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WKU History

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Grand Ole Uproar Over Witches

On March 2 Professor Erik Midelfort of the University of Virginia delivered the annual Harrison Lecture on the eternally fascinating subject of witchcraft. He focused his presentation by posing a crucial question: "What was so 'Great' about the Great Witch Hunt?" Afterward his host, Beth Plummer, discussed the topic with him.

BP: How did you become interested in the German witch hunts?

EM: My interest in German witch hunting stemmed in part from an undergraduate paper I wrote (long, long ago) on 17th-century English witchcraft theory, a paper that focused on Joseph Glanvill, who tried to use "empirical studies" to verify and justify belief in demons and witchcraft. But since there was an abundance of studies on English witchcraft and I was fluent in German, I decided to study witchcraft in a German setting. The pieces came together during graduate school at the University of Tübingen in the middle 1960s.

BP: Why has the topic of the witch hunts been so popular among scholars in Germany and the United States?

EM: Witchcraft trials generated huge amounts of records, piles of hitherto unstudied trial documents, judicial opinions, medical opinions, theological opinions, pamphlets, sermons, treatises, etc. So these trials became a way by which different sorts of historians could gain access to aspects of the past that had remained very obscure. Village historians could look into village social conditions. Women's historians could examine aspects of gender relations. Medical historians could see the impact of newer medical theories on the ordinary beliefs of doctors and patients. Legal historians could study the impact of torture on trials and the effort to reform judicial practice so that the innocent might be better protected. And of course religious historians, both Protestant and Catholic, could look at the trial documents to find out whether reform proposals were having any impact on the village level and whether the inflamed religious rhetoric of the 16th century was influencing the pursuit of "evil" in all of its forms. By the late 17th century, many people, at least among the learned, began to doubt whether the devil could actually have the effects in this world that witchcraft theory declared they did. All of this seemed very promising to those of us, not just in Germany and America, but also in Italy, France, and Britain. We were trying to create a more integrated history, one that would look more like historical anthropology.

BP: In your talk, you suggested a shift in the study of witch hunts from a focus on widespread "panic" to a focus on smaller instances. Are scholars doing this kind of work?
EM: The best scholarship that focuses on the smaller trials and tries to downplay "panic" comes from countries where those large chain reaction trials never did amount to much: Finland, the Netherlands, Italy. There is the work of Marko Nenonen in Finland, Willem de Blécourt in the Netherlands, Rainer Decker and Ruth Martin in Italy. So the push is coming from the periphery around the lands of the "great" witch hunt, and slowly we are recognizing that even the central regions were less panic stricken than we once thought.

BP: How has the history profession in general changed during your career?

EM: It has changed in some very obvious ways over the last 40 or 50 years. Women are now much more commonly accepted in academia, and topics in women's history have become main stream. One does not need to become politically or ideologically committed in any way to do a study of "women and witchcraft," and that's a big change from 1965.

Another change is the "linguistic turn," that process by which historians along with other scholars in the late 1980s became more concerned with the "dis­course" about a subject and less convinced that they could capture the social "reality" of the past. Historians have resisted this change more than scholars in literature or anthropology, but the impact on the history profession is unmistakable. We rarely find "pure social history" anymore. Instead, most of us recognize that all of human reality gets filtered through the cultural and linguistic lenses provided by our particular setting (parents, pastors, teachers, friends, neighbors), and therefore it's just as important to see what something means as it is to say "what it actually was."

Still another change for early modern European history specifically has been the proliferation of detailed studies of local conditions, micro-histories, and of the interactions between elites and ordinary people. When I was starting out, the assumption was that we needed broad, general accounts, but for the past 25 years it has appeared that there may be more to be learned from more focused studies that depend on detailed records of some local event or local chain of trials.

One thing that has not changed: historians still try to communicate with a broad public of general readers, and sometimes we succeed. This makes the history profession more concerned with telling stories and with avoiding specialist jargon than some of the other fields in academia (I will refrain from naming horrible examples).
New Faces Adorn the History Department

The history department can boast of several new faculty members. With these photographs we introduce Dorothea Browder—our U.S. Women and Labor historian, Marc Eagle—our eagle eye on Latin America, and Chunmai Du—our Asian specialist, still apparently on the boat coming over.

History Department Marks Lincoln Bicentennial

History faculty members participated in a number of events marking the bicentennial of Abraham Lincoln's birth. Here Glenn LaFantasie, Frockt Professor of Civil War Studies, addresses a luncheon in Lincoln's honor at the faculty center.

JAMES D. BENNETT 1926-2009

On March 21 former history professor Jim Bennett died. Many of you who were at WKU during the 60s through the 80s will remember his courses on the American West. A graduate of Centre College, Texas Christian University, and Vanderbilt, he taught history in a Kentucky high school, a Texas junior college, and for over 30 years at Western. Interment was in his hometown Calhoun.

Alcohol Brings History and Biology Together

We are breaking new ground (also crushing grapes and heating malt) with a course called A Cultural History of Alcohol. Working with the department of biology, Drew McMichael is using his considerable knowledge of the subject to enlighten Honors students. The course has attracted plenty of customers and promises to improve with age.
Greetings From the Top of the Tree

Greetings Fellow Historians:

The History Department has enjoyed a good year in spite of difficult budgetary times. The generosity of our alumni allowed us to continue our student tutoring program for Western Civilization classes. Alumni support also helped make possible the Thirty-fifth Annual History Contest for Middle and High School students. This year's contest was held on March 27 with over 450 area students participating. This year's Senior High World History winner, Ben Raynerd, is a student from St. Xavier.

This past fall the department was awarded a grant to transform one of our classrooms into a student success center with a small computer lab and an array of audio-visual equipment. When completed, the center will house our student tutoring program as well as provide needed space for small seminars and student presentations.

My predecessor Richard Weigel has won the Potter College Award for Advising. Congratulations to Rich for this well-deserved honor. Thanks again for your support. Stop by and see us sometime!

Robert Dietle