The Institute for Historical Study *Newsletter*

Volume XXIV, No. 3 Fall 2003

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

I am finally back at work after three vacation trips in the last two months, the latest a week in Colorado. On the return trip to California we drove through Nevada on U.S. Route 50, touted as the "loneliest road" in the United States. If you ever worry that our country is nothing but crowded cities and traffic jams, I would highly recommend this journey. The juniper forests and sagebrush valleys stretch on for miles and miles and miles. You have to plan way ahead for appropriate gas and pit stops. We discovered to our dismay that one small town's stations were both out of gas.

Route 50 goes through the old mining town of Austin, once the seat of Lander County. The stately brick courthouse vault contains the original *Reese River Reveille* newspaper, published from 1863 until 1993. Apparently, this is the only complete file of a Nevada newspaper dating back to territorial days. I did some research there for my first book, and perusing hard copy instead of craning my neck around a microfilm reader was a delightful experience.

Our annual membership potluck dinner at Jeanne McDonnell's home was a wonderful combination of good food and good fellowship. I always look forward to seeing the results of the McDonnells' renovation projects. Thank you, Jeanne, for your generous hospitality. Don't forget to attend Jeanne's presentation on Juana Briones at the San Francisco Public Library on 19 November.

—Anne M. Homan

WORK IN PROGRESS

Illuminating the Valley: The San Jose Electric Light Tower, 1881–1915

On 10 August at Ellen Huppert's home, Laura Tarwater-Scharp gave a work-in-progress about an early landmark in San Jose. The 237-foot Electric Light Tower was erected in 1881 at Market and Santa Clara streets, each of its four feet resting on a different corner of the intersection. The tower was the brainchild of J. J. Owen, a California booster and technology buff, then publisher and editor of the *San Jose Mercury*. Inspired by the developing technology of the electric light, cities across the nation were lighting their downtown areas for safety and convenience. San Jose was experiencing a large population growth, and the city wanted to prove that its 20,500 citizens were progressive. Rather than the traditional individual lights at street level, San Jose, with the editorial persuasion of Owen, chose the tower. According to a theory then in vogue, a higher light would spread farther than one near the ground and was capable of lighting up the whole downtown area. John Gash was the tower architect and city engineer; John Pieper built the tower. The finished structure weighed 15 tons and cost $4,000.

A special lighting ceremony was held on 13 December 1881; over 1,000 people attended. "Today San Jose may be more proud of her tower than Egypt of its sphinx and obelisques, than Pisa of her Leaning Tower, England of her monuments of war, New York of her Cleopatra's Needle," enthused *The San Jose Daily Herald*. "Those are monuments of pride and raised by a proud and haughty aristocracy. This is a monument to progress and the diffusion of light in our midst." W. D. Stocking wrote a paean to the tower entitled "More Light," which said in part: "Good speed, Electric light! we hail/with joy its advent here;/its diamond-hued shafts pierce the veil,/our onward course to clear./Its radiant glory circles round/the misty, murky air,/like some bright start that never found,/a place to glisten there." Although the six 4,000-candlepower carbon arc lamps on the tower were not as effective as the organizers had hoped, some citizens did complain of roosters being confused and crowing in the middle of the night. The lamps were powered by a generator used by a lumber planing mill during daylight hours.

By 1884 the city was only using the tower for special occasions; it had become more a decorative symbol than a practical device. The carbon arc lamps were replaced by incandescent bulbs in 1891. Built of non-galvanized iron, the tower became seriously damaged by rust and blew down in a windstorm in 1915. Luckily, no one was hurt. As part of its centennial celebration in 1977, the city had a half-size

replica built, and this tower is now at Historic San Jose in Kelley Park.

Laura plans to write more, following newer developments in San Jose. "This area has continued to have a reputation for technological innovation through many a boom-bust cycle." Silicon Valley, like the tower, has had a sudden rise and fall.

—Anne M. Homan

BOOK REVIEW

Following are two reports on the same book

dark Mother: african origins and godmothers. Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum. (iUniverse, 2001; Media Mediterranea, 2003).

"The hypothesis of this book is that everyone's genetic 'beautiful mother' is african and dark, and that she is the oldest divinity we know." *dark mother*, p. xxv

When I first encountered a dark Virgin Mary at the sanctuary of Oropa in Northern Italy I was forever changed. The experience propelled me into a graduate program where I pursued the study of Black Madonnas as a thesis topic. Dr. Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum's prize-winning 1993 book, *Black Madonnas: feminism, religion, and politics in Italy*, was instrumental in helping me locate and interpret the dark images of the Madonna found throughout my ancestral homeland.

Birnbaum, a historian and a feminist, expands her findings beyond Italy to Africa in her most recent publication, *dark mother: african origins and godmothers.* (She prefers to use the more democratizing Italian style of removing capitals in many institutional words.) She has compiled evidence to show that the mother of the human race is African; that Africans migrated to all corners of the world; that they carried their beliefs with them, marking signs along the way in caves and on cliffs; and that these signs were sacred and indicated belief in a woman divinity. Thus, Birnbaum proposes, not only is our first and oldest ancestor a dark mother of central and southern Africa, but our oldest known veneration is to a dark African female divinity, whom Birnbaum calls the dark mother.

Following the inclusive values of the dark mother about whom she writes, Birnbaum embraces the work of scholars from many disciplines. She has brought together the genetic studies of Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza and the archeological study of rock art by Emmanuel Anati, both key to her theory, as evidence of African origins. The work of contemporary feminist scholars, including Marija Gimbutas, Judith Grahn, and Elinor Gadon, adds to the scientific foundation of her work and aids in its interpretation.

Birnbaum's Sicilian ancestry is at the heart of her exploration. The "bedda matri"—an expression of her Sicilian foremothers that means "beautiful mother"—is the matrix upon which she builds her hypothesis, that "everyone's genetic 'beautiful mother' is African and dark, and that she is the oldest divinity we know." Much more than a compilation of facts, Birnbaum's book weaves a strong and compelling web of personal story, science, poetry, and art, always with the dark thread leading back to Africa.

She considers that her research seems to "tap an underground stream of submerged wisdom that is rapidly rising throughout the world," which is evidenced by her well-referenced sources. Some examples in popular culture that come to mind are the novel *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd, which prominently features a Black Madonna, and the research reported in *The Seven Daughters of Eve* by Oxford geneticist Bryan Sykes, whose DNA studies lead back to a maternal African ancestor of the human race.

Who is the dark mother? This is the name Birnbaum gives to the oldest known divinity, who archeologists say is female and whom some would call the Goddess. Significantly, Birnbaum's title of dark mother acknowledges her African origin, a point often missing in women's spirituality studies up to now. Signs of veneration to the dark mother, specifically the color ochre red and the pubic V, are found in rock art beginning 40,000 years ago in central and southern Africa, expanding outward over the next 18,000 years across Africa, Asia, Europe, the Americas, and Australia. During the Ice Age and continuing into the Neolithic, the dark mother takes iconic form in carved female figures; in historical times, her image and attributes are represented in goddesses such as Isis, Cybele, and Tanit, and in Black Madonnas and dark saints in the Christian era.

Take, for example, Santa Lucia, the subject of chapter five, an early Christian martyr whom the church hails as a chaste maiden saint of light. Where there is light, however, there is, or probably once was, darkness. Birnbaum observes that Santa Lucia, the origin of whose name means light, is celebrated in the darkest month of the year, and is understood popularly as the "mother of the night," rather than as an example of "light over darkness." Birnbaum finds the traits of the dark mother, like wisdom and nurture, retained in popular stories about Santa Lucia. Like Santa Lucia the "light bringer," Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum brings to light many 'submerged' details, and calls our attention to some of the more apparent ones, so that readers are given new eyes to view the world around them. Birnbaum cites numerous examples to support her observation that the memory of the dark mother has been retained in everyday culture and in rituals and festivals of "dark

others"—Jews, Moors, heretics, women, witches—in Europe and the United States. The dark mother's memory and values—justice with compassion, equality, and transformation—have persisted for millennia, not only among women but among men, says Birnbaum.

As a scholar, I have found Birnbaum's research to be invaluable for decoding the links to the past in the images, miracles, and devotions of Black Madonnas that I've studied. At a recent public presentation of my study, there was an audible gasp in the audience when I articulated her theory that the darkness of the Black Madonnas reflects a memory of the first African mother. My statement evoked a sense of recognition of a truth revealed, a veil lifted, kinship discovered.

As a woman interested in learning how my spiritual heritage has been submerged in mainstream religions, I found in Birnbaum's insights a venerated dark mother whose descendants include the Black Madonnas of my motherland.

As a genealogist and a human being, I welcome Birnbaum's theory for its gift to all of us of a world of siblings with a common ancestral mother, and all the possibilities for a more just world that this implies.

—Mary Beth Moser

Mary Beth Moser is an Italian-American who researches, writes, and lectures on Black Madonnas. Whenever she can, she travels the back roads of Italy to do genealogical and academic research. She is a graduate of New College of California in San Francisco where she earned her Master's degree in Women's Spirituality. She may be contacted at: mbmoser@prodigy.net

dark mother: african origins and godmothers. Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum. San Jose, New York, Lincoln, Shanghai: Authors Choice Press, 2001. 414 pp. Selected bibliography (37 pp.) Illustrated. $18.95. ISBN: 0-595-20841-X.

What Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum brings to us in this richly documented book is the story of a lifelong journey: serious, brave, deeply intelligent, enriched by scholarship, friendship, and strong political commitment. It is, in part, the story of Birnbaum's discovery of the dark mothers of her own sicilian-american heritage, an inquiry begun in her earlier book, *Dark Madonnas*, now carried forth into the wider world of Europe, Asia, and the Americas.

The first two-thirds of *dark mother* are a passionate, multi-layered dissertation in which Birnbaum marshals evidence "expressed in science, popular beliefs, and many other ways of knowing" in support of the historical validity of belief in the divinity of the african mother. Illustrations offer images of dark Madonnas from France, Germany, Spain, Russia, Arabia. DNA tests bring fresh support to long-held theories of the expansion of early african peoples into every continent of the earth. Birnbaum's research documents reverence of the dark mother throughout Europe and Asia; cave paintings and ancient icons bear the red ocher and characteristic vulval V associated with her worship. Belief in the divinity of a dark mother is present in the cultures of the Americas, in which my own research is grounded, most famously in the Virgin of Guadeloupe, in the celebration of Iemanja in Brazil, in the Voudou communities of Hispaniola and Haiti.

Birnbaum's purpose in *dark mother* goes beyond proving the historical existence of belief in the divinity of the dark mother, or even the identification of beliefs, such as the veneration of Sta. Lucia, which persist today. She seeks to make manifest the divine dark mother in the contemporary world in all cultures—to "retrieve this poetic wisdom . . . for the generation anew of a just and green world." (p. xlii.) She refers to "submerged beliefs," and counters the rationalism of behaviorists with a quote from George Santayana: "the passions of the heart, not the mind, determine a persons beliefs and conduct . . . both religion and science are myths, but myths are far from signifying nothing." (p. 293.)

The text itself is a sometimes uneasy mixture of learned scholarship and notebook narrative, as in this passage: "On our summer 2000 study tour of Sicily, we came across the oldest black madonna I know, Madonna dell'Adonai, at Burcoli, Sicily. Mary Beth Moser found her in Ean Begg's gazette of black madonnas, we walked down a dirt path, and were then dismayed to learn that the little church was closed for restoration. Chickie Farella convinced the workmen that it was very important that we see the black madonna. And the door opened." (p. 116.) Yet even this somewhat awkward paragraph offers the reader insight into the physicality of Birnbaum's journey, the generous care she takes in naming the friends and colleagues who accompanied her, and her scrupulous acknowledgment of sources.

In the final third of the book, "Comparative Beliefs in the United States and Italy," Birnbaum intermixes material from her own scholarly history: her doctoral dissertation on American intellectual history; articles about her engagement as a scholar-activist in the 1960s, an essay on Mario Savio's "legacy as a sicilian-american radical" (p. 325), and a discussion of the presence of images of the dark mother at the 1995 UN Women's Conference in Beijing.

Birnbaum writes of herself, "to be a sicilian-american radical, means, in my case, being conscious of my african origin and my multicultural inheritance of many dark others . . ." (p. 325.) It is clear that, for over forty years, Birnbaum has not held back from engaging in the struggle for social justice as she understands it, bringing to bear intellect, scholarship,

personal heritage, teaching skills, and love of students, family, and friends. It is an impressive history.

In this book Birnbaum succeeds in documenting the persistent belief in a dark mother. More open to debate are assertions as to the pacific nature of the world from which the dark mother emerged some 100,000 years ago: "they lived in small groups, without hierarchy or leaders, and with a social life grounded on mutual respect." (p. 4.)

While the scholarly evidence brought to bear by Birnbaum for the existence of a prehistoric dark mother is commanding, as is the evidence of historical and contemporary belief in her divinity, it is another step—a leap of faith, no less—to accept the dark mother as divine. That is, of course, an argument that cannot be won. As Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum and Santayana would tell you, divinity can only be known through the heart.

—Francesca Miller

GROUP REPORTS

Biography Group

The Institute's Biography Group met on Sunday, 14 September, at Bonda Lewis's charming apartment in San Jose, with six members present. A new member, Elizabeth Thacker-Estrada, introduced her work on a lesser-known first lady with a selection from the book she is writing, "Abigail Powers Fillmore: The Light of the White House." Despite the fun often poked at Millard Fillmore, he and Abigail were politically, socially, and culturally progressive, and had certain distinctions and achievements to their credit. For example, they were the first presidential couple to come from poverty, and they established the White House library. Abigail, unusually well educated for her day, had been a schoolteacher, and had established a circulating library in western New York State. She encouraged Millard in his dream of becoming a lawyer.

Bonda Lewis spoke about the fictional biography she intends to create by weaving together the stories of Anna May Potthoff, a young girl who came to Kansas on the Orphan Train, and women from Bonda's own Kansas family. From 1854 till 1930 the Orphan Trains brought homeless, orphaned, or abandoned children from the streets of New York City to find homes and new lives in what was then the West. The initial outcomes were not always happy. Anna May's brother, for instance, was adopted at journey's end, but she was not. Nevertheless, she seems to have won through to a happy life and family of her own. The Orphan Train phenomenon itself is a fascinating episode in US history.

Autumn Stanley talked about the detective work involved in researching a mystery woman such as Charlotte Smith—who left no letters, diaries, or private papers. Specifically, Stanley pointed out the value of looking anew at old research notes and putting the data together with bits of information more recently gathered. When she learned that 55 St. Emmanuel Street, Mobile, Alabama was also the corner of St. Emmanuel & Theatre streets—the listed residence of E(dward) Smith, and also the location of one of Catherine Odlum's boardinghouses—she was suddenly able to solve a longstanding mystery in Charlotte's life: how and where she met her husband. He was probably one of her mother's boarders.

Ethel Herr read a recent addition to her biography of Juliana von Stolberg, mother of William of Orange. This charming short chapter, titled "A Very Present Help in Trouble," reintroduces the loyal old servant Toske, a nonhistorical but important character in the life of William's daughter Maria, through whose eyes much of the story is told. It also shows how life changed for Maria after her father went off to war in 1573, and develops Maria's character as she cares for Toske in an illness. The MS is finished except for last-minute changes, and will go off to the publisher before Ethel leaves for her research trip to New York State.

Joanne Lafler presented a passage from her biography of her father-in-law, Harry Lafler, covering 1904–1905. During this period Harry joined a group of artists and writers and their families who socialized, womanized, and "talked, talked, talked" in and around San Francisco. "The Crowd" included, among others, Jack London, who had recently published *The Call of the Wild* and *The Sea-Wolf*, the poet George Stirling, *San Francisco Call* drama critic Blanche Partington, and Ambrose Bierce's nephew Carlton. Lafler and his first wife, Alice, separated, he became infatuated with the poet and translator Agnes Tobin, and then was passionately involved with the artist and writer Nora Mary French.

Jeanne McDonnell clarified four types of sources available for the biography of Juana Briones, who, like Charlotte Smith, left no diaries or personal papers—and who may indeed have been illiterate. Nevertheless, Briones had a certain renown in her day, not only as a *curandera*, but as a woman of property and business, so that lore (one of her four source types) survives about her, as do official records (another type). In fact, says Jeanne, state records may contain "more information about Juana than about any other woman of this era in California."

—Autumn Stanley

Visit the Institute's Website at
http://www.tihs.org

History Play Readers

During the last three months the play reading group has completed two plays and started a third. As usual, our interests have ranged widely. Timberlake Wertenbaker's play *Our Country's Good* deals with events in the new penal colony in Australia in 1789, when the first group of prisoners, under the enlightened command of Captain Arthur Phillip, presented a production of a popular comedy, *The Recruiting Officer*, as part of the events celebrating the birthday of George III. The play was inspired by Thomas Keneally's historical novel, *The Playmaker*. Wertenbaker also used primary historical sources such as letters and journals of the military officers. As a feminist, she was particularly concerned with the relationships between the "lags" (female prisoners) and the Marine officers, and she portrays the act of performance an experience that gives the women a sense of freedom and self-worth.

From late eighteenth-century Australia we moved to late sixteenth-century France, reading Christopher Marlowe's seldom-read history play, *The Massacre At Paris*. The massacre in question took place in Paris on August 24, 1572—St. Bartholomew's Day—but the play telescopes a great deal of history into relatively few pages. (The text that has come down to us is regarded by most scholars as corrupt and incomplete.) The cast includes King Charles IX, the Duke of Anjou (who become Henry III), Henry of Navarre (who becomes Henry IV), Catherine de' Medici (queen mother), her daughter Margaret (wife of Henry of Navarre), Margaret's mother (the old queen of Navarre) and assorted French nobility. The villain of the piece is the Duke of Guise, regarded as the evil genius behind the massacre. When it was first performed in London, in the early 1590s, it was popularly known as *The Play of the Guise*. Marlowe's strong Protestant bias is clear throughout, but especially in his depiction of the Catholic duke and his henchmen.

Interested in reading more about the Wars of Religion, we went on to Friedrich Schiller's 1798 trilogy about Albrecht von Wallenstein, Duke of Friedland (1583–1634), an important military commander in the early years of the Thirty Years' War. So far we have read the short first play, *Wallenstein's Camp*, in which the general himself never appears but is evoked as a great leader through comments by the troops serving under him, and we are halfway through the second play, *The Piccolomini*, which dramatizes growing tensions between Wallenstein and courtiers of the Habsburg emperor who seek to undermine him. Schiller held an academic post in history at the University of Jena and wrote a history of the Thirty Years' War. As a playwright he added a significant non-historical character and love story to enhance the dramatic conflict and delineate the themes of youthful idealism, disillusion, and *realpolitik*. For information about meeting times and places, contact Lorrie O'Dell.

—Joanne Lafler

Medieval History Study Group

At our August meeting in Berkeley, we focused on the effects of the eleventh-century Norman Conquest of England on various aspects of British society, particularly the political and legal effects. One particular document, a royal pronouncement that no slaves were to be sold out of England, aroused our interest regarding the history of legal rights, particularly the development of the traditions of common law. (We have reserved that topic for another day.) Having now raised the issue of slavery, we chose that as our next discussion subject. Our September meeting, at Lyn Reese's home, produced a lively discussion about slavery and serfdom, trying to define the differences between them, both legally and in practice. We also speculated on the reasons for the demise of slavery and the reality of a serf's relationship to his/her lord. This topic then led us into the world of feudal society, a subject discussed and debated at our October meeting at the home of Ellen Huppert. Hunting for a good definition of feudalism from various secondary sources, members of the group each attempted to further refine what each had read, leading us further into the basic questions of social organization and how it got that way. Therefore, for our November meeting we are going to try to uncover the conditions under which this land-based society was established into the patterns that have come to be called feudalism. It appears we are now moving into the realm of historical geography!

Besides published secondary works and compilations of primary sources, some of us make use of documents found on the internet at the Medieval Sourcebook. While the translations used are older (since they are in the public domain), this compilation is a great, and growing, storehouse of pieces of history such as wills, manumission accounts, land transfer deeds, papal decrees, and even an agreement regarding the renting of a suit of armor. Check it out and enjoy entry into an intriguingly different world.

—Lorrie O'Dell

MEMBERSHIP NEWS

Laura Tarwater-Scharp has accepted a position as program administrator of the Stanford Humanities Center's new Mellon Workshop. The Center sponsors a variety of talks, conferences, and workshops, which are free and open to the public. Find more information at http://shc.stanford.edu.

CALENDAR

November	**19**	Jeanne McDonnell talk at San Francisco Public Library, on "San Francisco Cultural Geography: The Case of Juana Briones, 1812–1850.".
Early December		Tour of Emily Long Rader Exhibit: date to be determined.
January	**18**	Work-in-Progress by Joanne Lafler.
February	**28**	Annual Membership Meeting.
March	**21**	Work-in-Progress by Jody Offer.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Please send all of your *Newsletter* material to Peter Browning. You may use any PC word-processing format—or as a PC-ASCII file if you use a Macintosh. It is highly desirable to send hard copy as well as computer files, e-mail submissions, or e-mail attachments.

Send book reviews and books to be reviewed to Autumn Stanley. Please send Membership News to Peter Browning.

Deadline for the Winter 2003–2004 *Newsletter:* **30 January.**

The *Newsletter* is sent to all members. Non-members who wish to receive it and to get regular announcements of Institute events are invited to make tax-deductible contributions to assist with the cost of printing and mailing.

Direct membership inquiries to:
Membership Chair, P.O. Box 5743,
Berkeley, CA 94705

The Institute is affiliated with the National Coalition of Independent Scholars (NCIS) and with the American Historical Association (AHA).

The Newsletter is the official publication of the Institute for Historical Study, a scholarly organization designed to promote the research, writing, and public discussion of history. Membership in the Institute is open to independent and academically affiliated scholars who are in agreement with its aims and who have a commitment to historical study. Membership inquiries should be sent to the Institute address.

The Institute for Historical Study
P.O. Box 5743
Berkeley, CA 94705
(510) 540-8415

http://www.tihs.org

Non-profit Org
U.S. Postage
PAID
Oakland, CA
Permit No. 498