

THE INSTITUTE FOR HISTORICAL STUDY

VOLUME 42, NO. 4, SPRING 2023

NEWSLETTER

“The Historical Play Reading Group – A Chapter in Our History” by Oliver B. Pollak

During her first presidency, theater historian Joanne Lafler used the Summer 1986 newsletter to invite members to start a History Play Reading Group. At the earliest Institute meeting in 1979 study groups had been deemed vital; by 1984 two groups had been successfully launched, with the Play Reading Group in 1986 becoming the third.

Joining Joanne as an early enthusiast was Lorrie O’Dell (future Institute president). The two were “indefatigable.” By the time the Fall 1986 newsletter appeared the new group had met three times. From 1986 to 2020 the Play Readers read about 129 plays by 80 playwrights, from 13 countries; 12 of the authors were women, and 22 plays were about women. Meeting every four to six weeks they read three to four plays a year. Plays were selected democratically.

Members purchased, borrowed library copies, or were provided copies of the plays. They met in each other’s San Francisco, East Bay, and Marin County homes to read historical plays out loud accompanied by finger food, coffee, wine, and arguing “endlessly about departures from historical truth.” Well written reports by Joanne, Lorrie, and Edith Piness for the newsletter outlined the plays’ action and importance in theater history and sometimes captured Play Readers’ discussion.* On occasion members enjoyed theater parties at the American Conservatory Theater, including *Gems of the Ocean* by August Wilson and Schiller’s *Mary Stuart*.

Joanne pointed out “there’s no homework—we just read aloud.” Lorrie added “although every play is a historical document we want to dig into the playwright’s thinking about an actual event.” The plays imaginatively recounted political power among Biblical leaders, Roman emperors, English monarchs, Russian tsars, French and German aristocrats, presidents, pretenders, and associated war, revolution, civil war, and skullduggery, all playwright grist.

Play Readers shared their theatrical passion at Institute annual meetings, summer picnics, fall potlucks, and winter banquets. The 1989 bicentenary of the French Revolution was observed with a reading of *The Trial of Olympe de Gouges*, a feminist victim of the revolution. At the 1997 annual meeting at Oakland’s new Rockridge Branch Library, attended by some 50 people, the Play Readers presented “Staging History.” Judith Offer discussed her manumission play *Breaking Free*; Bonda Lewis performed as Jane Austin; six members read from Bertolt Brecht’s *Galileo*, Robert Bolt’s *A Man for All Seasons*, and Alan Bennett’s *The Madness of King George*. “A delighted audience, immediately responding to an informal poll, indicated that this was one of the best annual meeting presentations ever held. . . . With the buzz of conversation found in most after-theater crowds, the . . . historical drama fans adjourned for a social hour at outgoing-president Georgia Wright’s rebuilt [after the 1991 fire] Berkeley Hills home.”

Participants at the November 2007 annual dinner listened to carefully “staged” excerpts of Shaw’s *Caesar and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, John Osborne’s *Luther*, and Tom Stoppard’s *Travesties*. Lorrie and Edith wrote: “Members of the audience commented on the different interpretations of Cleopatra and asked for a little better explanation of ‘what was going on’ in the scenes from *Travesties*. A lot of comments focused on Luther’s struggle, many from those who had little specific knowledge of the Reformation. The performance was clearly enjoyed by the audience and player alike.”

– *Continued on back page*

PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

As the new president of the Institute, I want to pay tribute to two past presidents and founders, Joanne Lafler and Lorrie O’Dell. Sadly, they, along with another longtime and much-admired member, Oscar Berland, passed away during the first quarter of this year. This issue is dedicated to them.

Many years ago Institute president Joanne Lafler recognized the dedication of three board members (Jules Becker, Georgia Wright, and Lorrie O’Dell) as their terms came to an end: “They have contributed a lot more than mere job descriptions would indicate. It is an understatement to say they will be missed.” I concur with her sentiments. As they leave the board of directors, I want to thank my predecessor, Ann Harlow, who has served as president since 2018, and board member Oliver Pollak for their excellent work on behalf of the Institute.

I look forward to working with the current board—Jim Gasperini, Marilyn Geary, Dan Kohanski, Louis Trager, and recently elected Peter Meyerhof and Tim Welsh, as well as two former presidents—Mike Griffith and Rob Robbins. Their commitment and expertise will continue to benefit the Institute and make my job as president less daunting.

I appreciate all members who carry on the legacy of the founders, past presidents, and board members to ensure that the Institute remains a vibrant, supportive community of historians. To maintain this goal, it is imperative that we continue to publicize the Institute and attract new members.

An outreach opportunity for the Institute will take place at the library I manage, the Merced Branch of the San Francisco Public Library. An Open House will be held there on the afternoon of Saturday, May 13th. Tabling at this event will enable our representatives to pass out flyers, speak with the public about Institute activities and other benefits of membership, give away history books donated by members, and recruit new members. We need volunteers!

The 2024 annual meeting of the American Historical Association in San Francisco could provide another venue for recruiting new members. At a previous AHA annual meeting held in San Francisco in 2002, Frances Richardson Keller introduced me to the Institute via a reception co-sponsored by the Institute and the National Coalition of Independent Scholars. Who knows, perhaps a future IHS president could be introduced to our organization during the event next year.

I anticipate that by working together, we will be continuing the work started by the founders to support independent historians and their projects.

As we mourn the loss of our colleagues, we carry on with gratitude for their vision, dedication, and hard work. The success of the Institute during the next 44 years is up to us.

– *Elizabeth Thacker-Estrada*

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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.

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

IN MEMORIAM

The deaths of three longtime members in three months is a record for the Institute. Lorrie O'Dell and Joanne Lafler were among the dedicated and hardworking founders of the Institute for Historical Study in the fall of 1979. Lorrie had ceased active participation some time ago due to ill health. Joanne was as active as ever (within the confines of Zoom meetings) and her death came as a shock, as she was expected to recover from a recent fall. Chronologically Oscar Berland could claim the most senior status; his recent illness was of short duration. Member Harvey Schwartz, another early joiner, commented, "Yes, I knew Oscar for a long time. I met him in graduate school many moons ago. He was one of a kind, yeah, I'll miss him for sure." I am reminded of Joanne's assertion in the Spring 1986 issue of the newsletter that "we are an organization of feisty and independent individuals." With the passing of these three, we are perhaps just a bit less feisty but probably still as independent.

Thank you to the various members who contributed to this special issue of the newsletter and shared their memories of our late colleagues. – Ed.

Lorrie O'Dell

To me, Lorrie was a friend, an example of how to act, and an incredible historian. I met Lorrie soon after joining the Institute and was so pleased with this woman of such academic standing who let Jean Wilkinson and myself know about the importance of the work we were doing bringing women's history into middle and high school classes. She would tell us that this was the best way to reach others and would constantly ask how our efforts were going.

Some years later I got to know Lorrie even better. She and I were part of a small women's group within the Institute who wished to write a piece called the Life of the Mind—the idea being that we each would try to uncover why we

had developed a passion for inquiry that led to our devotion to history. Other members were Ellen Huppert, Joanne Lafler, and Deborah Frangquist. Here Lorrie told us of growing up in Chicago in a strong German Lutheran family, who associated mainly with other Lutherans, and how she began to distance herself from her family and her social milieu, as well as from the 1950s expectations of women, by immersing herself in intellectual pursuits. In doing so she developed a strong sense of independence and freedom. Later, with a PhD in European History from the University of California Davis, Lorrie joined folks constrained by the university system to become a charter member of the Institute in 1979.

A couple years after she met Joanne Lafler, Joanne once exclaimed "Lorrie, you know everything!" Lorrie didn't think so, but sometimes it really seemed like she did. Within the Institute her natural leadership skills and drive positioned her to become a presenter describing the organization to other Bay Area groups, serving as president from Spring 1989-February 1991 and again from Spring 2001-Winter 2002, and giving untold service years as corresponding secretary, keeper of the archives, mailing lists, and calendar, and serving as newsletter editor. For most of this time she worked in San Francisco for the Bank of America managing writers and editors.

Lorrie continued to sharpen her independent scholarly interests by helping establish groups such as the History Play Readers and Bancroft Reader's Roundtable. She also helped form the monthly World History Study Group which I happily joined. John Rusk, Ellen Hubert, Nancy Zinn, Bob O'Dell, and sometimes Maria Sakovich and Georgia Wright also joined the group which first focused on 19th century Europe, then the Medieval world, and finally on any aspect of global history we wished. Meeting monthly at different homes, we each selected a topic of interest to talk about, sometimes all

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reading the same book. Here Lorrie sparkled by presenting fascinating topics and insightful responses. She also made sure we all had a chance to express ourselves without interruption. And, when she was unable to move about, she held the monthly meetings in her home propped up in the bed placed in her living room. When I entered she would be listening to opera. Her ability to sing and love of music constantly stayed with her.

Always beside Lorrie was Bob, the model husband who made sure she could attend meetings and was attentive to her needs when things were difficult, particularly in those eight years when she was bedridden. A thank you, too, from me to you, Bob.

– Lynn Reese

Probably written by Joanne Lafler, Spring 1989 newsletter: “A European historian with a concentration on the history of women, Lorrie has been a mainstay of the French Revolution bicentennial committee. She is especially interested in the question of whether films can be good history and would like to stimulate greater interest in the historical critique of creative uses of the past.”

Maria Sakovich: When Lorrie asked me if I wanted to take her position as editor of the newsletter, I wasn't sure. I told her that I would try it out, for a sort of probationary period. We never agreed on the length of probation. That was in early 2010! Thank you, Lorrie, for this interesting experience.

Oscar Berland

Longtime Institute member Oscar Berland passed away on March 21, 2023, at his home in El Cerrito after a short illness. He is survived by his partner, Paulette Comeau, and cousins in Pennsylvania. Oscar was born in New York City in 1927. He grew up in the United Workers

Cooperative Colony, famously known as the “Coops,” and attended the City College of New York. Oscar was a member of the Communist Party of the United States between the late 1940s and 1956. In 1948, he went to Birmingham, Alabama and then to Durham, North Carolina to work for labor reform and civil rights in the segregated American South. Oscar's party code name then was “Charles Pierce.” He was arrested in 1951 by a plainclothes Birmingham police agent for throwing leaflets out of a window announcing that another policeman had bombed the houses of two African Americans. In 1956, Oscar left the party after the public release of Nikita Khrushchev's stunning report of that year denouncing the crimes of the Stalin era.

Oscar turned to scholarship in the 1960s. During the years 1960 to 1964, he exchanged letters with the noted University of California labor economist Ira B. Cross. Subsequently, he moved to California to study here. His historical writings are still cited today. In 1962, the *Sierra Club Bulletin* published Oscar's “Giant Forest's Reservation: The Legend and the Mystery,” an often-cited article about California's utopian Kaweah Colony. Oscar's innovative 1966 San Francisco State University MA thesis was entitled “Aborted Revolution: A Study in the Formative Years of the American Labor Movement, 1877- 1886, with Special Reference to the International Workmen's Association of San Francisco.” He also did graduate work at the University of California, Davis, and wrote theoretical articles, including, in 1966, “Radical Chains: Marxian Concepts of Proletarian Mission” for *Studies on the Left*. During 1999-2000, he penned a two-part set of articles called “The Communist Perspective on the ‘Negro Question’ in America, 1919-1931,” for *Science & Society*.

Oscar also wrote a volume of unpublished poetry, was active in Yiddish and labor history

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reading groups, worked as a machinist, built his own telescope, taught in a vocational school, studied Polish Jewish culture, and enjoyed playing the mandolin. Very much a social person, he had a buoyant, charismatic personality. Always inquisitive, he eagerly embraced life to the fullest.

– *Harvey Schwartz and Paulette Comeau*

Leslie Friedman: I am sorry to learn that Oscar Berland has been added to the list of lost members. He was an energetic, very interesting and intelligent person. And I really only knew him by email.

Maria Sakovich: Oscar wore his years lightly. I remember sitting at a small table at Emeryville's Denny's restaurant for a board meeting (!). I think he had been recently elected, but stated that he really didn't want to serve. "I'm over 90 . . ." I was so surprised to learn this that I blurted out something like "Oh, my goodness . . ."

Joanne Lafler

Joanne earned her PhD in theater history from UC Berkeley in 1974. An expert on 18th-century theater, Joanne wrote the book *The Celebrated Mrs. Oldfield: The Life and Art of an Augustan Actress*, which was published by the Southern Illinois University Press in 1989. In addition, she penned several articles about 18th-century actresses and the steadily growing role of women in the early modern theater.

Joanne enjoyed both teaching and the occasional staging of plays, but, like so many able scholars, she was unable to find a permanent academic position. In response, she became an outstanding independent scholar who was also one of the founders of both the Institute for Historical Study and the National Coalition of Independent Scholars (NCIS). She was a founding editor of H-Scholar, an H-Net discussion list sponsored by NCIS. She served as president of the Institute from 1986 to 1989.

In 1988 she was elected to the founding board of the new NCIS, and in 1992 became its president.

Besides her dedicated work as a founding member of the Institute and service as president Joanne was also a long time board member, even when not holding office. She was the first newsletter editor as well as an inveterate contributor to the newsletter throughout her 44-year membership.

Joanne married John Lafler, an artist photographer and an early programmer (one of those who was part of the invention of the idea) in August 1960; they had two beloved daughters and one granddaughter.

Over the past several years, Joanne researched and wrote a book about John's father, Henry Anderson Lafler, an essayist, publisher, and poet, who survived and eloquently chronicled the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, and became a central figure in the early 20th-century San Francisco literary community. Joanne's book, "The King of Telegraph Hill: A Californian and His Dream," is based on family diaries, letters and papers, and other primary materials, many found in the UC Berkeley Bancroft Library and the Huntington Library. This book is currently being edited and published by Beth Wright (daughter of a late Institute founder, Georgia Wright) at her press, Wright for Writers.

We had the pleasure of being members of the Institute's Biography Writers Group (now the Writers Group) with Joanne. In addition to the enjoyment we found in her writing, she offered always insightful and constructive observations on ours.

Joanne was a delight in all ways, and like so many Institute members, our hearts will always hold her.

– *Bonda Lewis and Elizabeth Thacker-Estrada*

IN MEMORIAM

Cornelia Levine: Joanne's death was so sudden that I still can't quite grasp that she's not with us anymore. She was generous with her engagement with your ideas or work; she was solid and not holding back in her critiques but never unkind. She spoke her mind with precision and she continued to be a scholar until her end. I will sorely miss her—do already—and send my warm wishes to her family and friends for solace and peace.

Cathy Robbins: Joanne was always a sharp and vibrant writer and critic. She also offered her support for the Institute in other ways.

Esther Mordant: What sad news! I remember Joanne very well and was always grateful for her contributions to the Writers Group. Please pass our condolences to Joanne's loved ones.

Maria Sakovich: Joanne was one of the very best newsletter writers. I shall miss that very much. I had been really looking forward to her being at my forthcoming May talk.

Edith (Edee) Piness: Joanne and I very much enjoyed one another's company. We found many similarities in our upbringing, so much so that we began to call one another "cousin." That was delightful. I shall miss her very much as I shall miss the others who have passed on.

Rob Robbins: The death of Joanne Lafler is a tremendous loss for the Institute. One of the founding members of IHS, she was its heart and soul, the embodiment of its spirit and values. She actively participated in all the dimensions of the organization and infused them with her energy, kindness, and humor. She was an invaluable source of information about the history and practices of the Institute and full of ideas about its future directions. As a member of the Writers Group, she was a careful, thoughtful, and gentle critic of all the works presented for discussion. My own work benefitted tremendously from her suggestions. I

will miss her wisdom and warm friendship very much.

Elizabeth "Liz" Nakahara: Joanne gave me rides to the writing group whenever it met in San Francisco or beyond. I always enjoyed our carpool conversations. Also, I worked with Joanne on finding and hiring a website designer when the Institute's original website seemed outdated. I think that Joanne, Bonnie Portnoy, and I made a good team. And I think our hire's design of the Institute's current website is a winner. Joanne was a wonderful buddy and teammate.

Marilyn L. Geary: When I think of Joanne, I hear her voice: distinctive, melodious, articulated. She delivered insights at the Writers Group meetings in a sonorous tone that added depth to her incisive comments. Somehow her voice evoked the past for me, reminiscent of actors and actresses in films of the Thirties. A bygone time. Yet Joanne kept current. Just a month before her death, she forwarded an article to Institute members on "The Efficacy of ChatGPT" and contributed a front page article on Jack London and racism to the newsletter. Her leading voice made significant, irreplaceable contributions to the Institute.

Carol Sicherman: While I'm aware of Joanne's central role in starting and sustaining the Institute, my indebtedness to her is more personal than historical. For me, her generosity took two forms. She was a driver: an indefatigable driver to innumerable gatherings and meetings in the East Bay and San Francisco, and a driver of discussions en route and during the gatherings. Second, her exceptional friendliness warmed this new Oaklander's heart with her rare gift of intimacy and trust.

Jim Gasperini: I first met Joanne when the Writers Group still met in person, alternating meetings on either side of the Bay. Every other

month a group from the East Bay would meet near a donut shop in Oakland, squeeze into Joanne's little car, and ride over as Joanne led lively conversation. I also rode with her to meetings of the Play Readers at her good friend Ellen Huppert's lovely home in one of the Heights. I was fortunate to be able to briefly get to know these grande dames of the Institute. I enjoyed Joanne's wide-ranging curiosity, gregarious engagement with the world, and perceptive observations about my writing and that of others.

Ann Harlow: Joanne and I made an instant connection when I joined 20 years ago, because her biography subject and mine overlapped. We met monthly as the Biography Writers Group for several years, and later I participated in the Play Readers Group, appreciating all the work she put into choosing each play (with our input), doing some research on it, and getting copies made. I have so many other fond memories, including carpooling to Institute events and the time she visited my husband while he was in a rehab facility after a bad accident. Joanne was an outstanding leader, researcher, writer, and friend, and the Institute won't be the same without her.

Linda Baines, president, NCIS: Joanne's role in establishing the National Coalition for Independent Scholars with her close colleague Margaret de Lacy was fundamental in developing the firm foundations on which the organization is based. In her work as a member of the board of NCIS and later as president, she helped to establish the concept of "independent scholarship" and showed how independent scholars could participate in and contribute to the creation of new ideas and knowledge. Without Joanne's hard work and unfailing support for other independent scholars, NCIS would not be flourishing in the way that it is, as an international global organization, with partner groups in many countries around the world.

Rob Robbins wrote with more sad news. "Those who enjoyed **Marina Oborotova's** fine presentation "The Joy of Life: Impressionists and Post-Impressionists in Russia," will be saddened to learn that she died at the end of February 2023. The Institute board of directors awarded Marina a year's membership as compensation for her talk and in the hopes of her continued participation. Unfortunately, this was not to be."

Deanna Paoli Gumina recently joined the Institute, for a second time, so she is not quite a new member. She is the author of *The Italians of San Francisco 1850 to 1930/Gli Italiani di San Francisco* (1985), written in English on one side with the Italian translation opposite. It was well received, followed by four printings. For this work Deanna earned the "Medaglia d'Ore" in Lucca, Italy. Over the years, she has written about various local Italo American figures as Andrea Sbarboro, as well as on Italian cuisine and San Francisco's Italian restaurants (including "A Toast To Paoli's Restaurant"), fishermen of San Francisco Bay, and the Italian variety theater. She is currently writing an article on the Italian enemy aliens in San Francisco. She has also written about San Franciscans Lillie Hitchcock Coit, illustrator and artist Ernest Peixotto, and writer Kathleen Norris, including the biography, *A Woman of Certain Importance*. Deanna's latest research topic is home economics in San Francisco private and public schools up to the 1960s. Deanna is retired as a learning specialist working with disabled children and adults.

In January **Elizabeth Thacker-Estrada** participated in a program, sponsored by the First Ladies Association for Research and Education (FLARE), about Julia Gardiner Tyler (1820-1889), the second wife of President John Tyler and the first lady of the United States (June 26, 1844 -March 4, 1845). Liz delivered an introduction to the era of Julia Tyler and

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moderated the question-and-answer session that followed the presentation, “The First Rose of Texas was the ‘Rose of Long Island.’”

Chris Webber announced his latest publishing venture: *The Beowulf Trilogy*, published by Open Road Media. In this book Chris shares his own translation of the original epic and also answers the question of what happens next, with two epic poems of his own. He writes: “In ‘Beyond Beowulf,’ the Geats welcome a new leader, Wiglaf, the young warrior who aided Beowulf in his encounter with the dragon. He helps the tribe search for a new home while contending with threats from storms, trolls, and the Saxon army. Then, in ‘Yrfa’s Tale,’ the warrior’s viewpoint gives way to the perspective of Wiglaf’s wife and family, and the emotional toll of their struggle.”

Steve Levi writes that his “in-the-weeds book” on the building of the Alaska Railroad, *A Rat’s Nest of Rails*, will be out soon. “That the Alaska Railroad, the only government-funded railway in American history, was ever built is astonishing. It was constructed over the most treacherous terrain in the world during the most violent political era in US history. The work force included anarchists, Bolsheviks, socialists, syndicalists, and labor union organizers. Construction took place in the midst of the Great War, Spanish influenza, Russian Revolution, and the Great Red Scare; US troops were sent to Siberia to keep Russian socialism from our shore, and Japan was gobbling up colonies from Southeast Asia to Siberia.” An audio visual preview of the book can be found at <https://youtu.be/k095pL17qaA>.

“The Who, What, When, Where, How and Why of Paraplegic Vivian Edward’s Transcontinental Goat Cart Odyssey, 1907-1910” by Oliver B. Pollak

While preparing *Jewish Life in Omaha and Lincoln: A Photographic History* (Arcadia, 2001), I included a 1922 postcard of four South

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Omaha children and a goat cart. (I knew two of the children.) In May 2022 I looked at the book again and thought the goat cart card was an unfinished story. The internet produced a bonanza of images of goat carts in parks and zoos, in use by street merchants, peddlers, water deliverers, entertainers, itinerant photographers, and disabled people—eBay alone offered about 170 postcards. I also discovered a large goat postcard collection in Petaluma in nearby Sonoma County. I wrote an article, “Goat Carts and Postcards,” which appeared in January 2023 on the Postcard History website.

I was especially intrigued by postcards of the disabled Vivian Marion Lloyd Edwards, whose goat cart enabled him to earn a living and gain some fame as well. His story was too big to include in my article so it became the topic for my February Monthly Presentation. Though paralyzed from the waist down from the age of four, Edwards’ engaging personality and entrepreneurial spirit created an indomitable image, a model for overcoming limitations.

Born in Lansing, Iowa in 1856, Edwards moved to Hastings, Nebraska and attracted the attention of the press starting in the early 1880s. In 1888 he trained goats to pull his specially fitted wagon. From 1889 to 1906 he earned a living raising and selling goats and farming. He also toured Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, Montana, Washington, and Oregon exhibiting his goats at fairs, where he also played the violin, and sold popcorn. One of Edward’s exploits was a train ride from Butte, Montana to Chicago to exhibit his goats at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition.

Starting in San Diego on April 1, 1908, a cavalcade of five goats, three burros, a dog, and up to six men began a trip to New York, traveling across deserts, mountains, and rivers. The troupe wintered in Kansas City and arrived in New York on September 17, 1909. Edwards took photographs of his entourage and turned them into postcards which he sold as mementos

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along the road to gawking observers and bemused children. “Captain” Edward’s progress was covered by hundreds of newspaper articles. As he had done earlier, he sold popcorn and peanuts; he performed at amusement parks, county fairs, and dime museums. He gave testimonials for medical treatment and took on public speaking engagements. He visited Washington DC in 1910. He got pneumonia in August and died in Uniontown, Pennsylvania on September 9, 1910; he is probably buried in an unmarked grave. Even after he died, his troupe, on the return trip to San Diego, continued to sell postcards to cover expenses.

Writers Group

As befits the start of a year, our Writers Group looked both backwards and forward. The first two sessions (January and February) were devoted to the work of Jim Gasperini as he seeks to finish his encyclopedic study “Fire in the Mind,” an account of the ways that humans have conceived of fire. Jim’s book has spanned ages and cultures and now he ends it with a final chapter and a coda. The last chapter focuses on modern fire ritual and on Jim’s personal experience with the “Burning Man” festival. The book’s coda tries to bring us back to the general theme with a broad rumination about our connection to fire and our continued fascination with what Jim terms our “non-human relative.”

These two sections provoked vigorous discussion and profound admiration. A number of us felt that Jim may have given too much attention to the modern festival which appeared to some a trifle “cultish.” On the other hand, there was wild applause for the coda which reminds us of the fact that we humans are “fire drunken.” Jim’s final words seemed appropriate and moving: “For better or worse, fire is an essential part of who we are. We grew up with it, we cannot live without it, it is ours—our divine spark, our companion, our servant, our cook, our protector, at times our nightmare, our

tie to times past and times to come, and our portal into the great mysteries.”

In our February session, we took up a much more practical matter, a discussion of Jim’s draft of a book proposal for potential agents and publishers. Everyone agreed that the draft that Jim had developed was solid and workmanlike. Not all were sure it would produce a “Fire in the Mind” for agents or publishers. Everyone had suggestions to make, drawing on their own successes and failures. It is uncertain whether Jim garnered much wisdom or many useful ideas, but at the very least he could bask in the good wishes and admiration of his colleagues.

Our March session brought us to a beginning—John Barnard’s book entitled “The Creole Incident: The Beginning of the End of Slavery.” The book centers on the uprising of African-American slaves aboard the brig *Creole*—an event John describes and the most successful slave revolt in US history. But there is much more to this story than successful revolt. John maintains that the Creole incident was “a calculated, premeditated course of action that involved a handful of radical abolitionists and some of the highest officials in the United States Government at the time. It clearly determined the beginning of the end of slavery.”

John has already completed the research and writing of this fascinating book and is in the process of editing it for publication. The members of the group provided extensive technical criticisms and suggestions. But these did not indicate any lack of enthusiasm for a work that is both important and timely. We eagerly await the opportunity to see more of what John has produced.

— **Rob Robbins**

BOOK REVIEW

Miners, Milkers, & Merchants: From the Swiss-Italian Alps to the Golden Hills of Australia and California by Marilyn L. Geary
(Life Circle Press, 2021)

Marilyn Geary's latest publication is part biography, part immigration history, part local history. Marilyn explores the lives of some of the men who left Ticino, the Italian-speaking canton of Switzerland, beginning in the middle of the 19th century. At the center of her story are the Rotanzi brothers, Francesco, Virgilio, and Alessandro, and their father Luigi. The first-named emigrated to the gold fields of Victoria, Australia in 1855 (at the age of 16) and the latter two to California in 1861 and 1862 (at the ages of 16 and 19). Though the small village of Peccia (300 inhabitants) was poor, the family enjoyed middle-class status and the sons left with decent educations. Luigi, a teacher and district judge, had started a new family with a second wife, following the death of his sons' mother. He did not like that his sons migrated so far away, but he understood why and he was willing and able to loan money for their trips.

The Alpine landscape of Ticino offered great beauty and wonderful air to breathe but little arable land from which to make a living. Before 1850 generations of men worked during the autumn and winter months in the Italian provinces of Lombardy and Piemonte across the border. This seasonal migration came to a halt when the Ticinese began helping their neighbors to the south to overthrow the Austrian Hapsburg monarchy. Some joined the Risorgimento as fighters, or gathered arms, produced propaganda, or provided asylum to thousands of Italians who found refuge in Ticino. In retaliation the Austrians set up economic blockades, forcing thousands of Ticino laborers out of Northern Italy, back into their canton. This expulsion coincided with a constellation of "bad weather, poor harvests, a potato blight, and an epidemic of foot-and mouth disease that ravaged livestock." How was the population to survive?

Migration for longer than the traditional seasonal sojourns, especially to Australia and California, provided a solution for some. Between 1850 and the early 1900s, Ticino lost 20 percent of its population, almost all male. In one region, the Vallemaggia, a small valley just 30 miles long, the home of the Rotanzi family, 40 percent of the population left. Families mourned the loss (some times temporary, sometimes permanent) of sons, brothers, husbands. Though many intended to return, only one-third to a half made the journey back.

Luigi and his sons kept in touch via letter-writing, not entirely satisfactory because it took four months for letters from Australia to arrive at Peccia, and another four months for a reply, if the correspondents wrote regularly, which was not generally the case. Marilyn discovered their correspondence, collected in a book she found at the Marin County Free Library, *L'emigrazione ticinese in California* and later *L'emigrazione ticinese in Australia* by Italian scholar Giorgio Cheda. Intrigued after translating one letter, she went on to translate them all. "A challenge," she writes, "they wrote in an archaic Italian with a sprinkling of dialect, sometimes omitting punctuation." I was glad that Marilyn chose to "stay true to their voice and to the formality of their language." The letters form the base layer of Marilyn's rich descriptive narrative.

To provide context to the correspondence and to supply much that was missing in the letters, Marilyn undertook in-depth research using "other contemporaneous sources, including local newspapers, brochures, and guidebooks for immigrants" as well as trips to Victoria and Ticino. Thus she is able to provide a wealth of detail about many aspects of their lives: for example, travel to their destinations—"I would not wish this trip on anyone"; mining practices and mining camps—"Mining is exhausting and scarcely profitable. . . ." When Virgilio lands his first job at Ghirardelli's soda factory in Oakland, readers learn about Ghirardelli as

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immigrant and entrepreneur (“one of the wealthiest men in California”) and the conditions for his workers, and even the process of bottling soda water, sometimes hazardous if the bottles exploded. When Alessandro becomes ill we learn about 19th-century medicine and its reliance on “laudanum and morphine, lead acetate, calomel tablets or mercurous chloride, and blue mass pills, which also contained mercury.” Maybe it was fortunate that the newly arrived immigrant could not afford to pay for a physician and relied on the care of “an Italian woman, a well-known healer.”

An important part of the narrative are the networks of the Rotanzi brothers that Marilyn’s research unearthed. We are introduced to a variety of Italian speakers. Especially in the early days of adjusting to a wholly new environment and language, immigrants relied on each other for survival; later they worked together for the greater good of their fellow countrymen and their new communities. In the swiftly developing villages of Hepburn Springs and Daylesford, Victoria, Francesco and others as members of the Swiss and Italian Association created the Italian Library for their fellow speakers of the language. For the community as a whole, the Italian-speaking Committee Established for the Mineral Springs of Hepburn worked to counter the destruction that mining was bringing to the natural springs in the area. By 1865 Francesco and the eight other committee members managed to preserve an acre of mineral springs, which increased to 74 acres in the early 1900s. Today this area is known as “Spa Country,” attracting thousands of visitors.

Descriptions of the varied experiences of the Rotanzis and their compatriots bring into relief what I learned when working for a small church-based operation helping Soviet immigrants in the 1990s: not everyone is equipped or predisposed to successful adaptation. Marilyn writes of Virgilio, in Northern California: “While [his] travel companions had been building solid fortunes, Virgilio had been amassing mountains

of debt. . . . Virgilio lacked patience. He giddily skipped over many hard years of working as a milker and manager of a rented dairy. [Instead] he jumped directly into purchasing a ranch.” Francesco made his way more slowly and surely. By the time he became a naturalized British subject, thirteen years after emigrating, he was legal manager for two mining companies, the clerk for a road district board, an early form of local government, and he continued to participate in local good works, including a flood relief fund for Ticino. Though he had lost savings in mining investments, he continued to hope that he might still become rich.

What is often missing from immigration stories are the experiences and feelings of those left at home. Luigi’s letters to his sons keep them in touch with family and local events, including the rains which had “swept away entire villages and roads as well as drowning livestock, damaging crops, and killing villagers,” and generated another flow of emigration. (Devastating rains occurred again eight years later.) Luigi writes of the loss of his prestigious position, due to a shift in power from liberals to conservatives; he drops out of circulation, commenting, “I have only melancholy and sadness for company.” Of course he worries about his sons and tries to cope with his frustration that they don’t write more. At one point he endures haunting nightmares about Francesco. Ultimately Luigi outlives his far-away sons. The cost of migration for those left behind can be high.

The appeal of Marilyn’s detailed biographical approach is that readers are drawn into these life trajectories and come to care about the young men and their compatriots. As their lives unfold we learn of their difficulties as well as the broader horizons which opened up to them. Her use of abundant detail provides readers an almost vicarious experience of day-to-day life and a keen understanding of context.

Learning about the Rotanzis mid-19th century experiences also brings to mind today’s

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migrants. Perhaps the biggest difference between the 19th and 21st centuries for migrants (besides easier communication with those at home) is governmental control over immigration. (Although control in the United States began with the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, various restrictions characterize the first half of the 20th century.) Comparisons also reveal that much in the migrant experience has not changed. For some dreams are realized; for others it is the children who benefit; and for yet others obstacles prove stronger than dreams.

– *Maria Sakovich*

Although David Rosen submitted the essay below some time ago, I kept postponing its inclusion into the newsletter because of its length. Its fine writing and quiet probing of the gray areas of history, however, seems an appropriate tribute to the three excellent historians whom we've lost this winter.

QUERIDO

“Not a Teaspoon of Warm Water”

While the folks in America were preoccupied with Vietnam, I was lucky enough to land in Amsterdam with a job teaching history. The only Dutch I could understand were words that were cognates with German. Alas, the pronunciation of vowels and many consonants had mutated over the centuries, so it was fortunate that I found lodging with a charming German woman, who had left the Stuttgart area in 1912. She spoke her own version of Dutch, i.e. German words with Dutch sounds. After taking an intensive night school course I could speak with her like old friends.

Mrs. Querido had three lodgers sharing a kitchen, with a shower enclosed in it, a comfortable situation for that time and place. Awakening late the first morning, still exhausted from jet lag and apartment hunting, I warmed up the water to a lovely stream and stepped inside. Within 90 seconds the water went frigid and I let out an involuntary yelp before rapidly

finishing my business. In marched an elderly fellow tenant with a triumphant smile, who announced “*geen lepel warme water*” was available in this house at this time. Over a fine hot cup of coffee this fatherly teddy bear hinted without much subtlety that the situation was linked to the landlady’s being married into a Jewish family for 60 years. Consider me a coward if you will, but I played my historian’s role and simply listened.

I rapidly learned that Mr. P had been a card-carrying Dutch fascist in the war, an NSB-er, or member of the local national socialist movement. I eagerly awaited the reasons he chose a Jewish household to dwell in—but with no success. (Incidentally, the third housemate was Jamaican, and I am a blond Jew.) Mijnheer P graciously explained that the hot water supply allowed for one shower every few hours, offering that in the future that he would wash himself in the evenings and ask our third to use the water in the late afternoon—all so that I could do the USA thing and shower before work. He further answered all the typical transport and lifestyle questions I posed over the months about his home town, remaining unstinting in his willingness to assist me.

The War Made Strange Bedfellows

Meanwhile, every month I went down to the basement apartment to pay my bill and sip a long sherry with the flirtatious Mevrouw Querido. She quickly initiated me into the family history, explaining that she had used her German papers and youthful looks to save her husband three times during the war. The third success involved a harrowing trip to Westerbork, the infamous Dutch prison camp, with a Calvinist minister to certify Mr. Querido had converted and signed over all his property to the church. Then, the couple went underground.

You don’t need to be a historian to know how unusual her rescue was. (In fact I know of only one other case, that of the blind Berliner Otto Weidt, who rescued his Jewish secretary

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directly from Auschwitz.) At 72, Mrs. Querido's piercing eyes glowed with inner fortitude and sheer chutzpah when she spoke. Her energy and mental acuity were formidable.

Mrs. Querido had managed a small nursing home in this very house after the family was nearly wiped out in the Great Depression. The house was all they recovered after the war. In any case, the furniture had disappeared, except for her roll top desk. As for the house Nazi, his aunt had been one of her assisted-living patients. Gravely ill, she had exhausted her funds and not been evicted, but allowed to die peacefully, while the handsome, young nephew was rewarded with coffee and cake for his constant care and visits.

In early 1945 the Dutch endured their "hunger winter," suffering the fascist yoke while Paris and Rome were already liberated. Desperately hiding their identity, the Queridos heard the early morning banging on their door, signifying their betrayal yet again by a neighbor. In fact, the fascist militia man sent to arrest them was none other than the young Mr. P, who remembered their generosity and gave them ten minutes to disappear. After the war, the Queridos in turn saved P from the incarceration meted out to the fascists of the Low Countries (in contrast to their continued prosperity in France, Italy, Germany, and even Eastern Europe).

The Fortress of the Loyal Wives

For 20 years I contemplated this story before judging people's actions in the war. I also managed to visit Mrs. Querido five times. The last visit was preceded by a stop in her home town, Heilbronn, a city of 100,000 in Swabia, southwestern Germany. Stopping for a picnic lunch at the Heilbronn castle I was astonished to learn that in the Middle Ages the women of the city had accomplished a unique rescue.

Their town's fortress had been successfully besieged and destroyed by a neighboring rival. In the spirit of chivalry, the women were

permitted to leave before the men were massacred. They were allowed to save what they could carry—and marched out with the men tied to their backs!

Back in Holland, I related the old legend of the Heilbronn Castle to my former landlady and absolutely brought her to tears. She proceeded to tell me that—at 92—she was awaiting her Lord and a reunion with her husband. As I discreetly asked which cemetery he was buried in, she tiptoed over to her desk and jimmied the front drawers. There behind them were two hidden ones. Her ageing family photos had survived the war and were still in hiding, along with her true identity.

Having outlived her peers and the original minister she had cultivated during WWII, she could simply not rest until someone knew the truth. She, too, was Jewish! You can call her "in denial," but she had more or less forgotten her true identity in the war and post-war years. Having met several Europeans with a similar fate, I did not condemn her life "in the closet." She knew she had a friendly audience and finished the family story for me.

It turns out that back in 1912 she had broken the heart of her childhood boyfriend in Heilbronn. This loyal lad thought protectively of her, right up to 1933, when he became a local Nazi official and sent her a coveted "Aryan" identity card. She laughingly put the fake document away, writing her friend that she lived in Holland, a country with a stout tradition of freedom and tolerance, which had welcomed her husband's family four centuries earlier in its flight from the Inquisition. Had he not heard of the famed Portuguese Synagogue? In any case, those hooligans and their shrieking clown would never last a year, everyone familiar with German culture knew that for a fact.

Returning her absent gaze to me, she smiled lovingly and advised me to enjoy every day of my life.

– *David Rosen*

Although the Play Readers began with history plays, the choice of plays eventually broadened. “Our interests have ranged widely” stated Joanne. “The group . . . moved precipitously from Ancient Egypt to the 20th century.” Readers leapt “from science to music, from Darwin to Mozart.” “There was a dramatic change of time, place and subject matter as the group turned to Gore Vidal’s *An Evening with Richard Nixon*.” Then Play Readers “moved back five centuries to an earlier politically-charged era and began reading *Henry IV, Part I*,” about events in 1402. The play, however, was written in 1595 and first performed in 1597.

Play Readers eventually became the oldest active group, leaving an enduring record of 34 years of activities. The most recent reading was in early 2020. In the Spring newsletter Joanne wrote: “Due to winter holidays, interruptions of various kinds, and sheltering in place during the corona virus pandemic, we have read and discussed only one new play since the last newsletter, but its power has stayed with us. If you have seen a performance of Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* on the stage, or as a movie, you will know how we felt.” The Covid pandemic upended the Play Readers: Zoom meetings could not duplicate meeting in person. However, Joanne stated: “We will be sharing ideas about history plays and historical periods that we’re interested in for future readings.” The survival of the Play Readers Group is in doubt. The passing of “stalwarts” Ellen Taylor Huppert (2018), Georgia Sommers Wright (2019), Lorrie O’Dell (January 11, 2023), and Joanne Lafler (March 18, 2023) leaves the future cloudy.

* Participants over the years included, Thelma Bryant, Kathleen Casey, Monica Clyde, Deborah Frangquist, Ruth Friedlander, Jim Gasperini, Ann Harlow, Ellen Huppert, Peter Huppert, Marian Kassovic, Joanne Lafler, Bonda Lewis, Annette McComas, Ross Maxwell, Phyllis Grilikhes-Maxwell, Lorrie O’Dell, Judith Offer, Edith Piness, Anne Richardson, Christopher Webber, Georgia Wright, and Nancy Zinn.

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