

# From the Chair's Desk

## Boston University History Department Spring 2011



Greetings from BU History Department! As we wrap up another academic year, the abundant (and, this year, especially welcome) signs of Spring provoke the usual bittersweet feelings.

We feel tremendous pride in the accomplishments of our faculty and graduates: last year's students dispersed literally to the ends of the earth, from military service in Afghanistan to graduate and professional schools, Teach for America and Peace Corps assignments, jobs in the federal government, business and even the National Hockey League! We feel a thrill in the anticipation of new challenges that are to come. We also unabashedly long for the quieter, languid days of summer.

But it is impossible to say goodbye to a class of students without having sober re-

flections on the passage of time, not just on a historical scale, but in our personal lives. And it is with sadness that we prepare to part, however temporarily, from friends and colleagues and as we conclude classes and projects that we often wish never had to end.

As we don the medieval caps and gowns to renew an ancient tradition and simultaneously bid farewell to an infectious group of talented young people, I can't help but remember just how privileged my colleagues and I are to do what we do here at BU and I want to thank everyone who makes that possible. Thank you all!

But now, adieu to sentiment. It's time for the latest dispatches from Bay State Road....

### ALUMNI NEWS

Sarah (Arnold) Coster, '05, is now the Director of the Carlyle House, a historic house museum in Alexandria, Virginia. The house was built in 1753 and was the site of British General Edward Braddock's 1755 meeting with five colonial governors before setting off for Pennsylvania during the French and Indian War. The site runs daily tours, hosts lectures, living history events and more. Sarah encourages any alumni or professors visiting the DC area to stop by for a tour. For more information, visit [www.carlylehouse.org](http://www.carlylehouse.org) or e-mail [scoster@nvrpa.org](mailto:scoster@nvrpa.org).

Erika Storella, '02, got married last November ([http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/07/fashion/weddings/07STORELLA.html?\\_r=1&scp=1&sq=storella&st=cse](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/07/fashion/weddings/07STORELLA.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=storella&st=cse)). She lives in New York, working as a literary agent on nonfiction projects in the areas of history, sociology, business, politics, biography. "New York is great," she confesses, "but I really do miss the foliage and the Charles River."

Marc Mappen graduated from Boston University in 1967 with a BA in American History. He fondly recalls Professors Robert E. Moody and Robert V. Bruce and "how exciting it was to be a college student in the heady hippie atmosphere of Boston in the 1960s." After graduation, he took a Ph.D. from Rutgers University, started a family, and eventually became an associate dean for academic affairs. During that time he developed an interest in writing and lecturing about New Jersey history for a popular audience. To pursue that interest he left



Ph.D. Candidate Brian Casady (and his research crew) visit Seven Forks, the major hydroelectric site in Kenya.

Rutgers after 33 years to become the executive director of the state Historical Commission, in which capacity the *New York Times* described him as “the eminent New Jersey historian.”

Sarah Mayersohn, '09, is studying for her master's degree in Library Science, specializing in Archives, at Indiana University in Bloomington, IN. She reports that her “first year's gone really well so far, especially with my awesome job as student processor on Sen. Birch Bayh's papers at the university archives.”

Finally (cue in the dramatic music from “Law and Order”), Marc Weber, '07, earned his law degree from the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, Yeshiva University in New York City and is now a prosecutor at the New York County (Manhattan) District Attorney's Office. Bad guys beware!

## BOOKS OF THE MONTH

Professor James Johnson writes from France, where he is completing a new book with the support of a Camargo Foundation fellowship, to report on two extraordinary books he has read in the last year: Edmund de Waal's *The Hare with the Amber Eyes*, a work of history that reads like a novel, and *The Time of Our Singing*, a novel packed with history.

Edmund de Waal, an artist living in England, narrates the rise of the Ephrussi family, a Jewish banking empire whose Russian patriarch established branches throughout Europe. At the center of the account is a priceless set of 18th-century Japanese carved miniatures. As the objects are passed from generation to generation, de Waal recreates the family's struggle to assimilate, their eventual grandeur, and their terrible demise, from the Ukraine, to belle-époque Paris, to Vienna under the Nazis, to postwar Japan. De Waal, an Ephrussi on his mother's side, has inherited the set of miniatures, whose journey over the past 200 years he recounts with eloquence and love.

*The Time of Our Singing* is the story of two musical prodigies, mixed-race brothers born in the 1950s to a German-Jewish physicist who has fled Germany and an African American woman from Philadelphia. Their dream is to raise their boys “beyond race,” an ideal that the prejudice of the wider world and the brothers' own struggle over identity strongly question. Defining moments in recent American history play a role in the plot: MLK's speech at the Lincoln Memorial, the killing of Emmett Till,

the Rodney King riots, Louis Farrakhan's Million Man March. Music animates the narrative, which recounts the brothers' childhood, their schooling at a conservatory in Boston, early recording sessions, national and international recital tours, and their eventual estrangement. Powers' musical descriptions are frankly gorgeous, rich in detail, precise, knowledgeable, written by someone who understands how music works and what it is to perform. The book is moving, beautiful, often painful, and of tremendous value.

Professor Simon Payaslian doesn't entirely agree with its provocative arguments, but nonetheless recommends an intriguing new book by Michael A Reynolds. In *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908-1918*, Reynolds contends that the decline of Ottoman and Russian empires contributed to the First World War and that the disintegration of both empires shaped the geopolitics of the region for the rest of the twentieth century.

## RANDOM NOTES

Spring 2011 marked many accomplishments by History Department faculty. In January, Oxford University Press published Professor Brooke Blower's elegant and innovative first book, *Becoming American in Paris*. . . . Professor Jonathan Zatin scored a rare trifecta in international fellowship competitions, winning awards from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, the Earhart Foundation, and the Institute for Advanced Study (Wissenschaftskolleg) in Berlin. . . . Professor Eugenio Menegon's book, *Ancesters, Virgins, and Friars*, won the Joseph Levenson Award of the Association for Asian Studies, while Professor Jim

McCann's book, *Stirring the Pot*, was named “Best in the World” for the Africa category in the Gourmand Awards. The award ceremony took place in the Folies Bergère Theatre in central Paris. With its red velvet seats, gilded statuary, balcony, and raised stage, the Folies Bergère still displays the over-the-top feeling that it offered to performances by Maurice Chevalier, Frank Sinatra, and Josephine Baker. . . . Two undergraduates—Yuxin Qin and Daniel Mucinkas—and two doctoral students—Jonathan Koefoed and Jolanta Komornicka—won awards from the BU Humanities Foundation. Professor Nina Silber (from the NEH) and doctoral candidate Natalie Mettler (from the Pardee Center) each won summer grants, and undergraduate Ryan Barrett took home the Alumni Award for Writing Excellence.

Finally, I'm collecting news for my next message, so please send along stories, jokes, misadventures, cautionary tales, and any other material to me at [bjschulm@bu.edu](mailto:bjschulm@bu.edu) or just email [history@bu.edu](mailto:history@bu.edu). I end with the latest batch of historian jokes (If you want to avoid another round of groan-inducers, the burden is on you to e-mail in some better ones!).

Q. How many historians does it take to change a light bulb?

A. I dunno — not my period.

Q. How many revisionist historians does it take to change a light bulb?

A. In actual fact, despite the popular consensus, the light bulb was never actually changed.

Q. How many cultural historians does it take to change a lightbulb?

A. I am less interested in the lightbulb than the discourses surrounding the changing.

Have a great summer!

All best,  
Bruce

5 BU students on a Historic Boston walking tour led by Prof. Bruce Schulman. Behind them, Acorn Street on Beacon Hill.

