

2017

Featured Piece

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Gettysburg College

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Featured Piece

Abstract

This year the General Editors decided to create a feature piece to show our appreciation for the History Department. We selected four professors from the faculty to answer a question about history: what figure/event/idea inspires your interest in history? Reading their responses helped give us insight into the thoughts of these brilliant minds and further help us understand their passion for the subject we all share a common love and interest in. We hope that you enjoy reading their responses as much as we did.

The four members of the faculty we spoke with are Dr. Timothy Shannon, Dr. Ian Isherwood, Dr. Jill Titus, and Dr. Scott Hancock.

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Dr. Timothy Shannon

Dr. Timothy Shannon teaches Early American, Native American, and British history. He received his BA from Brown University and his PhD from Northwestern University. His book *Indians and Colonists at the Crossroads of Empire: The Albany Congress of 1754* (Cornell, 2000) won the Dixon Ryan Fox Prize from the New York State Historical Association and the Distinguished Book Award from the Society of Colonial Wars.

I first became interested in early American history as a child. I grew up in a suburban Connecticut town that had a green and a couple of Congregational churches at its center. One of those churches had a cemetery that dated back to the mid-eighteenth century, and in my comings and goings, I always enjoyed pausing to read the names and epitaphs that were still legible on those weathered gravestones. They told me about people who had walked in my steps two centuries before, long before paved roads, automobiles, and bicycles, and that sense of time gone by gave me an appreciation for where I was from, even if my town looked like all the other towns around it.

Later on, as a high school and college student, I was drawn to the study of history because it was a subject I seemed to do well in without much effort, as opposed to math and other quantitative disciplines. I did not read much historical fiction, but I liked biography and other genres of non-fiction, even the scholarly books I was assigned in my college history courses. As impending adulthood forced me to think about ways to make a living, I considered law school, a common path for many history majors, but was also drawn to teaching. When I thought about the kind of life I wanted to have, my college professors struck me as a useful model. They certainly weren't rich, but neither did they appear to be starving, and they all seemed to enjoy their work. Of course, I had very little idea of what they actually did when they were not in the classroom (committee work is something best hidden from the young and innocent), but I was impressed by the fact that they wrote books and articles in addition to teaching their classes. The idea of writing history appealed to my creative side, and it still does. I have never exhibited much interest in the visual arts and my enthusiasm for making music far outpaces my ability to do so, but historical research and writing perfectly balance my aspirations with my abilities, and so here I am.

Dr. Ian Isherwood

Dr. Ian Isherwood specializes in modern history with a focus on the history of war and memory studies. He has taught in both the English and History Departments at Gettysburg College and serves as the academic coordinator for the Civil War Era Studies minor. He is a Gettysburg College alumni having received his BA here, he received his MA from Dartmouth College and his PhD from University of Glasgow. He is the author of *Remembering the Great War* (IB Tauris, 2017) and his articles and book

reviews have appeared in *First World War Studies*, *War, Literature and the Arts*, *The Journal of Military History*, and *War in History*.

I am going to take something of a dodge on the question of what figure/event inspires me from history. With the limitations of space here, not to mention the attention spans of readers, any attempt for me to define and discuss either the many historical figures that I find inspirational or the many events that I find moving, might seem flippant. So, I am going to withdraw my forces in an orderly way, reestablish a line of defense, and attempt to outflank the question.

I am often intrigued by the fact that so many of my students wince when I say the word ‘historiography’. The word itself is neutral – it has no inherent negative and certainly no positive connotations – but it is a word that is immediately associated with rigor, boredom, and an undue amount of stress. Yet, this word, or shall I say what it means – process – is what I find most inspirational in being an historian. Facts, figures, and events are the moving parts of history, but they require a researcher and a writer – a working and curious mind - to actually make sense of their meaning. It is that role in which the historian has the honor of playing.

The play itself has three acts: Act 1 (Setting: The Dorm Room/The Graduate Suite/The Faculty Office) the struggle with one’s topic, to create an inference/idea, to gather and read one’s secondary sources; Act 2 (Setting: The Archive) working with piles of documents and uncovering new ways of thinking about the subject based on a new reading of the documents; Act 3 (Setting: The Computer Screen) he struggle to write with sense, clarity, and purpose – crafting and layering one’s work through revision. (Note

to self: dramaturgical analogy is not the best way to make this point).

So why do I find so much enjoyment in the process of interpretation and writing? I think it is because somewhere between my eighteenth and twentieth birthdays, I grew fatigued by the Gradgrind approach to history – rote memorization and all the ‘well actually-ing’ that can come in our discipline. It seemed like this – trying to own the past by hoarding minutia - was missing the forest for the trees. Thankfully, I was taking methods at the time and through that and my senior seminar later on Eisenhower (and really all my history classes at GC), I grew to appreciate the ways in which historians interpreted and argued and I was able to get my hands dirty with documents. I learned that history was malleable and imperfect, which I found liberating.

Later, in graduate school – surrounded by brilliant professors and peers – I learned over and over again the value of humility and the limitations of my own knowledge. As professor, I have learned just how difficult it is to convey complex ideas and differing approaches with clarity to students who oftentimes want answers (and not more questions). At every level of my historical training, what has driven my interest is not just the people and events of the past, but how to interpret these things to make them seem relevant. This – the making of history from imperfect sources – is what I find to be the most inspirational part of our art for it poses a daily challenge to the way we see the past in our present.

Dr. Jill Titus

Dr. Jill Titus's work focuses on 20th-century African American history, civil rights and public history. She is particularly interested in the intersection of African American history and public memory. She received her BA from Taylor University and both her MA and PhD from University of Massachusetts. Her first book, *Brown's Battleground: Students, Segregationists, and the Struggle for Justice in Prince Edward County, Virginia* (UNC Press, 2011), was a finalist for the Library of Virginia Literary Award.

As is probably true for most people, my answer to this question is continually in flux. As a child, my interest in history was kindled by visits to Colonial Williamsburg and Gettysburg, and countless hours lost in the orange-bound pages of the *Childhood of Famous Americans* series, both of which resonated with me deeply, albeit in different ways. Ultimately, though, I think the takeaway for me was that history was made up of stories, lived by people whose lives were very different from my own, but who sometimes felt some of the same emotions that I did. I wanted to understand these people, and “see” the world they saw.

As I got older, stories continued to resonate with me, but I became more and more interested in the relationship between historical “events” and lived experience, and in the way the same event could be experienced differently by different people. I became fascinated by the idea of perspective – and I clearly remember the way it began. Having loved *Johnny Tremain*, I was thrilled to find a book called *Redcoat in Boston* in my school library. The main character was the same age as Johnny Tremain, and both books dealt with the same events, but *Redcoat in Boston* encouraged readers to empathize not with the Sons of Liberty, but with the British soldiers. I was astounded at how differently the familiar story of pre-Revolutionary tension in

Boston came across when approached from a different perspective.

Books have always played a really important role in shaping my historical interests, so the figures and events that inspire me have shifted based on what I'm reading. In and after college, I read a lot of Civil War and colonial American history, which I combined with stints at Gettysburg NMP and Independence NHP. By the time I began my graduate work in history, I was fascinated by the relationship between religion and politics in the founding era. But not long after that, my interest in modern civil rights history, kickstarted by an unforgettable class in college, reignited, and for the past 15 years, has supplied the fuel for my interest in history. It all fascinates me – the tactics, the personalities, the multiple fronts, the shifting alliances, and most of all, the unyielding determination to challenge injustice. I care deeply about this field, in no small part, because it connects so profoundly with the present.

Dr. Scott Hancock

Dr. Scott Hancock's interest focuses on the African American experience from the mid-seventeenth century to just before the Civil War. His work considers African Americans' engagement with the law, and incorporates other disciplinary perspectives such as law & society and geography. He received his BA from Bryan College and both his MA and PhD from University of New Hampshire. Some of his work has appeared in the anthologies *Paths to Freedom*, *We Shall Independent Be*, and *Slavery, Resistance, Freedom*, and more recently in the journal *Civil War History*.

In 1975, when I was 13 years old and living in Heidelberg, West Germany, when comic books were 25¢—when kid math was

still easy, four for a buck—and when the Amazing Spiderman was still Amazing, I collected comic books avidly (that’s right, we called them books, not magazines.) That spring my mother, my brother and I rode a train into West Berlin—my father, an Army intelligence officer, wasn’t permitted into East Germany because, as he claimed, his brain was a weapon that knew too much. Soon after we arrived, we took a bus to East Berlin, through the Berlin wall at Checkpoint Charlie. East German guards inspected our stuff...and took what seemed to me a sinister interest in my Spiderman comics. What I remember is that they confiscated them. It is entirely possible this is a memory colored by what came after; maybe they simply examined and returned them. Regardless, the question it generated was why? Why are they like this?

What came after seemed a stark contrast to sections of West Berlin we had seen, which were vibrant, westernized, shiny and modern. East Berlin was drab, run down, almost stifling. The few people we saw with seemed (to a 13 year-old American army brat) at best indifferent and at worst depressed. That it was a grey overcast day didn’t help. For me, the why question stuck: what had happened to produce what appeared to be two such starkly different worlds, side-by-side?

That day alone didn’t spark my interest in history. I already had intense interest in World War II, especially aerial warfare. And though I was mixed race, I never identified as white, and started developing interest in stories of Black pride and power. But looking back, the experiences of moving from a working-class, racist white neighborhood in Baltimore to a military community in West Germany during the Cold War, of growing up with an outspoken Black woman (my mother), of seeing the effects of anti-American terrorist groups targeting American military

installations, of being the child of white man who served three tours in Vietnam...that one day of moving through the Berlin wall may have coalesced a variety of questions into two: why do people do the things they do? And what might get them to do things differently?

Answering those questions requires a sankofa experience: understanding what came before in order to effectively move forward.