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## Featured Pieces

Michael Birkner

Ian A. Isherwood

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## Featured Pieces

### Abstract

This year's feature pieces were written by Michael J. Birkner and Ian A. Isherwood, both professors in the History Department. Prof. Birkner's research focuses on nineteenth- and twentieth-century America, especially the life and career of Dwight Eisenhower, as well as on the history of Gettysburg College. Prof. Isherwood specializes in memory studies and the history of World War I, and directs a digital history project on First World War letters.

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### *Prof. Michael Birkner*

Before the pandemic set in and the College administration said we'd be teaching remotely the second half of spring semester 2020, I had never heard of Zoom. As someone who has relished teaching at liberal arts colleges precisely because of the classroom vibe and the spate of extra-curricular enrichment on campus, this news was not welcome.

I quickly realized that Zooming was not all that difficult, and equally quickly determined that I would be happier without trying to add more complications like chat rooms and Moodle exams. I sought normalcy within the world of Zoom. By and large, it has worked out OK.

What has impressed me the most over the past year is the willingness of students to meet their instructor—me—at least half-way. I haven't diluted the academic requirements in my courses, though clearly have had to make adjustments, particularly on assignments. One foundation of my syllabus is assigning papers where students draw on Musselman Library's physical resources, whether in the stacks or in Special Collections.

In spring 2020 that wasn't possible. This past academic year it has been a mixed picture, with many students on campus (more so spring term), but many also studying remotely. As a result, I had to restructure my assignments to suit students in both categories. I've been fortunate working with librarians who have found ways to even the playing field by making materials available online, whether archival materials or journals like *LIFE* magazine, above and beyond the readily accessible scholarly journals accessible through JSTOR.

Contrary to conventional wisdom about college students today, history students like print. I have not heard from students struggling to obtain the works needed for class discussions, whether paperback books or article length assignments on Moodle. Their class participation has been remarkably vibrant, making my job easier.

To be sure, there are quirks involved teaching on Zoom. The classroom dynamic is not the same as it would be in person. There is less opportunity to move about the room, no opportunity (in my case) to use the blackboard or point to a map, fewer handouts, and less casual conversation before and after class about a person's status in the course or their current activities.

On Zoom, students sometimes surprise me. I've had students attend class while driving a car, eating lunch, and even flossing their teeth! Some students are uncomfortable with being on screen or have technical issues along those lines. One can never be sure how engaged they are when their faces are not visible.

The biggest impact of the pandemic on my academic life, aside from the loss of opportunities for exchanges with students, is the absence of shop talk with colleagues that made life at Gettysburg more functional, meaningful, and enjoyable.

The pandemic has hindered my scholarly work because archives I most frequently visit have closed and remain closed, up to and including presidential libraries and the Library of Congress. I was able to spend a month in Melbourne, Australia, over winter break 2019-2020, and used that time to complete research for an article I subsequently published in the *Victorian Historical Journal*. By and large most of what I have worked on has related

to essays and book reviews. I cannot wait to get back reading, in person, dead people's mail.

***Prof. Ian Isherwood***

I suppose the way to start is with how it started. The last weekend of February 2020, a week or so before things started to fall apart, I was speaking at my mother's memorial service in Florida. The church was packed and everyone was hugging and shaking hands. The day after returning to Gettysburg from her service, I was in a College van heading to NYC for a donor event that featured our digital history project—[www.jackpeirs.org](http://www.jackpeirs.org). It was another crowded event with a few hundred people all eating canapés and glad-handing. A few days after that, I jumped on a plane for London to do some research over spring break. It was unmasked on the London Underground that I got my first wave of Covid anxiety as I became nervously aware and hyper-focused on every cough and sneeze around me. Organizing my research notes over a pint in a pub later, I watched as the worldwide news went into full-blown pandemic panic. I cut the trip short out of fear of a border closing and came back to a fourteen-day self-quarantine and a flurry of emails indicating that the College had moved to remote learning.

Quarantine and remote learning. How easily we say these words now, but how odd those words were then, as we were trying to understand how our world would change. Reflecting back, it is hard for me to see through the shadow of exhaustion and make clear what has been a hazy year that has utterly pushed many of us to the limits of our emotional endurance. Still, there are three things that I think define the year for me both personally and professionally (the year has blurred the lines between these two categories as our family home has become both office and elementary school). The first is grief. For me this began at the start of the pandemic with the loss of my mother to cancer. More generally, though, that personal grief extended into a sense of general loss over this year. The second aspect is a sense that all of our worlds have gotten smaller as we have been homebound, remote working and learning, and measuring aspects of risk for all of our activities, great and small. There have been good things about this, but it has also compounded the anxiety that all of us have felt and the sadness over our lost experiences. The third theme is more positive: adaptability and resilience. At the end of it all, I can say that I did my duty this year. I have never been as busy and have never worked longer days. I don't know whether I am a better historian or not (probably not), but I do know that I learned a lot about teaching this year and have tried to help my students stick

this thing out. We are approaching the end of the most difficult year in higher education in modern memory. Many of us are landing this plane with three engines out of four lost, but the runway is in sight. It hasn't been pretty and most of us want to put the journey behind us, but we stepped up to the moment and finished the mission. And to do so in such a miserable year deserves the ultimate credit one can bestow upon the exhausted—a break.