THE VIEW FROM THE CHAIR'S OFFICE

After nine years of distinguished and efficient leadership of the department, John Block decided to move out of the big office in the history suite. Leaving the cares of the Chair behind him, Block already appears more at ease and has a constant smile on his face. Having moved his books down the hall once again, yours truly seems to have less time for scholarship or preparing for class!

This year we have the usual strong number of majors—fifty, at last count—compared with forty-six in 1993-94. Under Steve O'Neill's sponsorship the departmental Gilpatrick Historical Society is undergoing a strong revival, with plans for parties, as well as tours of local sites, workshops, and the like. Indeed, they recently sponsored a showing of "Schindler's List" which filled Daniel Recital Hall.

All of us were saddened when Jim Smart announced his early retirement for the end of this academic year. Like Block, Smart has begun to smile more broadly and we understand has been renovating the workshop in his basement.

President Shi recently announced that his inauguration will take place on April 18 and will be preceded by symposia on Southern literature and Southern history. Alumnae George Tindall, Anne Scott, John Hope Franklin, and John Reed will participate in the history symposium. Watch the alumni publications for time and place.

For those of you who remember the shared light bulb in the office on the Men's Campus or the one telephone we had for many years on the present campus, you may find it hard to believe that we are fully computerized these days. We now have each other and colleagues on other campuses with E-mail and consult the Furman Library catalog from our offices. Rumor has it we may be getting Voice Mail soon.

A number of alumni designate their gifts to Furman for the use of the department. Please know that these are deeply appreciated. Some of you visit, and many of you write from time to time, and we share the news around the department. Homecoming '94 brought a large number of folks to the departmental drop in, and it was a pleasure to catch up with those who came. If you feel inclined to reflect on your experience in the department or offer suggestions of ways we might improve, please feel free. We hope this newsletter might jog some memories or suggestions for us, and we would be delighted to hear from you.

A. V. Huff, Jr.

BOOK REVIEWS

We thought that our alums would be interested in those books we've been reading that would appeal to generalists, so we've reviewed a handful of them for you.


Published in Britain only in July this year, this delightful series of essays should be in U. S. bookstores shortly if not already. The title immediately recalls to Furman history majors Lytton Strachey's 1918 publication Eminent Victorians. Like it, this book is not about disciples of the title figure, but rather is intended to shed light on an era. Whether Roberts' subjects are representative of the age of Churchill (1940-55), need not be argued. They are all worthy of commentary. Roberts' essays are sometimes irreverent, often provocative and blunt, and a bit revisionist. For starters Britain's present stature is characterized as an "Italy with rockets." His six essays include one on the royal family's support of Appeasement and their opposition to Churchill's stance on the eve of World War II.
Another discusses opposition to Churchill’s early wartime policies from within his own party. Still another highlights expedience among Tories as they held Churchill up to leadership in the 1950s even as the old man slipped into his dotage. Lord Louis Mountbatten’s Viceroyalty in India is examined and the author concludes he deserved to be impeached.

Of particular interest to me, Roberts writes about that well-known historian Sir Arthur Bryant. I used to caution students about Bryant’s super-patriotic bias. Roberts focuses on Bryant’s book Unfinished Victory (1940) and calls it a pure apologia for Nazism. The author’s style is lively and entertaining. His conclusions may be controversial especially to Churchill devotees. So much the better: historians thrive on controversy and reinterpretation.

Ed Jones


Hardly definitive by any measure, this is by far the best study to date of the much-maligned Empress Dowager, Hsü Hsi (Ci Xi) [ruled 1861-1908]. Seagrave shows earlier accounts to be based on a variety of dubious sources, including malicious gossip, second-hand impressions, and deliberate lies circulated by her political opponents.

Seagrave argues that the image was perpetuated and embellished by successive popular writers incestuously passing it along. One study published in 1910 influenced generations of scholars before being exposed in 1977 as fraudulent. Seagrave suggests that more favorable views of people who were personally acquainted with Hsü Hsi were ignored. Most were women: the wives of the American and the British ministers to Peking, lady-in-waiting Princess Der Ling, the American portrait artist Mrs. Katherine Carl. Using these and other sources (including an unpublished doctoral dissertation by a Chinese-American graduate student which had done much of the spade work for his study), Seagrave portrays the Empress Dowager in more balanced terms, not blameless but not diabolical either.

Seagrave was born along the China-Burma border where his father was a medical missionary. His family roots in Asia extend over five generations and his writing shows empathy and understanding as well as careful research. His earlier studies include a best seller, The Soong Dynasty (1985) about the Soong family and the regime of Ching Kai-shek in China, and The Marcos Dynasty (1988) in the Philippines.

Ed Jones


In 1938 C.L.R. James, one of Trinidad’s most eminent scholars and the tutor to Trinidad’s former prime-minister, Eric Williams, wrote this passionate, comprehensive and readable account of the Haitian Revolution of 1791-1803. Haiti’s revolution began with the Fall of the Bastille in France, evolved into the only successful slave rebellion in history, and ended in the foundation of the first Black republic. While telling a very engrossing story, and richly depicting the lives of the “great men” of this revolution—including of course Toussaint L’Ouverture—, James makes very accessible to readers of all levels the complicated interplay of French, colonial, and international history. He is able to do this in part because of his adherence to the Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution, an interpretation that, at least for beginning readers, provides an elegant, if simplistic, entree into enormously complicated events. James insists, rather convincingly, that most accounts of the French Revolution have ignored the central role of France’s colonies. Thus readers with interests in the French Revolution, French history in general, Colonialism, and Marxist historiography, to say nothing of Haiti itself, will find this book an invaluable place to start. An added attraction of the Vintage edition of this classic work is the inclusion of James’s reflections on Haiti’s history since the revolution, entitled “From Toussaint L’Ouverture to Fidel Castro.”

Tracey Rizzo


Stephen Ambrose’s huge yet very accessible study of D-Day, its thesis stated by its subtitle, recounts those enormous events so skillfully that an alert reader (“Furman history major”) should not
miss it. The book is history at its best, dramatic and passionate. Ambrose blends (with a lot of "what it’s") a careful and detailed analysis of the invasion of the grand scale seen by statesmen and generals with mostly wrenching but at times humorous anecdotes based on oral reports and written memoirs collected from hundreds of surviving participants. The operation was the largest and most successful amphibious attack in military history. Ambrose, Eisenhower biographer and military historian, is fittingly head of the Eisenhower Center and National D-Day Museum in New Orleans. For a veteran, the list of names of veteran contributors inspires a kind of awe. At least in me. Although I lost no close boyhood friends at D-Day, I lost some later, especially one of my closest—in the Bulge. Other sources, besides the usual official records, include memories of Canadian, British, French and German participants.

In historical impartiality, Ambrose gives credit to all the factors responsible for the day’s success: "What made D-Day possible was the never-ending flow of weapons from American factories, the Ultra and the Double Cross System, victory in the battle of the Atlantic, control of the air and sea, British inventiveness, the French Resistance, the creation of citizen armies in the western democracies, the persistence and genius of Andrew Higgins and other inventors and entrepreneurs, the cooperation of business, government, and labor in the United States and the United Kingdom, and more—all summed up in the single world ‘teamwork’.”

What will you find in this book? Well, all the incredible range of facts that the media, especially TV, gave us last spring and summer—some examples: the long and intensive preparation, the innovative technology including the Ducks, amphibious 2 1/2 ton trucks (the artificial harbors, Mulberries, are strangely given less attention), the clash of personalities, the patient genius of Eisenhower, the vagaries of weather (which almost blew the whole thing), the accidents which came close to signaling the event, the false intelligence plays by which the Allied high command threw off German anticipation so that the invasion was a surprise (almost but enough), coming where it did, the blunders (including Hitler’s and even Rommel’s), and heroism on both sides.

You will also find (and if you saw Ambrose on TV last June you will remember) an almost Whitmanesque hymn of praise to the ordinary American soldier for carrying the day, for making victory out of the chaos when Allied plans inevitably went wrong in the heat of the fight. Ambrose calls his book "a love song to democracy.” What was shown that day was that ordinary young men from a free society, enlisted men and officers alike, unused and even antagonistic to military discipline, were clearly superior to the tightly disciplined troops of the authoritarian Wehrmacht, who were supposed to know war, but who could not think, could not function outside the rules in which their masters had conditioned them. Even the German officers, high and low, were "pathetic," unable to act with any initiative. The Germans miscalculated, delayed, blundered in countless ways, whereas the Americans, used to thinking for themselves, were able to take charge and exploit the always unexpected accidents that mark a battlefield, even often their own appalling, dreadful mistakes. At least that is Ambrose’s theme—and if it is patriotic and didactic, who can quibble in this grim time for the Republic.

Thousands of details give the book the smack of reality. A few seemingly frivolous samples must suffice (but really nothing is frivolous in war). While awaiting the great day, American troops in the staging areas were stuffed with steak, meringue pie, ice cream and fresh eggs (fattened for the kill, as they said, with the ironic cynicism characteristic of soldiers). They were also diverted by films, games and endless marches, and given thousands of paperbacks, then new to publishing. Millions of condoms were distributed, only to find uses for safe sex indeed, with a vengeance—they kept sand and water out of the muzzles of M-1 rifles.

But what the reader will most remember are the graphic accounts of the experiences of hundreds of ordinary servicemen, often in their own words. This is a densely human book and thus sui generis history. My students will remember that I always stressed the causes of wars and rarely discussed their fighting. Well, I am an older and I hope wiser man now, and whatever the awfulness of war, its story teaches us with extraordinary presentness what humans can do, at their best, at their worst. Scholarly reviews have hardly begun to come out. But without being a military historian, I strongly suspect that Ambrose’s work will stand a long time. Read it!

William E. Leverette

“Bill” Leverette has recently published a quasi-autobiographical novel, Shooting The Limit, about an adolescence marked by the expectation of going to war. Contact the Furman University Store. $14.25 inc. s/h.
ALUMNI NEWS

Recent news of History alums. Please send us your news for the next issue of the History newsletter.

One alumnus with whom we unexpectedly made contact was through the Internet. David Spear, the department’s medieval historian, had put out a query on an electronic medieval bulletin board. Much to his surprise he received a response from a medievalist in the Washington, D.C. area. It was Dan Wages, a 1947 Furman graduate, and amateur historian interested in the Late Middle Ages. Dan’s interest in history was first sparked by Dr. Gilpatrick, and Dan recalls the importance of doing “parallel readings” for Gilly as important in honing his historical skills. He got an M.A. in history at UNC-Chapel Hill, and even started his doctorate at Columbia University. But a one-year Fulbright grant at the University of London ended up sidetracking Dan: he was lured from a professional history career to one at the CIA. During his 30 years with the agency Dan maintained his passion for history, and now in retirement he is writing articles on the Hundred Years War and doing research on the Dutch Revolt.

News of other alums we gleaned from our Homecoming ‘94 drop-in. Julie Bledsoe ’85 is working as Assistant Curator of Collections for the North Carolina State Historical Sites in Salisbury, N.C. David Ellis ’86 is Vice President of Sales Management for Target Performance Systems. Lee Fowler ’79 is doing something in Virginia, but I couldn’t decipher his handwriting. Pat Maness ’91 is teaching history to 8th graders in Rock Hill, S.C. Kirk Neely ’93 is in product development and market research at Greenleaf, Inc. in Winston-Salem, N.C. And Kent Simmons ’83 and ’94 is teaching history and geography at Harrison High School in Marietta, Georgia.

And news of other recent History grads. Tomiko Brown ’92 received her M.A. in History from Duke in ’93. After spending last year at Yale Law School, she has returned to Duke to complete her Ph.D. coursework. Tomiko hopes then to return to Yale Law School and complete her law degree. Brian Case ’92 received his M.A. in sports administration from Georgia State university last Spring. He is a member of the staff at the McCallie School in Chattanooga. Kelly Harden ’92 received her M.A. in History from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in May, passing her M.A. exams with distinction. She is currently working at Tucker Wayne/ Luckie & Company, and advertising agency in Atlanta. Gordon Jones ’84 is curator of the Civil War and Military collections at the Atlanta Historical Society Museum. His department’s exhibit “Gone for a Soldier” features the lifestyles of common soldiers, North and South, and will continue through 1995. Matt Lassiter ’92 is helping to sponsor a conference for graduate students who write about Southern history, called “Telling about the South”. Matt received his M.A. in History at the University of Virginia and is now working on his Ph.D. there. Erin Mahan ’92 received her M.A. in History from the University of Virginia in ’93. She spent last year at the University of Exeter in England on a Rotary International Fellowship. She is now back at UVa working to complete her PhD coursework. Scott Pfeiffer ’89 graduated from the U. of South Carolina Law School, and is now working for a law firm in Greenville, S.C. Laura Putney ’92 is in her third year at Harvard Law School. Stacy Stanley ’90 is a first year student at the University of South Carolina Law School.