

History Department Celebration Address, June 16, 2017

Bruce Thompson, Lecturer in History, Literature, and Jewish Studies

I am honored to be a part of this wonderful occasion, and to salute the members of the UCSC Department of History Class of 2017 for their achievements here at UCSC.

Historians love anniversaries: as the distinguished historian of Germany Gerald Feldman used to say, they're good for business. This year marks the centennial of the birth of President Kennedy, who, by the way, played a role in my becoming interested in history. I'm sure that all of us have different stories about how we became drawn to our discipline. Here's mine.

I grew up on the East End of Long Island, in the 1960s. Half of the place names there are English, ending in Hampton. The other half are Indian place names. I loved the sound of them: *Montauk*, *Amagansett*, *Ronkonkoma*, *Setauket* (base of the Long Island spy ring that helped George Washington to beat the British in the Revolutionary War), *Shinnecock*, *Quogue*, *Cutchogue*, *Patchogue*, and my favorite -ogue name, *Aquebogue*. My first historical question: so many Indian place names, but where were the Indians? No one could tell me.

My first brush with History with a capital H came a bit later. It was the summer of 1962. I was six years old. My father had a store in Southampton (more specifically, Hampton Bays), on Ponquogue Avenue. (Hamptons and Quogues!) One of his customers in the summer months was a visitor to the Hamptons from New York City: a man named David Dubinsky. He was the president of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, one of the first great American unions, and still a major player in the American labor movement during the early 1960s.

One day that summer I was visiting the store, and my father introduced me to Mr. Dubinsky. He was a short man with white hair, wearing bermuda shorts, a Hawaiian shirt, and a Panama hat. He was on his way to the beach. My father said: "Bruce, do you know where was Mr. Dubinsky last week? He was in Washington, at the White House, shaking hands with President Kennedy. Would you like to shake hands with Mr. Dubinsky, Bruce?" I replied, "yes I would!" And I did. And that means, by the way, that when we shake hands today, members of the History class of 2017, you will be shaking hands with a man who shook the hand of President John F. Kennedy!



Was it a coincidence that I had soon memorized a list of all the presidents, and as soon as I had learned to read, began reading biographies of the famous ones? I think that was the beginning of my interest in history. I was fascinated by the subject from an early age. It was my favorite subject in school, and there was no doubt that it would be my major when I went to college.

Half a century later, now that I've had some time to think about it, I'd like to offer some reasons why our discipline is so fascinating, not only for those of us lucky enough to have chosen it as a major, or a profession, but for the wider public, even now, when attention spans have grown shorter and habits of reading more precarious. My list is tentative, and far from exhaustive, but here it is:

First, a line of Latin: *Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto*: "I think that nothing human is alien to me." That famous line from the Roman poet Terence applies perfectly to our discipline. In other words, there is no other discipline that takes in as many aspects of the human experience as our does. That interest in the sheer diversity of the human experience goes all the way back to the beginning, to the first historian, Herodotus, whose intellectual curiosity about the diversity of human cultures was insatiable.

And I don't think there has ever been a time when the discipline has been so broad in its range of inquiry as it is today. History, wrote the great Edward Gibbon, is nothing more than "a register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind." Gibbon was one of the greatest historians who has ever lived, but none of the historians here today would agree with that statement. History is the record of whatever we find significant in the past. And the range of our curiosity, our understanding of what counts as significant, is constantly expanding.

When I was an undergraduate, at Princeton University during the mid-1970s, many of the senior faculty were veterans of the Second World War. I did not know this basic fact about them at the time, because they never said a word about it. But after their retirements I learned that one of them, Carl Schorske, the historian of fin-de-siècle Vienna, had been in the OSS; another, Victor Brombert, historian of the novel, had

landed on the beach at Normandy as an intelligence officer shortly after D-Day; Sam Hynes, an expert on the literature of the First World War, flew more than a hundred missions as a fighter pilot against the Japanese at Okinawa and elsewhere in the Pacific; Alvin Kernan, Shakespeare scholar, was a bluejacket on the USS Enterprise at the Battle of Midway; Sheldon Wolin, the great historian of political theory, was a bombardier/navigator, also in the Pacific; the great historian of early modern England Lawrence Stone was on a British destroyer in the South Atlantic when his first article, on the Spanish Armada of 1588, appeared in 1943.

I have no doubt that their experience of the war influenced their choice of topics throughout their careers: the failure of liberalism, the fragility of civilization, the politics of cultural despair; the literature of war. And I'm sure they would have been astonished by the range of topics that appealed to the next generation, my generation. The outstanding graduate student of my cohort at Stanford wrote a book about Paris sewers and sewer men; the outstanding graduate student of the cohort after mine wrote a fascinating book about Jews in the worldwide ostrich feather trade. And one of the most exciting new branches of historical inquiry, environmental history, wasn't even on the radar screen at all during my undergraduate years. And yet I have no doubt that my teachers would have welcomed all of these new developments, the interest in sewers and ostrich feathers, because they were all humanists and nothing human was alien to them either. As David Cannadine wrote about one of them, Lawrence Stone: "Instead of confining himself to one of history's increasingly ring-fenced sub-specialisms, he moved back and forth from political to economic, to social, to cultural, to family, to educational, to architectural history. And, along the way, he ruthlessly ransacked other disciplines for their ideas and insights: sociology, statistics, economics, anthropology and psychology. For Stone was passionately curious about the past, was

insatiably open to new ideas and approaches, had an unerring instinct for raising large questions, and took a robustly mischievous delight in controversy ...” That’s our discipline at its best: passionately curious, insatiably open to new ideas and approaches.

Reason # 2: *We tell stories*. For a brief period in the 1960s, narrative was out of favor among the avant-garde of the profession, but it’s now generally recognized that there is no incompatibility between narrative and analysis. There is something inherently fascinating about a story well told. But for historians, the stories are constantly undergoing revision.

In New Yorker cartoonist Roz Chast’s brilliant memoir, *Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant?*, the young Roz asks her formidable mother, “Mom, why are we Jewish? Her mother replies: “I’m Jewish. You’re father’s Jewish. You’re Jewish. End of story.” But for us *there is no end of story*.



Five thousand books and counting about Lincoln’s presidency? The topic is still far from exhausted. There have been more great books about Lincoln in the past fifteen years than in the previous 150. Quattrocento Florence? Meiji Japan? Victorian Britain? Not done yet. The origins of the First World War? Historians have been studying that problem for a century, and we are still learning more every year. The election of 2016?

We already know a lot, but I'll bet it's going to take decades to understand it fully. Nevertheless, when you want to understand the deep roots of a surprising event, in the words of the great philosopher and ghostbuster Bill Murray, *Who you gonna call?*

Reason #3: *We challenge myths.* History is a critical discipline, relentlessly revisionist. The consensus view of the past isn't always wrong, but it's almost always partial or incomplete. Sometimes historians probe the past for examples of greatness, of human flourishing or achievement of one kind or another at the highest level. But just as often, or perhaps more so, the historian employs what George Orwell called "a power of facing unpleasant facts." We reveal, even if we don't revel in, the dark side of the past, because we have a responsibility to the truth. One of the leading trends of the discipline in the time I've been observing it is that it has cast its net ever more widely, examining the experience of people who may have been individually without much power, but who always had agency.

Reason #4: *We resurrect the dead.* Well, not quite, but surely one of the chief functions of our discipline is to rescue aspects of the past from oblivion, and to look especially at the previously overlooked. The great historian of the English working class, E. P. Thompson, wrote in the introduction of his greatest book, that his intention was to rescue the humble handloom weaver from "the enormous condescension of posterity." Few of us are capable of resurrecting the dead as vividly as E.P. Thompson did, but we try.

An example: When I was an undergraduate, I met an alumnus, a member of the class of 1908, born by my calculation, in 1887, more than a century before the members of the UCSC class of 2017. He was almost 90 years old when I met him, old enough to remember when the first airplane flew, when Charlie Chaplin's films were new, and

when the First World War began. Only one out of twelve people now alive remembers events that occurred before 1950, but he remembered events that occurred before 1900. He was serving, in his retirement, as the volunteer curator of the collection of stuffed birds in the little museum of natural history in the Biology building at Princeton, Guyot Hall, which opened in 1908, when he was a senior. How I wish I had interviewed him about his experiences as a young man, so that I could do a better job of resurrecting him for you now, but unfortunately, I missed that opportunity. I only remember bits and snatches of my conversation with him.



For example, members of the class of 2017, would you like some career advice from a member of the class of 1908? This is, let's remember, the fiftieth anniversary of the classic 1967 Mike Nichols/Dustin Hoffman film *The Graduate*, which has the most famous bit of career advice in the history of cinema. So what did my friend from the class of 1908 have to say about career paths? He said, if I remember correctly: *whatever you do, stay away from the stuffed bird business! There's no future in it.* Good advice then, still valid now.

My bird-man graduated when Woodrow Wilson was the President of Princeton, and he might have heard the following about the purpose of a liberal education from one of Wilson's commencement speeches: "We should seek to impart in our colleges not so much learning itself as the spirit of learning. It consists in the power to distinguish good reasoning from bad, in the power to digest and interpret evidence, and in a habit of careful observation and a preference for the non-partisan point of view; in an addiction to clear and logical processes of thought, and yet an instinctive desire to interpret rather than to stick to the letter of the reasoning; in a taste for knowledge and a deep respect for the integrity of the human mind. It is a citizenship of the world of knowledge, but not ownership of it."

And by the way, my bird-man shook hands with Woodrow Wilson, which means that when you shake my hand today you will be shaking the hand of a man who shook the hand of President Woodrow Wilson!

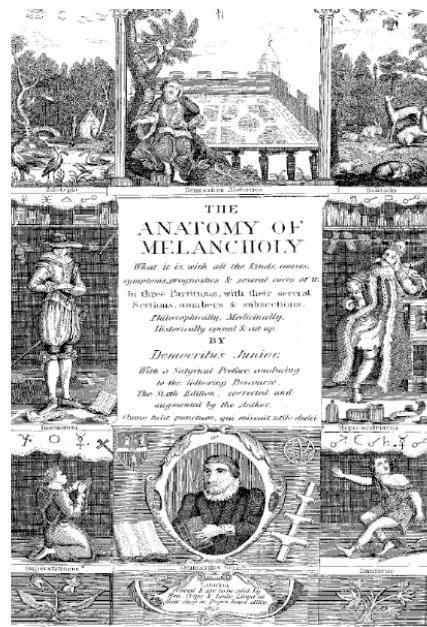
Reason # 5: *We offer perspective on the present.* "Historical knowledge," wrote the great world historian William McNeill, "is no more and no less than carefully and critically constructed collective memory. As such, it can make us both wiser in our public choices and more richly human in our private lives.... Encountering powerful commitments to vanished ideas and ideals, like those that built the pyramids, puts our personal commitment to our own ideals into a new perspective, perhaps bittersweet. Discovering fears and hopes like our own in pages written by the medieval Japanese courtier Lady Murasaki, or reading about the heroic and futile quest for immortality undertaken by the ancient Mesopotamian king Gilgamesh, stirs a sense of shared humanity that reaches back to the beginning of civilization and across all cultural barriers."



“On the other hand studying alien religious beliefs, strange customs, diverse family patterns, and vanished social structures shows how differently various groups have tried to cope with the world around them. Broadening our humanity and extending our sensibilities by recognizing sameness and difference throughout the recorded past is therefore an important reason for studying history, and especially the history of peoples far away and long ago. For we can know ourselves only by knowing how we resemble and how we differ from others.”

I'd like to try, in closing, to offer some perspective on an issue of concern to every member of the Class of 2017. Having acquired that citizenship in the world of knowledge and satisfied the university's formidable range of requirements, having achieved a considerable degree of proficiency in the discipline of History, and grown impressively in maturity and confidence over these last four years, many members of the class of 2017 may still have some anxiety about the future. Does the education offered here really prepare one for the challenge of finding employment in our rapidly evolving, global economy? I wish that an ironclad guarantee of a brilliant career were one of the "rights and privileges" attached to the degrees that will be awarded to our graduates this weekend. I can't make that guarantee, but I am confident that sooner or later, employers will discover the talents and skills of the members of the class of 2017: they will value your powers of analysis and synthesis, your creativity, and your ability to state problems clearly and to solve them by gathering evidence and assessing it critically.

Moreover, as a historian I can tell you that anxieties about jobs for graduates of universities are not new. Four hundred years ago, one of Shakespeare's contemporaries, Robert Burton, had bad news for the Oxford class of 1617: Employers, he wrote in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, "are so far nowadays from respecting the Muses, and giving that honour to scholars which they deserve, that after all their pains taken in the universities, cost and charge, expenses, irksome hours, laborious tasks, wearisome days, dangers, and hazards, if they chance to wade through them, they shall in the end be rejected...." In other words, after all of those sacrifices, the graduate of the university will be UNEMPLOYABLE! "He is now consummate and ripe," Burton wrote, "he hath profited in his studies, and proceeded with all applause: after many expenses, he is fit for preferment; where shall he have it? He is as far to seek it as he was at the first day of his coming to the university."



It's interesting that Burton used the word "preferment" rather than "career." The word "career" meant originally "a running course," as in "the career of the sun across the sky." It was derived from a French word for road or racecourse, and ultimately from the

Latin word "*carrum*," or chariot, which also gives us our word for car. "Career" did not acquire its modern sense of "the course of a working life" until the early nineteenth century.

The great problem for graduates, of course, is how to begin a career, or how to start the race. There are no easy answers, and there will, of course, be disappointments and frustrations. Today I can share a secret with our graduates, and that is that almost all of your professors have experienced rejection not once but many times. It's part of the game. I myself was once rejected for a job by the Department of History of the University of Pennsylvania. *What was especially alarming about their letter of rejection was that as far as I could remember I had never applied for a job at the University of Pennsylvania.* It seemed to be a gratuitous rejection from out of the blue, or perhaps a preemptive one. In any case, like many graduate students, I eventually accumulated enough letters of rejection to paper my wall with them.

But again, members of the class of 2017, you don't have to take these things personally, and indeed you should not. You are young, nimble, talented, and resilient. Sooner or later you will find a way to have someone pay you for doing meaningful work that you truly enjoy. And of course that kind of success—along with the love of family and friends—is a good part of what we mean by a happy life.

The history degree means, among other things, that *you will never be bored*. As long as you continue to be interested in history, the insatiable curiosity about the past and the variety of human experience that you cultivated here will never leave you, no matter what profession you choose to follow.

Members of the Class of 2017, I feel deeply grateful to have known so many of you, and to have been a part of this memorable day in your lives. On behalf of my colleagues, I thank you for the privilege of allowing us to be your teachers, and I salute your accomplishments at UCSC. I wish you brilliant careers and a long lifetime of citizenship in the world of learning.