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The Study of History: Graduate School

THE STUDY OF HISTORY: GRADUATE SCHOOL

As a part of our special section on 'The Study of History,' the *Review* conducted e-interviews with several graduate students in the history department. The students, whose studies encompass a wide range of historical concentrations, are at various stages of their graduate careers. All the students received the same questions proposed by the Editorial Board pertaining to their current research, undergraduate careers, and the transition between the two levels of study.

Andrew Berns: A fourth-year graduate student studying Early Modern Jewish History, European Intellectual History 1300-1600, and Medieval and Modern Jewish History.

Marie Brown: A second-year graduate student studying the Modern Middle East and North Africa, Feminism and Nationalism in Egypt and the Sudan, and Comparative Representations of Women and Gender.

Anton Matytsin: A first-year graduate student studying Early Modern Europe, European Intellectual History (1600-1950), and Imperial Russian History.

John Roper, Jr.: A third-year graduate student studying Modern Germany (1786-present), European History (1750-1990), and Cultural and Intellectual European History (1750-1950).

Penn History Review: *What is the subject of your current research and/or dissertation? Under which faculty members are you studying?*

Andrew Berns: My dissertation deals with the study of Jewish antiquities in sixteenth-century Italy. I'm particularly interested in the intersecting and overlapping ways in which Christian and Jewish scholars investigated the material culture of the classical Jewish past. Professors David Ruderman and Ann Moyer are supervising my work.

Marie Brown: Broadly, I study the modern Middle East and North Africa. My current research focuses on women's activism in the Sudan in the mid-twentieth century. I am working with Eve Troutt Powell and Kathleen Brown in the History Department and Heather Sharkey in the Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations Department.

Anton Matytsin: I do not have a dissertation topic in mind yet, however I have been working on two small projects. First, I wrote a paper about seventeenth-century views of life on other planets. I considered one "clandestine" treatise that remained unpublished for over 70 years in the context of better known works by René Descartes, Christiaan Huygens, and Pierre Borel. My second project, which I am doing for the required 700, is in the works. I am exploring the debates about epistemology and the relationship between mind and body surrounding late Cartesianism in the 1680s and 1690s. As it turns out, Descartes's late disciples (I am working specifically on Pierre-Sylvain Regis) significantly modified his dualism. My graduate committee is composed of Alan Charles Kors, Ann Moyer, and Peter Holquist. I have also studied with Antonio Feros, Jonathan Steinberg, and Kathy Peiss, who teaches the required 700 course.

John Roper, Jr.: I study the *Lebensreform* movement in Germany, from 1890 to 1933. Participants in the movement sought to strengthen the physical and spiritual character of individual Germans, and ultimately the young German nation, by promoting lifestyles that offered greater harmony with the natural environment. Through competing artistic philosophies and political ideologies, they promoted a variety of alternative lifestyle practices (including nature cures, vegetarianism, sun bathing, and nudism), defined new gender roles, and challenged traditional notions of sexuality. I am particularly interested in how reform movement concepts transformed from conception in rural, utopian, and communal settings to implementation in school curricula, youth programs, and political rallies in urban centers such as Berlin. [I study under] Thomas Childers (Advisor), Jonathan Steinberg, and Warren Breckman.

PHR: *Where did you study undergrad and what sort of research experiences did you have as an undergrad?*

AB: I went to Reed College. At Reed there was a heavy emphasis placed on research and writing. In our junior year we had to write a seminar paper of about 30 pages; mine was on the biblical criticism of Spinoza. Addition-

ally, every senior at Reed has to write a thesis. It is expected that students seriously engage primary sources, and make a good faith effort to master the relevant secondary literature in their chosen field. Both projects were excellent preparation for graduate school.

MB: I attended Bryn Mawr College [where] I majored in History. All history majors were required to write a senior thesis based on original research. This was a great learning experience and I really got a taste of what original research entails. I also studied abroad in Egypt for a semester which provided me with invaluable lived experience.

AM: I did my undergrad here at Penn in Intellectual history. When I was writing my thesis, I was lucky to receive several grants to go to Paris for three weeks and research the manuscripts and marginalia of a prominent fideist and philosophical skeptic Pierre-Daniel Huet. You would be surprised how many resources are available and how few people apply!

JR: [I attended] Brown. I took a broad selection of courses from a variety of departments, including several biology and psychology courses that emphasized mathematical modeling and behavioral studies. As my interest in history and cultural studies grew, I was able to draw on a variety of methodological approaches in research seminars. Studying in Germany during my junior year and learning to navigate library systems and archives that seemed vastly unfamiliar to me, especially in comparison to the open stacks of U.S. college libraries, broadened my research experience.

PHR: *When did you decide that you wanted to go to grad school?*

AB: I decided that I wanted to go to graduate school almost by accident. During the summer after I graduated from college I worked as a research assistant for a professor in the religion department. One day, while helping him craft course syllabi, prepare summaries of articles and book chapters, and track down obscure references to arcane texts, I looked up from my work and suddenly said to myself “I could go into this profession.”

MB: While still an undergraduate I planned on attending graduate school. However, it wasn’t until I had graduated and was out working in the “real world” that I realized how much I was committed to academia.

AM: I always enjoyed school for its own sake, but I started to seriously think

about graduate school during my junior year, when I started to work on my thesis.

JR: Two years after completing my undergraduate studies.

PHR: *Why did you choose Penn and how did you pick the professors you wanted to study under?*

AB: Choosing Penn was almost a no-brainer. I'm equally interested in early modern history and Jewish history, and the faculty resources in both are unparalleled in the United States. I knew that at Penn I would have the opportunity to meaningfully engage post-classical Jewish thought and also fifteenth- to seventeenth-century European intellectual and cultural history.

MB: While the reputation of a school is important, it is even more crucial that you are well matched with your professors. Graduate work is really a collaborative effort between yourself and your advisor. It is important to consider not only common research interests, but whether you and your advisor have compatible personalities. Also consider the location of the school; after all, it will be your home for quite some time. Penn has the right combination of resources and personalities that meet my needs.

AM: Penn seemed to match my interests most closely. I really wanted to do a field in intellectual history and Penn has some of the best faculty members in the field. I knew many of the professors from undergrad, but there were plenty of faculty I had not had the chance to work with. My undergrad advisor, who is also my graduate advisor, also had a lot to do with my decision. I knew he was an excellent person to work on independent projects.

JR: While the research interests and specialties of potential advisors formed an essential starting point in the application process, it was important to me that I also find a department with a collegial atmosphere where I could envisage myself as a student for at least five years. My advisor and the Penn Department of History faculty have always been generous in not only offering their expertise, but also imparting the enthusiasm and spirit of inquiry that has sustained them in their own careers. I also selected Penn because I was impressed with the dedication the library staff and their commitment to supporting research.

PHR: *Did you take time off between undergrad and grad?*

AB: I did take time off between college and graduate school. I spent several months traveling (mostly in Russia), doing somewhat menial labor (in rural Washington state), and working as a concierge in a large, multi-lingual, split-identity apartment building in Cambridge, Massachusetts. During quiet hours I was able to do a lot of reading while ignoring my official duties.

MB: Between college and graduate school I took two years off to work at a non-profit organization.

AM: No I did not. I decided to go straight through since I was fairly certain about wanting to keep working in History.

JR: For three years I worked in the Brown Office of International Programs as a study abroad advisor. It was an important opportunity for me to experience a “real world” office work environment.

PHR: *Did you acquire any specialized skills (language, methodological, statistical, etc.) before entering grad school?*

AB: I did study several languages as an undergraduate and during my year off, which provided me with a foundation for my graduate work.

MB: I did not acquire any specialized academic skills between undergrad and graduate school, but I would recommend that anyone studying the humanities pursue relevant language studies as far as possible. (Penn’s graduate History Department requires reading proficiency in two languages other than English).

AM: I had to learn Latin in one of my summers of undergrad.

JR: [Working at Brown] offered the benefits of working at a higher education institution: I could attend classes, continue language study, and pursue professional development opportunities—all while continuing to immerse myself in a campus environment and allowing me to observe more closely some of the realities of a career in an academic setting.

PHR: *What is your opinion of post-bac programs?*

AB: I don’t have much to say about post-bac programs, as I’ve had very lit-

the contact with students in these programs. Given how competitive graduate admissions have become, especially in departments with high technical competency bars (such as classics or physics, for example) I understand their usefulness.

MB: I'm not very familiar with post-bac programs. But, I think the most important thing students can do after graduation is gain experience of any kind in a non-academic setting. Admission committees look very highly on those who have outside experience.

AM: I do not know much about them.

PHR: *What advice would you give to current undergrads considering grad school?*

AB: The first piece of advice I'd give aspiring graduate students is to take time off—and it doesn't really matter what you spend it doing. My sense of grad students who come straight out of college is that they wish they had taken a break at some point. I'd also advise those thinking of studying non-American history to try to develop the requisite languages before beginning graduate school. Also, living in or spending serious time traveling through whatever country (or countries) you're thinking of studying will be invaluable preparation for future study—as well as a rewarding experience in and of itself. Finally, I'd remind prospective grad students that graduate school is as much about professional training as it is about living the life of the mind. While it's certainly important to care about ideas, love reading and writing, and thrive on debate, it's equally important to give serious thought to whether or not you'd like to become a professional historian.

MB: Graduate school is a major commitment; it is not for the faint of heart. I firmly believe that taking time off is the best way to learn about and define your professional goals and explore your research interests informally.

AM: I suppose one question would concern whether one should go to graduate school or not. You should make sure that you are really passionate about the discipline and topics you anticipate studying. There is a lot of work ahead, and the effort is only worth it if you enjoy what you are studying. The further you go, the more driven and organized you need to be in order to finish your projects. A graduate program in the humanities is nothing like

college: you need to do a lot of independent work. A good way to test out your abilities and your desire to go into a Ph.D. or a M.A. program is to write a thesis or a large independent study paper. So, when you are deciding whether to go to school or not, do not rush to make a decision. Take time off if you are unsure, because you will be making a fairly significant commitment. Talking to some graduate students, both at your potential schools and here at Penn, may reveal a lot of new things that you might not expect to encounter in graduate school. When choosing a graduate program, you should think of several faculty members you could potentially work with. Reading some of their work will probably help you decide if you would like to study with them, but contacting professors directly will also help.

JR: Take the time to consider evaluate both your research interests and motivations. The first couple of years after graduation can be a challenging transition, whether you find yourself continuing your studies or working full-time. Reflecting on your motivations will not only help you determine when and how to continue your education, but also sustain you if you decide to complete a graduate program. Be sure to engage with professors and graduate students in candid and frank conversations about their own experiences and considerations.