GULLIVER

The History Department Newsletter

“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” — William Faulkner

Professor Evalyn Clark at Home. Special Collections Ph.f6.28
Smashing History Conference a Great Success

“Yale men have long been noted for the variety and expressiveness of their slang. But even they may be outdone in the respect. An instance will suffice. There is a term in general use at Vassar, truly calculated to awaken within the ima penetralia of our souls all the love for the noble and the aesthetic of which our natures are capable. The term in question is ‘smashing.’ When a Vassar girl takes a shine to another, she straightaway enters upon a regular course of bouquet sending, interspersed with tinted notes, mysterious packages of ‘Ridley’s Mixed Candies,’ locks of hair perhaps, and many other tender-tokens, until at last the object of her attentions is capture, the two become inseparable, and the aggressor is consider by her circle of acquaintances as—smashed. The mortality, so to speak, resulting from these smash-ups is frightful to contemplate. One young lady, the “Irrepressible” rejoices in more than thirty. She keeps a list of them, in illuminated text, framed and hung up in her room like a Society poster. How,

In the name of the hogshead of batter

Devoured at each breakfast at Vassar,
such a custom should have come into vogue, passes masculine comprehension. But the solemn fact remains, and Vassar numbers her

smashed by the score. Strange are the ways of womankind!!”

A male student’s report about a trip to Vassar, Yale Courant, December 13, 1873

This report provides a colorful example of the rich LGBTIQA history that has been a part of Vassar from its very beginnings. In order to celebrate this history, and as a part of the continuing sesquicentennial celebration, Vassar hosted Smashing History: 150 Years of LGBTIQA the weekend of November 3-5. Lydia Murdoch, Associate Professor of History and Director of Women’s Studies, was a member of the planning committee for Smashing History, and explained that the event’s main goal was to call “attention to Vassar’s unique and vibrant history” involving LGBTIQA issues and fuel discussion about today’s issues. Sources like this 1873 report help to illuminate Vassar’s longstanding relationship with the LGBTIQA community.

The planning committee for this event was comprised of Vassar faculty, alumni, and also students. Three students sat on the planning committee—Cassidy Hollinger ’13, Gus Meuschke ‘12, and Jeremy Garza ’14. Student involvement signified the connection between Vassar’s LGBTIQA history and the current campus climate. Throughout the weekend, there was much discussion of today’s campus issues—with participants comparing, contrasting, and sharing experiences.

The result of all the planning committee’s efforts was a wonderful array of events, speakers, and discussions that emphasized different aspects of Vassar’s LGBTIQA history. Discussion topics included: “What is the Future of Queer Studies?”; “Activism for the 21st Century”; “Recovering Lesbian History”; and more.
According to *Smashing History*’s event description, the conference also aimed to recognize “the accomplishments of prominent alumnae/i who have distinguished themselves in service to LGBTQIA communities variously through activism, archival work and public history, the arts, community organizing and outreach, education, journalism, the law, and many other areas.” This goal was realized through the involvement of many alumnae/i, and the enthusiastic participation of students and the larger Vassar community. All involved with *Smashing History* hoped to “inspire and foster new generations of LGBTQIA students aspiring to make a difference in their communities.” This event provided a powerful example of how history can be used to stimulate thinking about current events and inspire change for the future.

-Sarah Marco ’12

During Smashing History, Anne MacKay ’49 spoke about *Wolf Girls at Vassar*, inspiring lively discussion!

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Professor Mills Leads Trip to MLK Memorial

On October 8, Professor Mills’s HIST 101: Martin Luther King, Jr. classes took a trip down to Washington, D.C. to see how what they had been learning about public history plays out in the public sphere. The students, led by Mills, traveled to D.C. primarily to visit the newly opened Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial, unveiled August 28.

The class, which has two sections (one a freshman writing seminar), is designed to introduce students to history by examining King’s life through his speeches, sermons, books, and articles. This, in turn, raises larger social and historical issues of poverty, social justice, and civil rights. “King is very much a part of the American fabric, and students think they know quite a bit about him, but they really only have a very surface understanding,” Mills says. “The course was intended to give students a deeper understanding of King.” Students also have spent the semester looking at the way in which public memory influences the way we remember King. “Going to see the memorial I think gave them a chance to see how King was constructed for public memory,” Mills says, part of the reason it was so important to him that they visit the memorial together.

The students visiting the memorial were fascinated, according to Mills, with the chance to stand in a place that saw such an important historical event. King gave his “I Have a Dream” speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial during the March on Washington in August of 1963, looking out over a scene that included the location of the present-day King memorial. The intentional placement of the King memorial so near to and visible from the Lincoln and Jefferson memorials is indicative of King’s place in history. In addition, King’s frequent references to Lincoln in his speeches and writings, examined by Mills’s classes, made the connection between King and Lincoln, in particular, very clear.

Though they briefly reflected on their feelings at the memorial, the real analysis came on the students’ return to Vassar. Upon returning, the classes fully discussed and debriefed the emotions and thoughts that arose while they walked around in D.C., soaking up history. Professor Mills plans to teach the Martin Luther King, Jr. class again next autumn, and he is hoping to be able to return with his students to the memorial. He is also beginning to conceptualize ways in which students can conceive their own memorials to King as a project to complement the class’s discussions of public history and memory. For now, however, he is very pleased with the trip and his students’ reactions. “History matters,” says Mills, “…it’s not just something that you take a class on and you get a grade and you move on, but it’s something that’s always around us.” In their visit to Washington, D.C., his students gained the opportunity immerse themselves in history that will continue to matter throughout the rest of their Vassar careers and their lives.

-Meghan Cooper ’13
The MLK Memorial, Washington, D.C.
Michelle Cantos ’11 – History Major One Year After Vassar

To the complete dismay of my parents, I did not begin to study for the MCAT and apply to medical schools after I graduated. Instead, I moved down to Washington DC to pursue my passion for foreign policy. Currently I work as a research intern for the Center for Advanced Defense Studies and I am part of the center’s Culture and Conflict Studies program. My time is spent collecting sources and analyzing their relevance to the projects of the senior analysts. It’s like perpetually being in that initial state of preparing a research paper, when you’re assessing whether or not a source is useful for your thesis. I’ve also had the opportunity to write reports for my ngo and will hopefully be published under the auspices of our political review at the end of this month. This level of reading and analysis every day makes me rely heavily on the critical thinking and writing skills I honed in Swift.

My time out of the office is spent studying for the Foreign Service Officer Test and meeting with older Vassar alums so I can gain career advice and expand my network in DC. When I’m not studying or picking the brains of older alums, I’m constantly researching fellowships and grad schools since I hope to go back for my PhD in international relations.

If I could give any advice to those still in the hallowed halls of Swift I would say that life begins at the end of your comfort zone. You may be content with taking classes that only focus on Europe during the Renaissance, but give foreign policy a shot at least once. (Vice versa for you policy wonks, history does exist before 1945!) For those of you working on your thesis, just remember keep writing and do something related to your thesis every day. If it’s out of sight, it’s out of mind and the next thing you know you’re using your thesis books as coasters/tools for squishing Vassar bugs in your TA.

-Michelle Cantos ’11
Travels with the Evalyn Clark Memorial Fellowship

In May 2011, I traveled to England in order to conduct research for my Senior Thesis on the First World War. I am examining the wartime experience of British female ambulance drivers at the front in Belgium and France. The contributions of these women to the war effort were immense, but they receive very little recognition in histories and memorials. In examining the physical and emotional hardships these women endured while serving, and the perceptions of them during and after the war, I seek to understand their complicated place in the highly gendered understandings of war work and women’s place in the war effort, and to examine why historians of the First World War have largely ignored their contributions.

The vast majority of my research was conducted at the Imperial War Museum in London, in their extensive archives. I identified twelve women who served as ambulance drivers and nurses during the war, and whose personal papers are housed in the museum’s archives. These papers included letters, diaries, postcards, photo albums, newspaper clippings, poems, and drafts of memoirs that were never published. For a week I carefully examined every scrap of paper, learning as much as I could about these incredible women. Some chose to record their daily lives in great detail (and to them I am eternally grateful) while others hid information from their parents and loved ones by writing very little. Both sets provided me with invaluable information for understanding the sacrifices these women made, and gave me the source-base required to do their work justice as I write my thesis.

Deciphering water-stained cursive handwriting in pencil from a century ago is not easy on the eyes, however, so I took breaks to drink tea in the Great Hall and explore the Museum and its many exhibits on both World Wars. There were several exhibits relevant to my topic on display, allowing me to learn a great deal more than expected. The Museum also has a number of interactive exhibits for children, so I particularly enjoyed listening to toddlers beg their parents to “please let us experience the Blitz!!!”

When I did make it out of the Museum, I traveled to several memorials throughout the city of London, including the Cenotaph, the central British memorial for the First World War and the site of every Armistice Day ceremony, and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Viewing these memorials allowed me to better understand the importance of physical representations of grieving in forming our memories of the war, and the nuanced role of historians in contributing to the commemoration of war.

The Evalyn Clark Memorial Fellowship allowed me to conduct extensive primary source research that was absolutely necessary to my thesis, while also giving me invaluable insight into the realities of archival research and a set of experiences that fundamentally altered the scope and depth of my thesis. I am grateful for this opportunity, and hope many more history students continue to have access to this resource.

-Hannah Groch-Begley ’12
Double Trouble: History Seniors Write Joint Theses

For most history majors, the senior thesis is the capstone experience of their Vassar education. Not only does the thesis represent the culmination of four years spent developing research and writing skills, the common set of requirements and deadlines makes it a unifying experience for senior history majors. Some students, however, double major in history and another discipline, and elect to write a joint thesis. For Lillie McDonough, who graduated in 2011 having completed a joint thesis in history and philosophy, and Charlie Dobb, a senior who is currently writing a joint thesis in history and sociology, the experience of writing a joint thesis has offered different challenges and opportunities than those most history majors face.

McDonough decided to do a joint thesis because, as she put it, “I’m a sucker for a good project.” She was in a philosophy class that was discussing the role of parable in philosophy when it occurred to her that folklore could be seen as a kind of parable or a communal metaphor. She came up with the idea for a thesis that would allow her to explore how folklore was used to communicate common experiences in both medieval and late nineteenth century Germany. This idea, McDonough decided, could not be contained by either department; it needed both the philosophical theory and the historical grounding. Philosophy would pose the theoretical questions, and history would serve as the testing ground for those theories.

Dobb similarly decided to do a joint thesis because he thought that the two departments he was working in—history and sociology—paired well together. “History inherently incorporates sociology,” he said, adding that some of the most compelling works of sociology he has read have a historical component. He acknowledged that sociology required him to choose a more contemporary period of history to write his thesis on, since it would be difficult to incorporate sociological research into a more remote time period. Even so, he felt he had plenty of options open to him in choosing a topic, and decided to write about the founding and restructuring of General Motors. Dobb believes that one of the biggest challenges in writing a joint thesis has been using sufficient anecdotal and archival research to satisfy the history component of his thesis. However, Dobbs also believes that “primary sources are like the data used in sociology”, which has allowed him to integrate the two disciplines’ methodologies into one thesis.

Both McDonough and Dobb have had some challenges navigating the different deadlines and requirements imposed by their two departments. McDonough described this process as being “initially a total headache” because the deadlines for the philosophy thesis were a month earlier than the ones for the history thesis, meaning that she was essentially having to do “double the work, a month early.” Eventually, the philosophy department allowed McDonough to use the history department’s deadlines, which made the
process easier. Sociology, unlike philosophy, requires a thesis for its majors, and is currently exploring a more structured thesis process. Dobb attends a thesis class for his sociology thesis once every two weeks, making him feel in some ways more involved with the sociology component of his thesis. The sociology department’s deadlines are earlier than the history department’s, helping Dobbs feel ahead of the game when he has a history deadline coming up.

McDonough and Dobb were ultimately glad that they decided to do joint theses, in spite of the challenges. McDonough believed that incorporating both history and philosophy into her thesis allowed her to discuss her topic in a more interesting way and approach it from a variety of angles. Dobb feels that both departments have been very supportive of his project. While writing a joint thesis provides a different experience than that of writing a traditional history thesis, the experience is no less rewarding.

-Eliza Blanchard ’12

Senior Thesis Workshops with Carol Lynn Marshall

Research librarian Carol Lynn Marshall has held wonderful workshops this semester to help history seniors as they navigate the thesis process. These workshops focused on advanced research techniques specifically useful for history thesis students. Topics have included: bibliographies, advanced use of WorldCat and other databases, & much more.

We wish her lots of luck with her new “project” this winter- a baby due in January!
The History Majors Committee, Fall 2011
Eliza Blanchard ‘12
Meghan Cooper ’13
Hannah Groch-Begley ’12
Sarah Marco ’12
Molly Turpin ’12

And thanks to Michelle Whalen, Leslie Offutt, and the History Department Faculty!

Keep in mind…
The History Majors Committee will be holding elections again in the spring. Think about nominating yourself or a history major friend!!