History Department Profile: Norma Torney

Few of the students who frequent Swift Hall on a daily basis understand the inner workings of the History Department; fewer still are aware of the woman at the center of it all. Norma Torney joined the History Department as its Administrative Assistant in 1976, making her the senior-most member of the Department by one year. Ms. Torney, who was raised in the Philippines and studied in Hawaii, moved to Poughkeepsie in her 20s and worked briefly as a medical assistant before seeing an ad for a job at Vassar.

And the rest is history. For the past 30 years, Ms. Torney has practically run Swift Hall, helping students navigate course selections and declare majors, keeping extensive statistics of anything and everything related to the Department and working closely with the Department Chair. In spite of all this, Ms. Torney says, laughing, “I don’t think the students have any idea what I do.”

As it turns out, what Ms. Torney does extends far beyond her prescribed duties as an administrative assistant. With a degree in comparative literature and a background both in nursing and as an English teacher, Ms. Torney’s professional endeavors run the gamut. Currently, in addition to her job in the Department, Ms. Torney works as a freelance copy editor – a project she started one time when “somebody [at Vassar] was desperate.” Now Ms. Torney edits both for Vassar professors, such as Maria Höhn, and writers outside of Vassar. She recently edited the script for the off Broadway play, Pap Smear as well as Vassar graduate Andrew Bender’s astronomy book, SlipString Drive: String Theory, Gravity, and Faster than Light Travel. Ms. Torney also teaches American English and culture classes to corporate families in the States on temporary assignment, who have a background in the language but need grounding in colloquial usages and local customs.

If these projects aren’t enough to keep Ms. Torney busy, there are also all of the activities she does in her off time. These include tennis, squash, belly dancing and ballroom dancing (tango is her current favorite although she says she is best at swing). How does one person manage such a full schedule? “I’m hyperactive,” Ms. Torney says. “So I like it.”

~ Julia Shatz ’08
New History Courses

The History of India - Professors Mita Choudhury and Lydia Murdoch

This semester, Professors Mita Choudhury and Lydia Murdoch are team-teaching a new course, "The History of India," which examines Indian History from the fifteenth century onwards to the 1857 Revolt and the imposition of direct British rule in 1858. Several topics the course explores are the emergence and evolution of different faiths, the evolution of caste, the place of women and ethnic minorities, and the impact of trade in the Indian Ocean.

The setup of the class is different than a typical 200-level history course at Vassar, as it is primarily a discussion, and not a lecture class. Professor Murdoch explained that the seminar-like setup of the class has provided students a way of easily jumping into discussion of the various politically charged issues that arise in studying Indian History. Central to the intellectual framework of the class is the historiographical issue of how colonialism has deeply affected popular understanding of Indian history. The course examines not only how Indian history is written, but also who is writing it, and for what reasons. In particular, readings and discussion point out how the History of the Hindu religion has been shaped for political purposes and also how notions of caste have been reshaped and rewritten by the British as a way of legitimizing its colonial presence in India.

For Professor Murdoch, teaching the course has been an exciting challenge. Largely a professor and historian of the nineteenth century, it has been a new and interesting experience to study and teach an earlier period of history. The students themselves come from a variety of disciplines such as Political Science, Religion, and Biology. As always, though, there is also a large contingent of history majors in the class. This diversity in intellectual background has brought various perspectives and interpretations to the table, contributing to a very lively and invigorating class atmosphere. Students' enthusiasm for the course, and the fact that the course itself is fully enrolled, point to a strong interest amongst students for Indian history. Their wishes may be fulfilled, as Professor Murdoch noted the possibility of the college hiring a South Asian historian in the near future. Until then, though, this course effectively offers students a rewarding insight into the incredibly rich and complex nature of Indian history.

~ Ashish Patil '08

Constantinople/Istanbul: 1453 - Professor Nancy Bisaha

In April and May of 1453 the city of Constantinople was placed under siege and conquered by Ottoman invaders. Renamed Istanbul, this historic population center came to embody and define an important historical moment in its transition from the Byzantium to Ottoman Empires; a moment that continues to inform modern East/West relations. Nancy Bisaha's new history seminar, "Constantinople/Istanbul: 1453," explores the significance of this city's transformation from both Eastern and Western primary sources.
In her recent book, *Creating East and West: Renaissance Humanists and the Ottoman Turks* (2004), Professor Bisaha argues that after the fall of Constantinople, Western accounts portrayed the Ottoman Turks as "new barbarians." Her course explores how this construction shaped Western imaginations regarding not just the Turks, but Muslims in general. In order to better understand modern misconceptions regarding the Muslim East, a primary goal is to explore the roots of these misconceptions through a critical examination of contemporary texts.

Further, the secondary scholarship on this period is not fully developed though it has gained momentum over the last few years. Indeed, one of the most interesting aspects of this course is its nascence: Students are expected to explore, evaluate, and interpret this historical moment alongside Professor Bisaha and the included texts. This study can not be stagnant as it intends to create not only new understandings of history, but new ways of perceiving and redefining such understanding.

~ Nicky Grodsky ‘08

**Marie-Antoinette - Professor Mita Choudhury**

What Mita Choudhury teaches in this class may not be Vassar’s usual social history, but her cultural approach to traditional themes is also at the forefront of historical scholarship. In this class, we analyze many sources early modern social historians have ignored for years. These sources range from biographies of the queen to her correspondence to revolutionary political pornography.

As a result, we have the opportunity not just to study the life and times of the queen of France but also to talk about gender roles, narrative construction, and above all else, political culture. Marie-Antoinette represented the most hotly contested symbolic site in France during the final years of her reign. The rumors and misrepresentations of her sexual deviancy and wastefulness may have had little to do what she did every day, but they speak volumes about the political changes France went through on the road to revolution. Very much like most Americans who remember the Monica Lewinski scandal better than the more serious aspects of the Clinton administration, the French public followed the scandalous life of the queen with fascination and horror. Though few French men and women could follow the intricacies of political economy and religious division, they all had something to say about the conduct of the queen.

Political culture, narrative construction, and gender analysis fit very nicely into the study of history, but part of their appeal lies in the fact that they are not exclusive to history. Professor Choudhury’s approach is grounded in historical methodology, but it is also broadly multidisciplinary. This is apparent when only half the students who signed up for this history seminar are history majors. Students need to be open to other disciplines in every history class, but image and narrative analysis are key parts of any discussion about Marie-Antoinette. Art historians and literature majors are welcome. My hope is that this class can help demystify the history seminar. Granted, taking this class represents a huge commitment complete with a fifteen-page research paper. Still, students are meant to enjoy this kind of class and to remember it fondly. Historians like to mix some fun into their studies, and what could be more amusing than a class about this ridiculous historical figure?

~ Peter Chesney ‘08
Clark Fellowships

The Evalyn Clark Memorial Travel Fellowship was established in 2002 in honor of Evalyn Clark, an important historian who taught in the Vassar History department for three decades. The fellowships are awarded twice a year for History students to travel and conduct historical research. This winter four senior majors conducted research for their theses. To learn more about the Evalyn Clark Fellowship visit http://history.vassar.edu/fellowship.

Alison Lotto: London, UK
With the Clark Fellowship I was able to travel to London to do archival research for my senior thesis on the Children's Charter, a British law passed in 1889 that addressed child abuse. I spent the majority of my time in London at the archive of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, the organization most responsible for the passage of the Children's Charter, where I was able to look at their publications and important documents. It was also fascinating to see how the organization I was studying had changed so much since it was founded, and to talk to people who work on the same issues today. I also visited the British Library where I was able to look at correspondence between important Members of Parliament, and the National Archives, which contained some original files of child abuse cases. It was really amazing to be able to go to an archive and request a document written by someone you had been studying for months, and have the librarians just bring it to you and trust you to look a original memos and letters. It was incredible to be sitting in the British Library between someone with an illuminated manuscript and another person looking at a stack of ship's manifests and realize that you are doing similar research. Being surrounded by that many amazing documents and artifacts made me really excited about my thesis and about continuing to study history. I am really glad that I had the experience of the disappointments and exciting finds of intense archival research, and see the primary sources that I would never otherwise have gotten the chance to incorporate into my thesis.

Julia Shatz: London, UK
I am incredibly grateful for the Clark Fellowship, which enabled me to conduct archival research in London for my thesis on the British regulation of prostitution in late-19th century India. I studied at the London Metropolitan University Women's Library and at the British Library and British Library Newspaper site. In all the places, I was able to access unique sources, including personal letters between social reform activists involved with the issue, military dispatches and memoranda from generals in India to the home office in London, and newspaper editorials written by colonial subjects in India. The relative ease with which I was able to literally get my hands on letters from the 1890s still astounds me. The trip was a wonderful opportunity, not only for its direct benefit to my thesis project, but also in allowing me to experience researching in different (and more intimidating!) settings than Vassar and to experience being a part of a more global scholarly community.
Peter Chesney: Chicago, IL
The Clark Fellowship allowed me to travel to Chicago, IL for my thesis about Charlotte Corday and reports of her 13 July assassination of Jean-Paul Marat. I read French revolutionary newspapers at the Newberry Research Library, the Northwestern University Library, and the University of Chicago Library. I used their online catalogs to see what relevant texts these libraries had before I decided to go there. In the rare books rooms, I found even more cool stuff, newspapers I did not know were found in the States! Beyond the research, the trip was very fun, but Chicago was brutally cold. Despite the winter, I have decided to apply to Northwestern University for a PhD program within the next couple years. I find the city really charming and the professors at the university very accommodating. I stayed for a week in Wicker Park at an art gallery/hostel that let out several rooms. The people at the hostel thought I was crazy because I usually left at about 8 am and returned between 8 pm and midnight covered in dust and chunks of old paper. But I loved the research so much I usually forgot to eat until after the libraries closed.
Clark gives undergraduates a unique chance to experience research like a professional. I would recommend it for anyone who is considering a life as an academic.

Julia Lehman: Macas and Quito, Ecuador
With the Clark Fellowship, I traveled to Ecuador during winter break in order to conduct research for my senior thesis. My thesis is about an indigenous organization called the Federation Shuar, and the involvement of the Salesian mission in its creation. During my trip, I spent five days in Macas, a city located on the edge of Shuar territory and the site of the Shuar Federation today. While the documents I was looking for were unavailable, I did have the chance to conduct interviews with various men who had been involved in the Federation. My time in Macas was incredibly valuable because I was able to see the area and meet the people that I was writing about. I spent the rest of my trip in Quito using the archives at the Salesian University. The material I found in these archives provided me with primary sources that are unavailable in the United States, and some of which had never been used before. It was an incredible opportunity to conduct archival research, and to be exposed to such a variety of primary sources.

An Ecuadorian community, which Lehman visited with the Clark Fellowship.

Vassar History Review
Are you really proud of last semester’s history term paper? Submit it to the Vassar History Review: Journal of Undergraduate Historians and become a published writer! Submissions can be made to jushatz@vassar.edu and are needed by Spring Break.
National Endowment for the Humanities Grants
Fellowship to Professor Mita Choudhury

Last spring, the Vassar College History Department's Professor Mita Choudhury received a Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to write her next book. The NEH is a federally funded institution, which gives grants to museums, educational institutions, and individual scholars. The grant awarded to Professor Choudhury is enough for her to spend six months finishing her book. As a result, she will be on sabbatical for the 2008/2009 academic year.

The book will be a microhistory of Provence's Cadière-Girard trial and the religious controversy Catherine Cadière provoked when she accused her Jesuit confessor, Jean-Baptiste Girard, of bewitching, seducing, and impregnating her. This new work will represent the intersection of Professor Choudhury's previous work on nuns and religious life in Convents and Nuns in Eighteenth-Century French Politics and Culture and the influence of her PhD adviser, Sarah Maza, who writes about 18th-century French causes célèbres. Historical journal Eighteenth-Century Studies has already published Professor Choudhury's article on the affair, "Carnal Quietism": Embodying Anti-Jesuit Polemics in the Catherine Cadière Affair, 1731."

In her new book, Professor Choudhury will argue that the controversy surrounding this scandalous affair marked a crisis of authority for traditional ancien régime French institutions. The news of the affair disseminated very widely not just in formal publications and journals but also in pamphlets, popular songs, plays, and engravings. Reception extended across class and linguistic barriers. Printed and translated trial records even appeared in England. A minor Enlightenment figure named Marquis d'Argens converted the story into its most famous retelling: Thérèse philosophe, a pornographic novel complete with pictures (available in the Vassar library).

The public divided largely into two partisan camps in response to this affair. Pamphleteers and agitators immediately attacked the Jesuits for their outmoded values of social and political hierarchy. Neither side really won the overall debate, but twenty-five years later, the French government expelled the Jesuit order from within French boundaries. Professor Choudhury makes the argument that these were more than just religious debates; they had broader political significance.

Professor Choudhury is a historian of political culture. She is interested in how ordinary early modern Europeans incorporated politics into their everyday lives and individual identities. By looking at the trial and its public reception, Professor Choudhury will make greater claims about this controversial debate raging not just in print but also over dinner tables and in workshops all throughout France. She finds that this affair serves as an example of new and still prototypical values of citizenship and individual political responsibility. With Girard as the despot and Corday as the abused protocitoyenne, this affair paralleled greater political controversies that became more common throughout the Enlightenment and into the Revolution.

Professor Choudhury's hope is that this work will appeal to both students and general readers. It will give the English-reading public better access to recent scholarly breakthroughs in eighteenth-century French politics.

~ Peter Chesney '08
Worried about the Future? Try a Fellowship!

Fellowships offer students the opportunity to explore their academic interests through organized programs or focused independent studies in either the U.S. or abroad. Why does this matter in the spring edition of Gulliver? The submission deadlines for many of the fellowships are early in the fall semester, so students have to start thinking about fellowship opportunities over the summer. Here are some fellowships that, according to Lisa Kooperman, Director of Fellowships and Pre-professional Advising, may be particularly applicable to History Majors.

First, the Fulbright Scholarship, which fully covers tuition and living expenses for students studying or researching abroad. Vassar students have had a lot of success with this fellowship, with twelve recipients in the 2006-07 academic year alone. In fact, Vassar was ranked third for Fulbright recipients amongst liberal arts schools nationwide. Also, according to the Kooperman, JYA experiences and senior theses can lay the groundwork for Fulbright projects.

While the Fulbright is project-based, the Rhodes and Marshall Scholarships focus primarily on applicants’ academic success. Both fellowships are highly competitive and are usually awarded to students with at least a 3.8 grade point average, excellent leadership skills and community service experience. If you are able to jump through those hoops, the Rhodes and Marshall will cover tuition and living expenses for graduate study in the United Kingdom.

The Fulbright, Rhodes and Marshall are well-known scholarships, but there are hundreds of other fellowships that offer a variety of opportunities and support to knowledge-lovers. Here’s a list of other scholarships that may be of particular interest to history majors:

- **American Graduate Fellowship** – For students pursuing a Ph.D. in the Humanities while studying in the US, UK or Ireland. Provides $50,000 per year.
- **Carnegie Endowment Junior Fellows Program** – Recipients work as research assistants to senior associates at the Carnegie Endowment, a think tank in Washington D.C.. Fellowship includes a salary and benefits package.
- **Jack Kent Cook Scholarship** – Covers tuition and living expenses for students in graduate school who demonstrate academic excellence and financial need. Maximum grant available is $50,000 per year.
- **Jacob K. Javits Fellowship Program** – For students with excellent academic record and financial need who want to achieve a Ph.D in the Humanities. Stipends average around $18,000 per student per year.
- **James Madison Memorial Fellowship** – Grants up to $24,000 for students pursuing a master’s degree in History or Social Studies. Recipients must plan to pursue a career as a secondary school teacher in one of those areas.

All of these scholarships are for college seniors and recent alumni. But sophomores, there are scholarships for you, too. The following fellowships are awarded to students during their junior year of college.

- **Beinecke Brothers Memorial Scholarship** – Grants roughly $30,000 to students planning to pursue graduate study in the arts, humanities and social sciences. Must be a junior, nominated by a faculty member and demonstrate financial need.
• Truman Scholarship in Public Service – Provides funding for graduate school for students planning to pursue a career in public service.

So what is the bottom line? Knowing about these fellowships now, for junior and sophomores at least, is crucial for being a competitor for one of these great opportunities. The key is to start early – look into these fellowships over the summer, review the applications and draft your personal statement before returning to school in September. Kooperman said that she is “happy to talk to people who are thinking about applying.” She encourages all interested students to read emails from her office, set up an appointment with her, and check out fellowships.vassar.edu. She also recommends meeting with advisors because they can help develop proposals, determine the feasibility of a project, and provide invaluable advice.

So if you want to explore the world or go to graduate school on someone else’s dime, check out all of your fellowship opportunities!

~ Maryrose Myrtetus ’09

Spotlight on The Watson Fellowship

The Watson Fellowship is a yearlong fellowship that is independently designed and unique to each fellow. Watson fellows create and plan a program, which will have them pursuing something about which they are passionate for one year. During their year, Watson fellows are not permitted to return to the United States, their home country (even if that is not the United States), or any other country they have spent significant time in prior to becoming a Watson fellow. According to the Watson Foundation, the purpose of the fellowship is “to offer college graduates of unusual promise a year of independent, purposeful exploration and travel outside of the United States in order to enhance their capacity for resourcefulness, imagination, openness, and leadership and to foster their humane and effective participation in the world community.”

To apply for a Watson Fellowship, a student must be enrolled in one of the 47 member institutions, the majority of which are liberal arts colleges. The application consists of a five-page project proposal and a five-page personal statement. At Vassar, the application process begins with each interested student submitting their proposals and personal statements, along with a one-page synopsis of their project to the Committee of Fellowships, a faculty committee led by the Dean of Studies. The Committee on Fellowships then selects a group of students to interview with the committee as a whole, in the end, selecting four students as finalists for the fellowships. This year’s Vassar students have very diverse projects ranging from traveling to China to study political graffiti to traveling to Europe to study Ultimate Frisbee. Vassar’s four finalists, as well as four students from each of the other member colleges submit their entire applications to the Watson Foundation. Each finalist is interviewed in person by the Director of the Watson Foundation (always a former Watson Fellow) and finally the Watson Fellows are selected by a panel at the Watson Foundation.

~ Seth Tannenbaum ’08

2007-2008 Majors Committee
Department Intern: Julia Slatz ’08
Peter Chesney ’08, Nicky Grodsky ’08, Alison Lotto ’08, Ashish Patil ’08, Seth Tannenbaum ’08, Maryrose Myrtetus ’09

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