Spring 2007

UA68/8/1 History Alumni Newsletter

WKU History

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc_ua_records

Part of the Higher Education Commons, History Commons, Mass Communication Commons, and the Public Relations and Advertising Commons

Recommended Citation

http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc_ua_records/3378

This Newsletter is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in WKU Archives Records by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.
Fire Fails To Bring An End To History

On the night of April 22-23, 2006, vandals broke into Cherry Hall, which by common agreement is the one most recognizable physical symbol of WKU, and set the venerable building ablaze. Several history department offices were looted and torched.

Cherry Hall was built as a W.P.A. project in the 1930s; and except for a year when it was renovated in the 1970s, history classes have been taught there without interruption for seventy years—until the fire. From May through July the Grand Old Structure languished without history; but then in August repairs were completed, and life as it should be resumed. In December we celebrated a very Cherry Christmas.

In Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, Lord Byron wrote, "While stands the Coliseum, Rome shall stand." We can say, "While stands Cherry Hall, WKU shall stand—and history in Kentucky shall not die." [JB]

Disturbing Questions About Le Tour De France

On April 4, this year's Harrison Distinguished Lecturer, Christopher Thompson of Ball State University, spoke on "Giants of the Road or Dopers! The Contested Heroism of Tour de France Racers, 1903—Present." His host Eric Reed captured the essence of his presentation in the following interview. [JB]

Reed: How did you become interested in studying the history of the Tour de France?

Thompson: In the late 1980s I was a doctoral student at NYU, thinking about working on Charles de Gaulle's foreign policy, when a French cultural historian happened to mention in passing that in the 1930s the Tour de France became the massively popular sporting event we all know today. I had actually lived as a teenager in Belgium, where cycling is the national sport and the Tour a major event each summer, so I was very familiar with the race. That familiarity, along with my professor's comment and my training as a historian, triggered a whole range of questions about how the event's social, cultural, political, and economic history might be connected to broader developments and trends in

Continued on page 2
ER: Why do you think that the French have been so attracted to Tour heroes?

CT: I argue in my book that throughout the twentieth century Tour racers were widely depicted and perceived in France as exceptionally courageous, tough, and persevering men. This image, I believe, resonated with the French because their national history since the late 1800s has been filled with serious crises and challenges to France's very survival. They understandably wished to identify with heroic athletes who took on and survived the exceptionally grueling challenge that the Tour has always represented. Other athletes in easier sports, or other public figures, simply did not embody the qualities the French have needed to survive three wars with Germany, foreign occupation, the Great Depression, two wars of decolonization, the loss of their empire, etc. I also argue that there is an important gender dimension to the depiction of Tour racers as hyper-virile heroes. For many French men, especially conservatives, such an image made an exceptionall y challenging traditional male authority in new and civil rights. Such significant gains by women obviously challenged traditional female identity in new ways, and the Tour racer's image as a courageous breadwinner provided an admittedly largely symbolic counterpoint to the new social reality of increasingly emancipated and empowered French women.

ER: Why are the methods and approaches of the "new" cultural history useful and appropriate for understanding the Tour and its significance?

CT: The "new" cultural history seeks to understand issues relating to power, social identities, and the relationships between various social groups by looking beyond the kinds of subjects political and social historians have traditionally focused on to get at these issues. Instead of studying elections, union activism, party politics, and the policies (and constraints) of important statesmen and politicians, the "new" cultural historians look at how certain events, institutions, and individuals have been publicly represented by various groups or commentators. This approach provides us with a new lens through which to examine debates about a whole range of issues relating, for example, to class, gender, ethnicity, and local and national identity. This approach also allows us to discover less explicitly political ways in which power was negotiated in a complex, modern society such as France's in the last century or so—not least by examining mass culture. Historians conducting this kind of research therefore look at primary sources long neglected by more traditional historians: for example, my research led me to look at sports fiction, postcards, press advertisements, advertising posters, television coverage and documentaries, poems, sports biographies, etc. Such sources reveal attitudes, hopes, and concerns that more conventional sources tend not to. That is their value: they allow us to gain a more nuanced understanding of a complex social reality.

ER: You explain that doping has been a part of the Tour de France since it was founded in 1903. Do you believe it is possible to break the doping "cycle" in this and other sports?

CT: I am relatively pessimistic about the chances for a meaningful victory in the campaign against doping in high performance sports. There is so much money these days in most sports—in large part because of the heightened media coverage that has pertained over the last quarter century or so—that athletes and their support staffs have the financial resources to implement increasingly sophisticated, scientific, and secretive doping programs. As a result, the anti-doping crusaders tend to be at least a step behind the dopers. That said, all hope is not lost. The relatively recent involvement of national governments in the battle against doping—both in the form of new, more stringent laws and a greater commitment to investigating and prosecuting violations—is a good sign. So too is the creation of the World Anti-Doping Agency and national anti-doping agencies. What is still needed, in my view, is far more money for research and development of new drug tests, as well as the uniformization or harmonization of national legal codes so that a doping violation in one country is also a violation in all others. That's a tall order and we are still in the early stages of such a trend, but there are signs that the responsible authorities are heading in the right direction. The key question will be whether the current momentum will be sustained or whether, as has generally been the case in the past, the political will to act will gradually dissipate. [JB]
LaFantasie Takes Endowed Civil War Chair

With the help of a generous grant from WKU history alumnus Richard Frockt and his wife Janet, the history department has established an endowed chair in Civil War Studies and chosen Dr. Glenn LaFantasie to fill it.

A native of Rhode Island, Glenn worked for the Department of State and with various historical societies and projects, and he was a published authority on the Civil War, but he was past 50 when he began his Ph.D. program at Brown University. When he graduated in 2005, despite his publishing record and having taught in several schools, he had trouble finding a tenure track job.

The humorous honorific his fellow graduate students at Brown gave him, one he accepted with good grace, inspired the title of an article he wrote for The Chronicle of Higher Education, “The Oldest Living T.A. Tells All,” on the difficulties older graduates have finding work. A few months later “the oldest living teaching assistant” landed not just a job but that rarest of all academic finds, an endowed chair.

Glenn's story is a remarkable one. Aesop would have found it fabulous and made good use of it in his collection of stories. So perhaps can we all. [JB]

Richard Weigel’s Farewell Address

Having served as head of the history department for nine years, Dr. Richard Weigel will this fall resume teaching full time and handle departmental advisement. In the footsteps—and clothing—of a retiring executive from an earlier era, he strikes a familiar pose as he hereby gives his farewell address. [JB]

It seems like only yesterday that I was offered the job of history department head on the very day Bowling Green was struck by a disastrous hailstorm that destroyed almost every roof in town and knocked out windows on the west side of countless houses. Actually it was nine years ago, and considering that I had such an auspicious start, I am fortunate that things turned out so well for the history department during my administration. My two terms will end on June 30, and I welcome a return to faculty status and the arrival of my successor, Robert Dietle.

During my years at the helm, nine faculty members have either fully retired or entered the optional retirement program and two have left the university for other professions, while eleven new full-time faculty have been hired. This coming year we welcome the addition to the department of Andrew Duffin in American West and Environmental History and Dorothy Browder in American Women’s and Gender History. One of my main challenges has been to facilitate the transition from a faculty hired mostly in the 1960s and 1970s to one hired in the 1990s and 2000s. Throughout this period the department received very generous financial support from your regular donations. In addition to helping fund annual student awards honoring Professors Stockless, Poteet, Salisbury, Thompson, and Troutman, your gifts have enabled us to bring outstanding speakers to campus, provide technology to our classrooms, and purchase videos for class use. The Frockt Family’s donation has helped establish the Center for the Study of the Civil War in the West.

We now have over 400 majors. Our faculty is made up of people who are both excellent teachers and accomplished writers. One recent book might especially interest graduates from the 1950s: Carlton Jackson’s P.S. I Love You: The Story of the Singing Hilltoppers.

Thank you so much for your regular donations to the history department. You have made a significant difference in our ability to improve classroom teaching. We continue to be interested in receiving your memories from your experience on the Hill and hope you find time to visit us in Cherry Hall.

Keeping Traditions: Weigel as Washington
A Familiar Face
A New Head With

Robert Delele

Robert Delele was the new head of the History Department since 1991. His appointment means the new head has a familiar face. Robert Delele has been a member of the faculty since 1989. He is known for his expertise in the field of Russian history and his contributions to the department. He replaces Richard Wegel, who has been the head of the History Department for ten years. Wegel is a well-respected scholar in the field of modern European history. His replacement is expected to bring new perspectives and ideas to the department.