



# Viewed Historically

The e-Newsletter of the Department of History  
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## A Very Early and Still Uncertain Spring

As I write this, we are having the very first day of mild, spring-like weather here in Columbia. It is a relief after an unusually long and cold winter, but years of experience have taught me that warm weather in February or March never lasts in mid-Missouri if the warm spell occurs before there are leaves on the trees.

This mild thaw, with the prospect of continued colder weather before spring finally comes, is a pretty good metaphor for the circumstances that the University as a whole and the history department in particular have experienced since the last newsletter reached you. The big chill began in November, with the institution of a hiring freeze, literally the day before the department was to contact its three finalists for the position in East Asian history. This was quickly followed by announcements of spending cutbacks and discussions of the possibilities of rescissions (for the uninitiated, that's a mid-year budget cut) and furloughs (temporary layoffs). Then there was the announcement from leaders of the state legislature that they were considering at least a 25 percent cut in the University's budget, for the fiscal year starting in July, 2009.

As you can imagine, this made for what Shakespeare would have called a winter of discontent, and a very cold one, too. Although the situation is still not completely clear, we have seen some fiscal springtime over the last few weeks. Governor Nixon's plan to continue state spending for higher education at the previous year's levels, if public institutions of higher education freeze tuition, was enthusiastically endorsed by the University. Compared to a lot of other states,

Missouri's public finances are in relatively good shape, and the additional assistance the state is receiving from the federal government should make it possible to implement the governor's plans, although, as dictated by our state constitution, the state legislature will have the last word.

We're pleased to announce one definite indication of the thaw: the department has just received authorization to resume and to complete its East Asian history search. We are currently scheduling our on-campus interviews and hope to be able to make a job offer this year. As usual, we will let you know when we have been able to make a hire.

In the meantime, let me announce three new initiatives that the department is launching in difficult times. One concerns the initiation of a new biennial lecture series, the *Lewis Atherton Memorial Lecture in American History*. [Lewis Atherton](#), who taught at MU from 1936 until his retirement in 1973, was one of the department's most distinguished members, known for his many books and articles on the history of the American West. He was the founder of the [Western Historical Manuscripts Collection](#) at the Missouri State Historical Society.

The inaugural Atherton Memorial Lecturer will be a contemporary, extraordinarily distinguished historian, [Laurel Thatcher Ulrich](#), professor of history at Harvard University and current president of the American Historical Association. Professor Ulrich is esteemed for her histories of American women of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries; her 1991 book, *A Midwife's Tale* was a Pulitzer Prize winner. She is perhaps best known to the public for her pithy quote, "Well-behaved women seldom make history." Her lecture will take place this fall, in late September

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or early October. When the date is set, it will be announced on the department's Web site, and there will be a notice in our next e-newsletter. Needless to say, all the department's friends and alumni are warmly invited to the lecture.

The second initiative stems from an extraordinarily generous bequest from the estate of the late William Wilcher. He left the history department real estate and financial assets in the amount of about \$1 million—we will only know the exact figure after probate and sale of the real property. This bequest will ultimately create an endowment generating a yearly income of around \$50,000 that the department will use to offer additional support to its very hard-working and distinctly underpaid graduate students.

To be honest, this bequest was a big—if quite pleasant—surprise, both to the history department and to the University development office. We do not yet have all the details, but when we do, there will be a further report. Right now, on behalf of the faculty and students in the department, I would like to express publicly our thanks for this very generous bequest.

Finally, I would like to alert you to an initiative the department is going to be starting, in the hope of connecting its alumni with its current undergraduate majors. Especially in the current difficult economic climate, but even before these difficulties became manifest, many of our students have wondered about the possibilities existing in the job market for history majors. The department's friends and alumni are the people best positioned to answer their questions. To a selection of departmental alumni we will mail, complete with postage-paid return envelope, some questions about their career experiences and the uses of their history education. We hope that the answers will be illuminating to our majors. In addition, we plan to institute a career day next year at which some alumni or friends of the department come back to campus and discuss their work-life experiences with

history majors and offer them suggestions about employment possibilities, job-hunting and career pathways. We hope career day can become an annual event. If you are interested in receiving a copy of the questionnaire, or participating in the career day, please get in touch with us.

The feature section of this issue is a report on the annual undergraduate recognition ceremony. Our readers will see some of the distinctions that the very best history majors at MU can obtain. It might help spur some thoughts that would be useful for our upcoming career day.

In this issue, the "Historical Reflections" section goes to the movies. As our readers no doubt remember, the movie *Slumdog Millionaire*, about life for India's urban lower classes, was the big victor at the Oscars® this year, getting the prizes for best picture and best director. Michael Bednar, the department's expert on South Asia who lived in India for several years, uses his scholarly expertise and personal experience to offer two quirky insights into the movie.

You will hear from us again with the annual book issue in May; in the meantime, remember you can always look at the department's Web site, [history.missouri.edu](http://history.missouri.edu), or contact us at [history@missouri.edu](mailto:history@missouri.edu).

Jonathan Sperber  
Chair, Department of History Department

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## The History Department's 2009 Annual Undergraduate Recognition Ceremony

The history department held its annual undergraduate recognition ceremony on the afternoon of Wednesday, February 18. This event is an opportunity to make known publicly our high esteem for the department's best and most active and involved undergraduate students. About 40 students and their parents attended this year's ceremony, a very nice turnout for a weekday afternoon.

The students recognized fall into three distinct categories, although there is quite a bit of overlap between them. First, there are the scholarship recipients. Seventeen history majors received scholarships from the College of Arts and Science, the most of any department in the College. The history department has its own [scholarships](#) which are awarded from six different endowments. We were able to award no less than 23 departmental scholarships this year to students who excelled academically and demonstrated commitments to University activities and public service.



Undergraduates receiving Arts and Science College and history department scholarships.

The second group of students recognized were from the department's [internship program](#). Undergraduates involved in this program have an opportunity to work at an archives or a museum, doing what we call "public history" — making historical sources available to the public and preparing exhibitions and shows on historical events. Among the institutions cooperating with the department in offering these internships are the Missouri State Historical Society here in Columbia, the State Archives Missouri State Museum in Jefferson City, the Boone County Historical Society and the University of Missouri Archives. Eight undergraduates took part in internships, offering them some example of what it is like to work in a public history job, and, also, we would like to hope, developing skills in research, writing, consulting and exhibiting, that will stand them in good stead, wherever their careers may take them.



History interns during the current academic year.

Finally, the ceremony recognized its honors students, those who are undertaking the challenging task of writing a B.A. honors thesis, so that they can graduate cum laude. Among the nine students writing honors theses were Eric Hobbs, who is studying John Stuart Mill's contributions to 19<sup>th</sup>-century British liberal political thought; Taylor

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Rausch, who is investigating press censorship in late 20<sup>th</sup>-century America; and Evan Pfeiffer, whose work deals with debates about the French Revolution that occurred among French historians during the 1970s as a way of evaluating the changes in French intellectual life in that era.



Undergraduates writing honors theses, in the current academic year.

Considering making a donation to the history department? For information on doing so, click on this [link](#). The department chair and the development office of the College of Arts and Sciences will be pleased to discuss with you any plans you may have to help the Department of History.

## Historical Reflections

### Who Wants to be a (Slumdog) Millionaire?

With its recent Oscar® success, *Slumdog Millionaire* seems to be on everyone's lips these days. Here are two facts about *Slumdog* that you may not know, but which are worthy of being in the next episode of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*

#### It is written.

This phrase appears in the movie's opening and closing scenes as part of a multiple-choice question on how Jamal, a boy with minimal education from the slums of Mumbai, has reached the final round of the Indian *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (*Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*). The phrase is also referenced throughout the movie. The word for this phrase, *maktūb*, refers to the Muslim concept of fate, in which Allah scripts actions in a divine book that may affect one in ways not always understood. Jamal knows the answers to his questions through fate or Allah's guidance of events throughout his life.

#### Amitabh Bachchan makes a second appearance.

A young Jamal and his brother are at play in the slum when the helicopter of Amitabh Bachchan, one of the greatest actors in Indian film, passes overhead. As the crowd races toward his helicopter, the movie cuts to a series of classic clips from Bachchan's movies. An overanxious—and slightly toxic—Jamal finally races to join the crowd and obtains his idol's autograph. Bachchan, however, makes a second appearance in the movie. He is the host of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*, played in the film by actor Anil Kapoor. Thus, Jamal comes full circle in meeting his idol first as a boy and later as a contestant on his show.

— Michael Bednar

