they consider "the enemy camp." Most students enter the program with a clear sense of their "community of commitment," and they leave with their loyalties and core ethnic and religious identities intact. The *New York Times*, in a feature article about our project, put it this way: "No one has flipped positions. Then again, no one has flipped out either. Instead most students are learning." What they are learning is to eschew the black-and-white oversimplifications and live in the grey zone.

Students express this grey zone in several different ways. An Orthodox Jewish student in the program characterized it as "a loss of innocence. I now know what wrongs were done in the name of Zion and Judaism. But I also now know we were right enough that we should be able to acknowledge our wrongs." One of the



Professor Joel Allen, Prize winner Richard O'Connell with son; Arnold Franco, and Frank Warren at the Franco Prize Luncheon, Fall 2005.



Professor Emeritus Stuart Prall and Professor Peter Vellon; and Professor Frank Warren and Pinson Prize Winner Elizabeth Ingram at the Spring 2005 Honors Party.



Muslim students, who is a staunch advocate of the Palestinian national movement, was cited by the *New York Times* as saying that while he still remained pro-Palestinian, a lot of the myths he once held were dispelled. He referred to the dialogue in the course and concluded that “people stop spreading legends and start talking the truth. It is so easy to hate people on the other side when you don’t talk to them. But when you engage in discourse with them, you see they feel the way you do about your people. It’s not so easy to hate them anymore.”

The second observation is that training and integrating the high school teachers into “The Learning Community” at Queens College has filled an enormous educational void. High school teachers of AP History and Global Studies classes are searching for ways of incorporating the Middle East into their curricula that do not offend the students and parents who often have strongly held opinions and diaspora identities tied to the Middle East. Our curriculum of “walking in the other side’s shoes” offers a multidimensional approach—a kind of Rubik’s cube look at America and the Middle East from many different angles. Our show at the Godwin-Ternbach Museum this year, the Israeli-Palestinian exhibition *This Land to Me*, drew several hundred teachers and thousands of their students. This exhibition of life-size photographs and first-person narratives of a cross section of Israelis and Palestinians was a compelling introduction to one of the most enduring and complex international conflicts. The high school teachers developed educational resources for *This Land to Me* as well as other creative visual materials and resources that are all based on the exercise of “walking in the other side’s shoes”—an exercise that will lead to the discovery of a variety of different sizes and styles.

*Mark Rosenblum, Assistant Professor of History,
Director, Michael Harrington Center, and
Director, Jewish Studies Program*

World War II Memorial to be Erected at Queens College

The Queens College chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the History Honor Society, held an informal meeting in February to discuss a research project whose ultimate end is the erection of a World War II memorial to honor Queens College students and alumni who were killed in action.

During World War II many Queens College students and alumni volunteered their services to the United States Armed Forces. Unfortunately, not all of them returned. According to unconfirmed records, approximately fifty-seven students and alumni were killed while serving in Europe and Asia.

One of the fortunate alumni who returned home was Arnold Franco. Most notably, Mr. Franco served his nation during the D-Day invasion in June 1944. In honor of his fallen brethren from the college, Mr. Franco helped to sponsor a research project, which the History Honor Society conducted during the spring 2006 semester.

The goal of the project was to research via archives and other records all of the Queens College students and alumni who were killed in action during World War II. The group of Phi Alpha Theta students working on the project have now identified 60 students killed during the war. After this research is accomplished, a monument will be erected on the campus directly behind Jefferson Hall. This site will permit onlookers to read the names of the students who were killed in World War II while also experiencing the backdrop of the New York City skyline. A dedication ceremony is being planned for this fall. Please check with the Alumni Office or the Alumni Web site for further details.

Richard Facundo

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