

INTERVIEW WITH DR. MICHAEL BIRKNER

In this, our eleventh volume of the *Fairmount Folio*, I am inaugurating a new segment of the journal, an interview with an established historian. It will mirror a concept begun in our sister publication, *The Historian*, the journal of the national history honorary, Phi Alpha Theta. This segment is meant to provide wider understanding of the variety of experiences and scholarship found among historians. We hope you will enjoy these interviews.

The first interviewee, Dr. Michael Birkner, is an excellent example of the many scholarly interests and activities in which historians engage. In this season of presidential politics, he is of special interest with his connections to Kansas and the Eisenhower Presidential Library.

Dr. Helen Hundley

INTRODUCTION

Dr. Michael J. Birkner, Benjamin Franklin Professor of Liberal Arts at Gettysburg College in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, earned his Ph.D. in American History at the University of Virginia. As a graduate of Jefferson's university, it is unsurprising that his research has concentrated on presidential politics. He is the author, co-author and editor of six books. His work includes two books specifically focusing on presidents, *Dwight D. Eisenhower*, in 2005, and an edited volume on *James Buchanan and the Political Crisis of the 1850s* in 1996. A third, titled *Disrupted Democracy: James Buchanan and the Coming of the Civil War*, will be published by the University Press of Florida in 2010. In 2006, he chaired the Pulitzer Prize in History jury. Birkner is currently serving as a fellow of the Eisenhower World Affairs Institute. He is a consultant to the Dwight D. Eisenhower Memorial Commission, which is spearheading the creation of a national monument to the former president on the Mall in Washington, D.C. Most recently, on February 12, 2009, he delivered a keynote address commemorating President Lincoln's birthday to a special joint session of the New Hampshire legislature.

Dr. Helen Hundley
Faculty Editor

INTERVIEW WITH DR. BIRKNER

DR. BIRKNER, YOU TRAINED AS AN AMERICAN HISTORIAN AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA. WHAT OR WHO ENCOURAGED YOU TO STUDY POLITICS, AND ESPECIALLY PRESIDENTIAL POLITICS?

My interest in politics and presidential history in particular dates back to my childhood. I was not quite old enough to be inspired by John F. Kennedy's eloquence, but I was impressed by his vigor and pizzazz. By the mid-1960s, Civil Rights and the Vietnam War were front page concerns, and as a high school student I followed them closely in the press and on television. I enjoyed reading biographies from an early age, and it was natural for me to gravitate over time to more sophisticated political books and political history.

IN ADDITION TO ALL OF YOUR SCHOLARLY WORK, YOU HAVE ACTUALLY WORKED AS A COLUMNIST AND EDITOR ON A HIGHLY RESPECTED

NEWSPAPER. WHAT DID THIS DO TO ADD TO YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF PRESIDENTIAL POLITICS?

Working as editorial page editor of the *Concord Monitor* in New Hampshire offered a special window into our political culture because every four years presidential candidates fanned out across the state to make their case. Seeing politicians up close and asking them anything that you think is reasonable and pertinent highlights the human element of our political system and the fact that fallible women and men ultimately direct our affairs. I cannot claim that this experience changed my outlook on American politics aside from underscoring the importance of citizens taking the time and effort to inform themselves about issues and meet candidates whenever possible. The New Hampshire experience reinforced my belief that democracy benefits more when candidates are exposed to voters one on one and in smaller groups, than through the veneer of staged media events.

HOW DOES A JOURNALIST VIEW POLITICS VERSUS AN HISTORIAN?

It depends on whether the journalist is an opinion writer, as I was. There, a distinctive point of view is an asset. I learned early on that you should always give the position you opposed the best argument it could make before offering your own. That is congruent with the work of a historian, who triangulates evidence and then offers as strong and convincing an argument about the past that he or she can make. The difference, I think, is that the editorial writer has no obligation to be detached in evaluating evidence. The historian has to take all extant evidence into account in a way that an editorial writer does not.

GIVEN YOUR YEARS OF EXPERIENCE WITH THE COVERAGE OF PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS, IN WHAT WAY DID TECHNOLOGY CHANGE THIS ELECTION FOR NEWSPAPERS?

It's clear that the print media has lost much of its influence, though that does not mean that it is not an important factor in a presidential campaign. Clearly, the internet, notably through YouTube and blogosphere has changed the dynamic of campaigns. Politicians cannot assume that anything they say or do is really going to be private. The paradox of the present situation is that we have more information at our fingertips than ever before in trying to make sense of presidential politics, yet it is hard to argue that we have an elevated discourse on politics. Indeed, people seem increasingly inclined to gravitate to sources, both on television and the internet, that feed and reinforce their biases, rather than offer real food for thought.

WHAT LED YOU TO THE STUDY OF PRESIDENT BUCHANAN, GIVEN THE FACT THAT THIS PRESIDENT IS SEEN IN CONTRAST TO THAT OF PRES. EISENHOWER?

Very simple: I lived in Lancaster, Pennsylvania for a decade. Lancaster was Buchanan's home town, and as a student of nineteenth century political history at that time I felt obligated to offer an alternative to home town filiofetism about Buchanan. Opportunities to speak and write about Buchanan led to my work on my first book on Buchanan. I'm currently co-editing yet another book on Buchanan and the Coming of the Civil War. Amazingly enough, the literature on this president (and several others) remains scanty. There is a lot we still do not know about Buchanan as a political leader. I would add that there is always room for another good book on any subject.

WHAT HAS LED YOU TO THE STUDY OF SHERMAN ADAMS?

As with Buchanan, sheer coincidence of home towns had much to do with it. I was based at Dartmouth College for two years in the early 1980s as an editor of Daniel Webster's papers. Adams-the irascible, forceful and notably efficient chief of staff for President Dwight D. Eisenhower- was a Dartmouth graduate and his papers were in Dartmouth's library. When I moved to Concord to work at the *Monitor*, I heard many stories about Adams, was intrigued, and wound up returning to Dartmouth to work on his papers. I've since written many articles about Adams- a fascinating character- but have not yet completed my book on his role in the Eisenhower administration.

HOW DID BOTH EISENHOWER AND BUCHANAN USE THE MEDIA?

That's a big question. Buchanan used the media the way presidents did in those days- by providing patronage to sympathetic editors so that his administration's story could get out. Eisenhower, by contrast, tended to be aloof from the media. As one prominent journalist for ABC News once told me, "Ike treated us journalists like enlisted men or junior officers, and of course he did not socialize with men of such rank." Because Ike did not wine and dine or otherwise court the media, he tended to get less thoughtful coverage because leading writers did not understand his approach to leadership, which as the Princeton scholar Fred Greenstein would later observe, often took on a "hidden hand" aspect. We are now in an age of full-blown Eisenhower revisionism, with scholars disagreeing about the virtues of his policies but in general agreement that Ike was an effective political leader.

WHAT DOES THE EISENHOWER PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY OFFER YOU AS A SCHOLAR?

The Eisenhower Library is mecca for anyone interested in public policy in the 1950s. It houses an enormous number of original materials which are the bedrock for any serious study of Eisenhower and his times. That, and great archivists who help scholars find what they're looking for and help in interpreting the documents they use. I cannot get there enough!

HAVE YOU USED ANY OTHER PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARIES?

Yes, I've worked at several other libraries: FDR, LBJ, and Herbert Hoover. The presidential libraries are jewels in the crown of the National Archives system. All provide immensely valuable source material for scholars, without trying to steer scholars to a particular interpretation of the president in question.

DO YOU HAVE ANY FINAL ADVICE FOR ASPIRING HISTORICALS?

Go to the source- the original materials in any given field. They may be pieces of material culture, they may be diaries, government documents, or correspondence, but the original sources are the raw materials for fresh historical interpretation. There are few experiences more meaningful for the aspiring historian than the "aha" moment of finding something new and interesting in an archive!