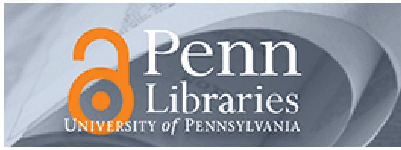

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Faculty Interviews

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FACULTY INTERVIEWS

This issue of the Review will introduce a new feature to the journal, the faculty interview. These interviews offer an opportunity for undergraduates to receive scholarly insight and advice from prominent members of the faculty as well as serve to facilitate further interaction between students and professors. Dr. Zuckerman and Dr. Kropp were selected for the inaugural installment of this feature because each specializes in areas of history that directly relate to the student essays published in this issue. The interviews were conducted separately, but each professor answered the same questions proposed by the Editorial Board.

Dr. Michael W. Zuckerman, Professor of History: Dr. Zuckerman teaches courses in popular culture, national character, human nature, and religion. In the Spring 2008 semester, he will teach one of the Senior Honors sections (HIST401) and American National Character (HIST443).

Dr. Phoebe S. Kropp, Assistant Professor of History: Dr. Kropp teaches and studies nineteenth and twentieth-century American cultural history, public memory, environment, race, and the West. In the Spring 2008 semester, she will teach US History 1865-present (HIST021) and the major seminar Mexican-American History (HIST204).

Penn History Review: *What is the subject of your current research?*

Michael Zuckerman: As much as anything, I'm working on Ben Franklin. I had been working on Franklin anyway, but suddenly [last year, during the 300th anniversary of Franklin's birth,] I was doing something on Franklin every week for four months.

Phoebe Kropp: Currently, I am looking into the history of camping. So, not organized camping, but rather individualized auto-camping and its history reaching back the 19th century. I'm interested in a variety of angles with it, both gender roles and the family as well as how people understand

and interact with nature through camping. A lot of what I'm doing is looking at how leisure camping became the norm for camping, when in fact it rests upon a larger history of camping as an ordinary travel mode. So I go back into the 19th century and look at who camped and why they camped, for all different reasons. Not until the late 19th century did people camp for fun, so why did this become so meaningful whereas camping out of necessity became suspicious?

PHR: *Why did you become a historian?*

MZ: Well, I didn't entirely decide to become a historian. I thought that academic life was going to leave me with an enormous amount of free time to be a novelist and pay me money to do things that were fun anyway. I discovered both that it was a full-time job and that I loved the things I could say as a historian—I didn't need to write novels.

PK: It's hard to say—I really like to write and I always liked to do research and get buried in the archives. That's a really hard question at this point to go back to—there was no pivotal event or 'ah-ha' moment that this is what I should be doing. If I had to, I would trace it back much further than college—it wasn't Oregon Trail for me, but back to something like an 8th grade trip to Washington, the kinds of things you do in elementary and middle school that get you involved in history through other means and it just sort of continued from there.

PHR: *Which historians or books have most influenced your work as a historian?*

MZ: This goes back a long way. I think, for me, the most influential figure was my teacher in American Civilizations here as an undergrad, Murray Murphey. As for books that mattered to me,…maybe something like Spengler's Decline of the West and a lot of things that were not history—I didn't intend to be a historian anyway. I got hired by a history department and had intended to be interdisciplinary. A lot of social scientists like Robert Merton. Maybe among historians, a book that I adored was Philippe Aries's *Centuries of Childhood*. For me, the most exciting things are books that make connections across disciplines. Another enormously influential book for me is *Man's Rage for Chaos* by Morse Peckham, who was a teacher of mine as an undergraduate.

PK: One of the earliest, and this is an older text from when I was in high school, was reading Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, which really introduced me to the idea that history was more than a record of facts and dates, the interpretive possibilities of history, and that there were many layers to history in terms of the sense of what happened as well as the sense people made of what happened, the meaning they attached to it, and the political uses of those meanings in all the intervening years. Also Mike Davis, *City of Quartz*, a book about the history of Los Angeles. Mike Davis is a very non-traditional type of scholar and has even been accused of some sloppy research, but he was very provocative and did make me think about the history of Los Angeles and of modern culture in completely new ways. He is certainly very astute about power and interpretations of meaning on the public landscape and very careful to notice things around him and then read the history into it and I really appreciated that. I read it early on in graduate school and that made an impact and also made an impact to do your research right. The other book that I identify with, maybe a little less provocative but certainly very influential, is Lawrence Levine's *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, which is a book of cultural history and I see myself as a cultural historian, again a book I read early in my graduate career that very much influenced me in that direction. For American historians, it has very much advanced thinking on culture.

PHR: *Why do you feel that the study of history is relevant and important? What relevance do you think the modern historian has today?*

MZ: I think anything that takes people out of their immediate present is relevant. I think it offers people who study it and who read it the chance to enlarge their life and the chance to see that the things that are normal here are not natural, are not universal Our particular came into being and will probably go out of being. I think history is particularly wonderful that way because history not only offers perspectives of other places, which a lot of other studies do, but of other times in history. History as much as anything, by implicitly saying that this too shall pass, manages to invite us to think about what it is right now before it passes, how it constricts us, how it enhances us and how what we are is different from what people have been before.

PK: The modern historian has a lot of different places, the halls we inhabit are only one of many. Academic historians are only one breed of people that make meaning out of the past. There are different brands of historians—whether its public historians, those who work in museums, writers of his-

torical nonfiction and fiction. Hollywood certainly tells history—we can debate about accuracy, but they certainly have a public role. In terms of what academics can and can't do, I think that academics are at their best when they are provocative and when even if the 'public' may not agree with them, they provoke thinking in new ways and make people aware of things perhaps that have been forgotten. Take, for instance, the ongoing controversy with the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia. The new Liberty Bell pavilion was built over, as it was discovered, the President's House, where Washington presided when he was President in Philadelphia in the 1790s, in part over the slave quarters. A controversy erupted among between the National Park Service and the African-American community about how this was going to be incorporated into the display and how the President's House was going to be memorialized. Academics had a large role to play, in forming a committee, to impress the park service to deal with this issue and bringing it up in the media to make it a force so that the community could get involved. They were written off as radicals in a lot of ways, but they helped create the possibility for this discussion, this dialogue to happen, even though the controversy itself hasn't been resolved yet in any perfect way. So, academics are provocative in the public and in the classroom, writing histories. Those are my favorite books, when you read something that you may not agree with but is interesting and raises new questions.

PHR: *Are there any area/epochs of history you think are glossed over in high school/college education, and if so why?*

MZ: I don't think it's ever a matter of gaps, I don't think it's a matter of coverage, it's how you cover what you cover. Clearly, we teach students in American history, which is what I do, who have had American History three, four, five times over and it seems to me that many have had a very shallow education in American history. What they've gotten is not all that worth getting in a lot of cases. So for me, it's never a matter of what's covered, it's a matter of how much insight, how much curiosity, how much passion they've picked up. If they've picked it up studying the same damn thing over and over again, that's okay, and if they've never touched vast swaths of human history but have a drive to understand how humans have been in the past, that's fine with me.

PK: I teach the second half of the U.S. survey and one thing I've noticed from a lot students who have taken it, and anecdotally from others, is that part of the reason they are there is because in high school their teachers only

got up to World War I or only got up to World War II, that they ran out of time at the end of every year. They covered the American Revolution and Civil War every year, but ran out of time each year to discuss the bulk of modern US history, huge chunks of the 20th century, which is kind of shocking to me, not because I don't think questions of the 19th century are still relevant, but I do see that as a gap. Even if high schools are better in teaching methods and teaching students to think about history than a generation ago, with knowledge of not just facts and dates but also how to interpret ideas of history,…but students don't have a handle on the role of the U.S. in the modern world, and I think history shouldn't and can't cede that area to political science or sociology—there is a history to tell there as well.

PHR: *Which currently active historians—not necessarily at Penn—do you think are conducting important research of which Penn history students should be aware?*

MZ: I guess I tend to like quirky people. There are big books that represent intriguing perspectives. Somebody here at Penn in my field, Dan Richter, has a book *Facing East*, which simply reverses, but in a highly speculative way because there isn't much solid evidence in their own voices, our conventional perspective on the colonial encounter and asks us to think about what that might have been like from the Indian point of view—if we take our perspective from the interior of the continent and look towards the colonists coming from Europe rather than always taking the perspective of the colonists invading the middle of the continent. I like books that really break new ground to a subject area that seems to be intriguing. A guy named Elliott Gorn has an article that I adore on dirty fighting on the Southern back country frontier in the 19th century that just seemed to me so rich and so delicious. There's a guy who's written a terrific book about night and nighttime and sleeping in early modern Western culture, discovering that people didn't sleep through the night. First of all just the whole idea of studying nighttime, but particularly what he discovers is that people didn't sleep through the night. They routinely got up in the middle of the night, maybe for a little bit, maybe for a couple of hours—they puttered away at some kind of work, they made love, they talked, they went for a walk—they called it first sleep and second sleep. He found widespread evidence that we conquered the night and sleep right through it now. He speculates wonderfully on what the difference might have been had we maintained that contact with darkness and make it a part of life. You could count on other people being awake, you could go off for trysts, you could go sleepwalking together, you

could do whatever you were of a mind to do. Things that just open up perspectives, ways of looking. These things reveal to us how narrow we are and how things may seem strange to us.

PK: Bryant Simon, a professor of history and American studies at Temple University, has a book that came out that's fabulously interesting about Atlantic City [*Boardwalk of Dreams*]. I think it's really interesting the way he traces the development of the city and the development of the American imagination—the city was built on dreams—and the consequences of it. His new work is on Starbucks and globalization and is definitely not what anyone would assume looks like history, but he's really a very creative thinker and he's going where the topic takes him in really interesting ways. He has a good instinct of picking up on things that are full of meaningful history that others might not grab onto.

PHR: *What influenced you to study the spread of ideas and cultural dissemination?*

MZ: Anybody who wants to understand social process has simply got to reckon with ideas, whether they are actually effective, whether they actually change anything, whether they actually cause anything or whether they just register…it's a great deal of what we have in the historical record, so you've got to be a fool to walk away from that. It's also intriguing just because ideas that are rich are some of the finest achievements that humans have ever managed, so if you want to feel good about the species, ideas are one of the things that are attractive to look at. If you're bitter and dyspeptic, ideas also contain some of the foulest and most disgusting achievements humans have managed, so you can see what you like in the human condition, but it's all there in the ideas. For me, most of the time I think ideas merely tag along. I don't think that on the whole ideas are enormously efficacious in and of themselves, but I think every once in a while an idea turns up that just seems to be so extraordinarily powerful in social change that it's hard to see that it wasn't the initiator of the change, so things like the Protestant ethic don't seem to me to be caused transparently or even evidently by anything, they seem to have led a lot of other changes rather than be derivative of things that were really responsible. There's no good reason for it, except that this idea seizes the imagination of a group of people who turn out to be riding a crest of history…I don't think it's the ideas in and of themselves, I think that surely there are other forces that account for why ideas spread to, appeal to people. They spread to certain places and stop spreading at certain

limits. The ideas are the same regardless of who takes them up and who spurns them, but I think that the stakes that people who play with ideas play for—maybe, maybe, maybe you're Karl Marx, maybe you're somebody who generates one of those ideas that really blow with the wind, that it's one of those ideas that every half-millennium changes the world. That's high stakes to play for. My sense of it is that it's never a thinker—most of the stuff that's transformative wells up from a lot of low-grade thinkers who are not world historical personages.

PK: That's part of what I find really interesting about the puzzle—trying to figure out what something seemingly innocuous and trivial as camping is. For me, the question is how did people use camping as a way to think about larger issues. You can't really get access to a lot of ordinary people's inner thoughts on the great questions of civilization—social history is one way to try to get at that by studying behavior, and cultural history is a different technique to get at the same kinds of questions. For instance, you don't get the words of individuals saying the kinds of things politicians do, with massive volumes about how they made their decisions, but you can look at what took up time in their lives and why they thought they were doing what they were doing and read through their comments about their camp to see what they thought about their home and their family back home, and you know, what women talked about—women talked about, and this is in the 19th century, how frustrating it was to find comfortable clothing to go camping in, and this tells us a lot about what they thought about their place at home. They weren't all feminists in the making, you can see that there was a lot of cultural tension around this issue—how they expressed it around the campsite gives us a different perspective on this question than, say, the speeches of feminists in the early 20th century.

PHR: *What is your favorite children's book?*

MZ: I have been through thousands of kid's books, but I have to say The *Phantom Tolbooth*.

PK: *Harold and the Purple Crayon* [by Crockett Johnson], about a little boy who decides one night to go for a walk in the moonlight and takes his purple crayon with him and the purple crayon creates the world that he walks through—it's a cute book about imagination.