

CONVERSATIONS



JEREMY MCINERNEY

DAVIDSON KENNEDY
PROFESSOR OF CLASSICAL
STUDIES AND DEPARTMENT
CHAIR

Discentes: What is your position in the department?

Jeremy McInerney: I am the Chair of the department and the title I've got at the moment is the Davidson Kennedy Professor of Classical Studies.

D: How long have you been here at Penn?

JM: I started here in 1992, fresh out of graduate school, so this is the one tenure track and tenure position I've had.

D: What are your responsibilities as department chair?

JM: Along with Professor Ker, I basically plan the roster of classes for the coming semester, and in fact, we actually work on a two-year projection of all our classes. It's subject to a lot of change because it varies according to who's on leave, so it's a somewhat fluid exercise, but we're constantly projecting anywhere from one to four semesters in the future. I also run a faculty meeting basically once every two weeks, and the agenda items for that depend upon the issues that we have to deal with. For example, in the last couple of years we've revamped the graduate curriculum. That's something that Emily Wilson is very much involved in, but we do it all together as a faculty as well; so at times I help coordinate what other people are doing. We also revamped the post-baccalaureate program in terms of the number of students and faculty involvement. At the undergraduate level, the kind of things that the Chair does is, for example, work with the Undergraduate Chair and make proposals for things like the archaeology track, which has to be done in consultation with a whole bunch of other departments.

D: Not to interrupt your brilliance but, when you mentioned revamped the number of students for the post-bacc did that go up or...?

JM: No, we actually reduced the number. We wanted to keep the program at a size that we thought would balance bringing in some revenue to the university, but also maintain the very high quality of the students involved and place a lesser burden on the faculty participating in it. So, you know, I deal with things like that where you have to balance out different interests. Issues like that are nearly always discussed by the whole faculty, and the chair tends to be the person who's steering that through. The other big thing that I spend a lot of time on is arranging the colloquium series of speakers. So I'm

basically lining up about 30 speakers a year, coming in once a week. Now again, just to be honest about this, Renée [Campbell] does a vast amount of work there. My job is to find out whom we want to have, to make sure we've got a bit of a balance between archaeology, history, classics, and then to invite them. But once they've said yes, all the logistics are taken care of by Renée.

D: Do you enjoy your administrative position?

JM: Actually, I don't like administration for its own sake, but this is me dealing with Bridget [Murnaghan], Cam [Grey], Emily, these are my friends; so in fact, it's actually collegial. It's where you can really enforce the bonds of what we are as a department. In the School of Arts and Sciences, I have to represent the department; that means working with the Dean, Rebecca Bushnell, and also dealing on a slightly more day to day level with the Associate Dean, Jeff Kallberg, who coordinates all the humanities departments in SAS. That's the job Joe Farrell used to do. So, we're a department that actually does a lot of heavy lifting administratively around the university. We have a Graduate Chair of Classics, a Graduate Chair of Ancient History, a Graduate Chair of Archaeology, an Undergraduate Chair, a Department Chair, the Dean of Graduate Studies is Ralph Rosen, Joe is a former Associate Dean in the School of Arts and Sciences...we all do a lot of stuff up the chain, which is good for the department because it means we have a profile.

D: There are two majors, Classical Studies and Ancient History. Could you go into the differences between them?

JM: The way I put it is that there are different ways of cutting the cake. This department in the old, old days was very much a Greek and Latin department. The first track is called Classical Studies because it was primarily classical philology. Along with every other university about 20-30 years ago, we realized that to survive in the competitive marketplace we had to create a major that didn't necessarily require Greek and Latin. So classical civilization is a track that allows a Classics

major to people who love the ancient world but don't really want to become proficient in Greek and Latin. Ancient history came about because a student a few years ago came to me and she said, "I love doing Greek and Roman history, but I also like the history of Southeast Asia and of East Asia." So we created an independent major for her, but she put together such a good independent major that I tried to turn it into an actual recognized major in Ancient History. The idea there is that you can include, if you want, the study of the ancient Near East, ancient India, ancient China or Japan, or basically any pre-modern, pre-industrial civilization. So it's broader than the Mediterranean. Then the archaeology track speaks for itself. It's attractive simply because we liaise much better with the museum, and it's for people who want to work primarily with material culture. So if you're language, civ, history, or material culture, we've got a version for you.

D: What is your most memorable moment with a student?

JM: The most memorable moment with a student...well there was the time when a student who was pre-med came to me, and I said to her, " You know, I don't know how you handle it and your head doesn't explode since you're doing Latin as well as all that." In response, she came up with the expression that this is a sanity major. That really had a very profound impact on me, because instead of thinking of us being in competition with other majors, it was one of these light bulb moments when I thought we're not competing with mathematics and the sciences. We can complement what students are doing there. For me, it was actually a complete change of attitude as to where we fit into the broader curriculum. I love now the idea of the double major. I love the idea of someone doing communications, or being in Wharton, or in engineering, and also doing a major with us. I love that.

D: Have you had any funny experiences?

JM: Well...oh, the moo sheets! So, every time I open a book around here, like a book I haven't used for ten years, there'll

be a sheet of paper in it that says “MOO”. It’s because, after I did the cattle book, some of the graduate students played a prank on me where they stuck a cow into the comfy chair that was in the office, and it was a cow with a bale of wool and a glass of milk in front of it. I came in and I saw this cow and I couldn’t believe it! That was amusing, but the funny part is that I was down in Virginia and taught a class down there. I was talking with these undergraduates about research and the woman who introduced me showed them my cattle book and said, “This is the book that you wrote, *The Cattle of the Sun*.” The kids all thought that was very amusing and so forth. Then, that night after dinner, I was going to give a lecture. Again, my colleague introduces me to a much wider audience, including these undergraduates, and when she introduces me, “Welcome to the stage Professor McInerney!”...somebody started mooing. Then all the kids started doing it as well. So I walk up to start a lecture and I hear all around “mooooo!” That was the best introduction to a lecture I’ve ever had.

D: What is your current research project?

JM: My current research is that I’m editing a volume on ethnicity in the ancient world. It’s actually growing out of the conference I did last year: “Ethnicity in the Ancient World of the Mediterranean.” The people who contributed to that conference are all contributing chapters to the book, and so are about 20 more people. If you think about 40 chapters, it’s pretty big.

D: And is this on a particular period?

JM: No, it’s Greece, Rome, the Western Mediterranean, the Eastern Mediterranean, so it’s basically all. Egypt, Mesopotamia, the whole deal. Hopefully that will come out at the end of 2013. It’s close to completion right now. And then the next major project I want to work on is salt. I want to do a study of the production, consumption, and trade in salt in the Greek world. This is an area that’s been very understudied for the Greeks. There are more people working on it in the

Western Mediterranean, but I want to work on it for the Eastern Mediterranean and that'll be fun.

D: What is your research process?

JM: Well, the way I usually work is that early in a project I keep a file of all literary references. So I'll start to do a search of databases and lexicons just to see what I can find under salt or salt related words. Also, whenever I'm reading literary material, if any references to salt come up, I keep it in a file. So it's like a giant shoebox, an electronic shoebox. For example, I've been working on sacred law and religion, and there's a sacred law that was published a few years ago that talks about how someone can get rid of a spirit that's haunting you and the way you can purify yourself is that you throw salt around in a circle. So that goes in the salt file. Another thing and this has been working for me is telling people about this. As a result, friends send me any salt references they come across, for example, a friend of mine sent me a reference from Lucretius on evaporation of salt water to leave behind salt deposits. That's how the project gets done. And also as a result of digging into things I found at least two demes in Attica that are called *Halai*, the Greek word for salt works. So one of the things I want to do is to go back to Greece and actually walk around the coastline where these demes were and find where the salt was being produced. In a kind of literal sense, where's the salt?

D: Speaking of Greece, would you tell us the "trophy story"?

JM: The trophy story is about an early piece of scholarship when I was a graduate student, and I was working on the territory of Phocis, the area that is close to Delphi. And during one of the first weeks I was doing research up there, we're up there for the weekend and walking between Chaironeia and the next town to the west, across the border into Phocis. I was looking to see if there were any markers on the landscape that would really mark out the border. We were going along, and there's a hill nearby that had been burnt down by a forest fire. In Greece, the undergrowth can really

tear your legs to pieces, so the forest fire actually makes it possible to do a lot of hiking in territory which otherwise isn't accessible. So we walked to the top of the hill and found a large fieldstone fort that ran around about fifty meters. And in the middle of it was an area that was frankly about the size of this office and made of stones. And in the middle of this, there was a block about 2 ½ by 1 ½ by 1 ½. And it was a worked, finished stone, which meant that it really stood out. So I was looking at it with a friend of mine, when John Camp, the professor at Athens at the time, walked over and said, "There's an inscription on that." So, we did drawings and took photographs of it. That weekend, when we were back in Athens, I got back to John's place later in the evening. He opens the door, he's holding a Loeb volume of Plutarch's Life of Sulla, and he said, "Read this!" In Plutarch's Life of Sulla, Plutarch says that when Sulla's army was camped outside of Chaironeia, facing the army of Mithridates VI, some men from Chaironeia came to Sulla and warned him about an ambush of Pontic troops up in the hills. So, Sulla stationed men behind this detachment of Pontic forces. The next day, when he's engaged Mithridates on the field, Sulla's little secondary force came out of the hills and ambushed the people behind him. Plutarch says that this is the first time a Roman commander had put up not one trophy, but two trophies: one in the field and one on the hilltop. Then Plutarch says the one on the hilltop says Homoloichos and Anaxidamos are heroes. The inscription on the block said, Homoloichos and Anaxidamos aristeis. So we found the Sullan monument, which is very cool.

D: Did your jaw drop when you walked into the apartment?

JM: I wanted to cry I was so happy. But, you know, there's a good punch line in the story as well. Afterwards John said, "This is your first week of your dissertation research. How does it feel that the best find of your career was in the first week of your dissertation? It's all downhill from here." Which is not true, but it was very funny.

D: How do you see the Classics discipline developing and growing over the years, and how does the Penn department fit into this?

JM: Yes, that's a tough one; you'll get different answers from different people. Here's how I'd put it in a nutshell: I think that we are moving away from the margins. With fewer people reading Greek and Latin, it seemed that for a long time we were being marginalized and Classical Studies was just this arcane work done by the few people who still read Greek and Latin. But in fact, what I find increasing with each passing year is that more and more people who are applying here as graduate students or are professors, are actually interested in dealing with literary theory, sociological theory, anthropological theory, and actually talking to other disciplines; and so, they are bridging the gap between us and the other disciplines in the humanities and the sciences. So I think Penn is well positioned because our faculty are people who like to think. I mean, look at the conference that's going on tomorrow about the beat poets, "Hip Sublime". Where on earth except at Penn are you going to see a conference of this sort? We can actually speak to English departments, cultural studies departments, and American History departments because of that. I'd like to think we're entering a good period, a solid period, where we can actually be central to academic discussion.

D: How would you recommend the Classical Studies major?

JM: My feeling is that for most professions either the company that employs you is going to give you the skill set that you need or you'll have to go through a professional training. But everybody—all professions, all jobs, all careers—want to have people whom they know are hardworking, have flexible brains, and can think in an orderly, rational and engaged manner. One of the guys I met down in Virginia is a banker, and he was a Classical Studies major. He still works on Statius in his spare time. Anyone who does a Wharton degree, they can do business; well, we

can do business too because you're smart enough to learn the skills if you want to go into merchant banking or consulting. So, I think of us as not being in competition but being value added.

FEATURED POST-BACC



DARIEN PEREZ

Where have you been?

I am a recent graduate of the University of Pennsylvania. I graduated in May 2012 with a degree in Anthropology & Ancient History. Throughout my Penn career, I was involved in several excavations, ranging from local historical archaeology in New Jersey to digging in the Tuscan countryside with Dr. Cam Grey and Dr. Kimberly Bowes for