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WKU History

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Stephen Aron

The history department wants from time to time to share with you the thoughts and comments of our visiting scholars. We begin with those of American West historian Stephen Aron, who appeared on April 4 as our Harrison Distinguished Lecturer for 2002.

A graduate of Amherst College and the University of California Berkeley, Professor Aron has taught at Princeton and is now at the University of California Los Angeles. Among his publications is the Johns Hopkins Press book How the West Was Lost: The Transformation of Kentucky from Daniel Boone to Henry Clay. At Western he spoke on “The Tragedy of William Clark and the Transformation of the American Frontier.”

With his emphasis on the continuing importance of the frontier in American history, he has often butted heads with “New West” historians, who argue that the West is a region whose boundaries are fixed in geography, not an intangible “process” through which the U.S. continually expands its boundaries. While at WKU, he sat down with our Kathryn Abbott for the following discussion.

Abbott: You spend a lot of time arguing for the importance of the “Great West,” for including the larger trans-Appalachian region in any study of the American West. Where does Kentucky fit into your “Great West”?

Aron: I continue to think that because the conquest, settlement, and statehood of Kentucky occurred simultaneously with the breaking away from Great Britain and the establishment of the United States, it set the precedent for subsequent American wests. Many of the processes of conquest, of colonization, and of consolidation that have their roots in Kentucky and the Ohio Valley generally were repeated in one way or another in places further west. In fact, in terms of wests, Kentucky and the Ohio Valley have a preeminent place in setting the pattern for later settlements.

Further, I would argue that it is impossible to think about areas simply as “wests.” American historians need to understand that what became “wests” were also “norths,” “souths,” and “homelands.” We need to have multiple perspectives in order to appreciate or understand their subsequent emergences as wests.

Abbott: You talk in a number of places about “contingent history of relations between native peoples and Euroamerican colonizers.” Too often in my history classes, students describe the events of history as “inevitable.” Can you explain why seeing history as “complex and contingent” is more valuable than viewing it as predetermined or inevitable?

Aron: This is a very difficult question to answer, but I think you are absolutely right. Students in particular tend to see history as inevitable—the way things are is the way things had to be. It seems to me that one of the things we historians need to help our students do is break free of that sense of

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inevitability, the sense that history unfolds in a predetermined manner. That is certainly the way nineteenth century Americans began to see us in terms of Manifest Destiny. We as historians must break them of the assumption that history is providentially designed or manifestly destined: for example, that it was manifestly destined that the United States overspread the continent. That’s the way things turned out, but they turned out that way because of a number of complex and contingent factors. Because of decisions made along the way, certain things fell into place from which other things then followed. But they were not themselves inevitably designed.

There is a lot of happenstance in history, and lots of alternative possibilities that we need to help students imagine in order that they may be able to grapple with the past not as a single line unfolding in a foreordained manner, but as much more complex and contingent and much less linear.

Abbott: Doesn’t that confuse people? One of the criticisms of the new historiography in American history is that it loses a sense of the national past and makes forming a national identify much more difficult. How can we as historians convince students that the multiple layers of meaning in history are something they can be proud of? How do we get that message across?

Aron: In some ways I think your question is my answer in terms of multiple layers. It is less immediately the servant of patriotic, civic interests to say that U.S. history does not unfold in a single line, as a Whiggish progressive story of the birth of freedom and liberty and democracy. That is a part of the story of American history, but it is not the only story in American history.

Until we grapple with the other stories that are part of our history, we do not really understand our past.

In some ways we can liken it to the inclusivity of peoples. If American western history is simply the story of white men marching across the continent, it is not the whole story. Until we understand the multiple peoples who vied for occupancy and opportunity on this continent, then we don’t really understand the whole history of America. Yes, it makes for a more difficult story, a story less easy to synthesize into a single line, but I hope that the more complex story people come out with is a more useful story for understanding the world in which we live, the world in which we have lived, the world in which we will live in the future.

Harrison Distinguished Lecturer Stephen Aron discusses the American West with Kathryn Abbott.
It is very popular with my students.

(3) *Lost White Tribes: The End of Privilege and the Last Colonials in Sri Lanka, Jamaica, Brazil, Haiti, Namibia, and Guadeloupe* by Riccardo Orizio, Free Press, 2001. As the name indicates, this book explores the contemporary lives of Europeans in former colonies, the remnants of imperialism. Of special interest is the section about Confederates in Brazil.

(4) *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* by David Cannadine, Oxford, 2001. The author argues that class status was more important than ethnic and racial stratification in the British Empire, ending with an engaging personal memoir. MF

Hugh Phillips has been at WKU for fourteen years, long enough to have a devoted student following, and is remembered by many of our Alums as “the grumpy teddy bear,” due of course to his bearded visage, not his personality. He is also remembered for usually being hidden behind a mountain of books. He received his Ph.D. from Vanderbilt in 1985 and arrived at WKU in 1988. Recently, responding to the events shaping the modern world, he has created a course on Terrorism; but his specialty is Russia and the Soviet Union. He recommends two books on Russia and one on Byzantium. JB

When asked which Western history teacher they recall with the greatest affection and appreciation, many Alums immediately name Francis (Jim) Thompson. He is perhaps best remembered for his lively course on Korea and Vietnam. Now retired after a career as a high school football coach and university professor, he still comes to the department daily to read, advise, drink coffee with colleagues, and in his words “flirt with the girls,” all with his feet on his desk. He recommends the following books on contemporary American politics. JB

1) *Flags of Our Fathers* by James Bradley, Bantam Books, 2000. Bradley traces the lives of the six men who raised the flag on Mount Suribachi during the battle for Iwo Jima. His father John was one of the six, one of the two who survived the war. He gives a vivid account of the fierce fighting of that February, 1945.

2) *John Adams* by David McCullough, Oxford Press, 2001. Author of the Pulitzer Prize winning biography of Harry Truman, McCullough tells the story of John Adams, the second president and his relationship with Thomas Jefferson the third. These two early friends, who became political foes, renewed their friendship in old age, wrote letters of rich philosophical content to each other, and incredibly died on the same day, July 4, 1826. FT

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Dear Alums:

A MESSAGE FROM OUR DEPARTMENT HEAD

I was thrilled to read the responses I received concerning our December Newsletter and especially want to thank everyone who took the time to fill out and return the departmental program questionnaire. I am also grateful for the individual donations that the department has received in support of additional technological equipment for classrooms, new maps, videos, and other purchases.

We have addressed in this Newsletter several of the suggestions and requests you made; and I urge you to send me more suggestions at Richard.Weigel@wku.edu. We want to do all we can to assist you in continuing to be involved in historical studies.

In addition to the suggestions made by our professors, you might want to take a look at books written by two of our graduates: Hugh Ridenour's The Greens of Falls of Rough: An American Family Biography 1795-1965 and Louis Hatchett's two works Duncan Hines: The Man Behind the Cake Mix and Mencken's Americana.

Best wishes,

Richard Weigel