

### ***Honest History*, the Adventure Magazine for Young Historians: A Review**

**By Pam Peirce**

I set out to review *Honest History* magazine for children because I thought that it was visually appealing and that it was a fine idea to introduce history to children in a colorful and lively magazine. I liked the title, which implied to me that the magazine would cover some important historical events that I was taught about poorly or not at all. I also thought that the magazine would be of high interest to IHS members who have children or grandchildren. Research has shown that it is the only ongoing world history magazine for children.

I soon discovered that there was more to this entity than its magazine. The company has also published several books and produces a podcast and a blog. So, I dutifully ordered a couple of the books at the library, listened to a couple of podcasts, and read some of the blog. I also ordered three copies of the magazine to read and review. I decided to write mainly about the magazine, with brief comments on the company's other offerings.

I found an online review of the magazine and the company's online presence written by Anne Miller on the website, Smarter Learning Guide, and found that I concurred overall with that review: ([https://smarterlearningguide.com/honest-history-review/#What\\_Is\\_Honest\\_History](https://smarterlearningguide.com/honest-history-review/#What_Is_Honest_History)). The reviewer concluded that the material is appealing and useful, with caveats that it is not a full curriculum and takes a secular—religion-neutral—approach. The Smart Learning Guide website seems to be aimed, in part, at homeschoolers.

The hand-drawn, colorful magazine mixes historical stories with activities that range from the usual mazes and word searches to recipes and creating vanishing ink. The topics covered are wide-ranging—from World War II to ancient Egypt, with a different topic in each issue. Reader reviewers agreed with the Honest History company that children under 6 or over 12 may not enjoy the magazine, but that those in the 6–12 age range are likely to find it engaging.

The company's considerable online presence offsets the high per-issue price (\$17.95 each, with numerous discounted bundles) to some extent. First, subscribers have online access to the entire digital archive of magazine content. Second, anyone, subscriber or not, can access the blog on their website (HonestHistory.co) or their YouTube podcasts, entitled *Anytime Now*.

The Smarter Learning Guide review includes one of the podcasts. It features the story of the H.G. Wells novel, *War of the Worlds*, as presented on “Mercury Theater” on the radio in 1939. It's a lively presentation, featuring the backstory about the history of science fiction, excerpts

—continued on outside back cover

## THE TIMES WE'RE IN...

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Periodically, the American Historical Association issues statements that its Affiliated Societies, including the IHS, are invited to endorse. AHA issued a statement in support of the Smithsonian Institution in response to an Executive Order from President Trump (see the AHA's statement on page 3). His order accuses the Smithsonian of coming "under the influence of a divisive, race-centered ideology" and criticizes the National Museum of African American History and Culture and the forthcoming Smithsonian American Women's History Museum. The fact sheet that accompanied the Executive Order directs the vice president of the United States, who is a member of the Smithsonian Board of Regents, to work to enact the order's mandates at the Smithsonian and its museums, education and research centers, and at the National Zoo.

The IHS board recently approved our institute joining the list of supporters of the AHA statement. In addition, we're preparing an IHS statement regarding this attack on history for the Institute's website that we'll share with IHS members for comments before posting.

—Elizabeth Thacker-Estrada

### **Upcoming Monthly Programs, 10 AM**

Sat., 5/17/25 – Ted Atlas. "Football and

Technology: The Essence of the Bay Area"

Sat., 6/21/25 – Bert Gordon, "Tourism and War: Their Links Through History from Antiquity to Gaza and Ukraine"

Sat., 7/19/25 – Enrico Beltramini, "The Theology Behind Lynn White's Historical Theology

### NEWSLETTER EDITOR

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# STATEMENT FROM THE AMERICAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

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## **Historians Defend the Smithsonian • March 31, 2025**

The Executive Order “Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History,” issued on March 27 by the White House, egregiously misrepresents the work of the Smithsonian Institution. The Smithsonian is among the premier research institutions in the world, widely known for the integrity of its scholarship, which is careful and based on historical and scientific evidence. The Institution ardently pursues the purpose for which it was established more than 175 years ago: “the increase and diffusion of knowledge.” The accusation in the White House fact sheet accompanying the executive order claims that Smithsonian museums are displaying “improper, divisive, or anti-American ideology.” This is simply untrue; it misrepresents the work of those museums and the public’s engagement with their collections and exhibits. It also completely misconstrues the nature of historical work.

Historians explore the past to understand how our nation has evolved. We draw on a wide range of sources, which helps us to understand history from different angles of vision. Our goal is neither criticism nor celebration; it is to understand—to increase our knowledge of—the past in ways that can help Americans to shape the future.

The stories that have shaped our past include not only elements that make us proud but also aspects that make us acutely aware of tragedies in our nation’s history. No person, no nation, is perfect, and we should all—as individuals and as nations—learn from our imperfections.

The Smithsonian’s museums collect and preserve the past of all Americans and encompass the entirety of our nation’s history. Visitors explore exhibitions and collections in which they can find themselves, their families, their communities, and their nation represented. They encounter both our achievements and the painful moments of our rich and complicated past.

Patriotic history celebrates our nation’s many great achievements. It also helps us grapple with the less grand and more painful parts of our history. Both are part of a shared past that is fundamentally American. We learn from the past to inform how we can best shape our future. By providing a history with the integrity necessary to enable all Americans to be all they can possibly be, the Smithsonian is fulfilling its duty to all of us.

The following organizations have signed on to this statement:

American Association for Colleges of Teacher Education • American Association of Geographers • American Political Science Association • American Society for Environmental History • Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies • Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies • Association for the Study of African American Life and History • Association of Research Libraries • Civil Rights Movement Archive • College Art Association • Conference on Asian History • Education4All • Immigration and Ethnic History Society • Institute for Historical Study • Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library • Labor and Working Class History Association • LGBTQ+ History Association • Medieval Academy of America • Midwestern History Association • National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education • National Council on Public History • Network of Concerned Historians • New England Historical Association • North American Victorian Studies Association • Oral History Association • PEN America • Radical History Review • Society of American Archivists • Society of Architectural Historians • Society for Historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era • Society for the History of Children and Youth • Society for US Intellectual History • Southern Association for Women Historians • Western History Association • Woodhull Freedom Foundation

## PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

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On February 22, 2025, for the first time in the Institute’s history, the annual meeting was held in the North Bay—where several Institute members live—in beautiful Mill Valley. The event took place in the spacious meeting hall of the Miller Avenue Baptist Church, the second time in IHS history that the meeting was held in a church. IHS Annual Meeting Committee member John Barnard had reserved the meeting place, and Pastor Kent Philpott graciously welcomed the members. Institute officers and committee members delivered reports on the Writers’ Group, monthly programs, mini-grants, the newsletter, the website, Institute finances, and membership—the Institute gained five new members in 2024.

New members Alice Thacker and Liz Schott delivered presentations on their historical interests. Alice spoke via Zoom from London, describing her volunteer work building a monastic garden at the medieval Merton Priory near her home and excavating at the Neolithic Ness of Brodgar, an archeological site on the main island of Orkney, Scotland. By way of an in-person PowerPoint presentation, Liz discussed her work-in-progress on a biography of textile designer and weaver Dorothy Wright Liebes. Due to technical difficulties, a third new member was unable to deliver his presentation on Zoom. He will present it at next year’s annual meeting.

Bonnie Portnoy spoke about her grandfather in her book, *The Man Beneath the Paint: California Impressionist Tilden Daken*. Her February 24th presentation on Daken at the Book Club of California can be viewed on the Book Club’s YouTube channel. Oliver Pollak reported that he is housing about 12 linear feet of the IHS archives. They are a marvelous source for researching Institute activities. Scholars interested in seeing the collection should contact Oliver.

The Annual Meeting Committee, which scouts and schedules the meeting site, arranges the lunch, and determines the meeting program, is working to ensure a technically sound hybrid annual meeting in 2026. Please contact me if you are interested in helping on this committee.

Two new study groups have been founded this year. Interested members held a brainstorming session for the Jewish History Study Group on January 26th, and the first meeting of the Study Group occurred on March 9th. The brainstorming session for the Women’s History Study Group took place on March 3rd, with the first regular meeting being held on March 24th. Please see Oliver Pollak’s article on the Jewish History Study Group and my article on the Women’s History Study Group on page 9.

Ripe for revival is the California and the West Study Group. Per the Institute roster, at least 30 members have an interest in this topic. If you would like to join other members in planning visits and touring local historic sites, please let me know. The development of study groups of interest to current and potential members encourages the continued growth of the Institute.

—Elizabeth Thacker-Estrada

## MONTHLY PROGRAMS

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**“Jeopardy Doubled: Racialized  
Antisemitism, Interwar Boundaries,  
and the 1924 Immigration Act”  
presented by Susan Breitzer  
January 19, 2025**

The National Origins Act of 1924 (known as the Johnson-Reed Act) was the first law to restrict all immigration to the United States. Although it was not specifically aimed at restricting Jewish immigration, during her IHS presentation via Zoom in January, Susan Breitzer showed how it had the (mostly) unintended effect of trapping Jews in Europe during the Holocaust.

Prior to the late 19th century, most Jewish immigrants came from Spanish and Portuguese countries or from Germany and were not obviously different in appearance from other Americans. But in the last years of that century, many Jews began to immigrate from Eastern Europe and Russia. These Jews were largely poor, and because of their orthodoxy and because they were visibly different in dress, language, and customs, this contributed to a rise in anti-Semitism in the US. In addition, the growing number of immigrants from Asia—China in particular—triggered a generalized xenophobia, leading to various laws aimed at excluding Asians from coming here. The rise of “scientific racism” both in the US and in Europe further contributed to prejudice based on race.

In 1885, there were the first efforts to restrict immigration generally, forbidding employers to pay for passage of job-seeking immigrants. By 1917, immigration laws were crafted to exclude those who might become a public charge—one of many categories of “undesirables” to be excluded from immigrating to the United States.

World War I redrew the boundaries of Europe; suddenly, Jews who lived for centuries in countries favored for immigration to the US now found themselves living in new countries in southern and eastern Europe whose inhabitants were not so easily welcomed. A 1921 law set immigration quotas based on immigration populations as of 1910. But the new 1924 law changed those quotas to where people had come from in 1890. This favored the western and northern European countries where Jews no longer lived. The Johnson-Reed Act also eliminated the religious persecution exemption; a hardship for those Jews living in newly created countries that wanted to get rid of their Jews.

The Great Depression and the rise of Nazi Germany created another impossible situation for Jews. The Nazis were willing to let Jews leave, but only after confiscating most of their wealth. At the same time, the Great Depression had left the United States even more wary of accepting people who might become dependent on public welfare, and the high unemployment of that period also made the US reluctant to accept immigrants who would be seen as competing for scarce jobs.

When Franklin Roosevelt became president, he decided to leave the problem of Jewish emigration from Europe to the State Department, which at that time was heavily anti-Semitic. While the Johnson-Reed Act had not specifically targeted Jews, it gave State Department consuls tools which, when strictly enforced, served to deny entry to almost all Jews trying to escape. American Jews had little influence and were afraid that any efforts they did make to counter the State Department’s resistance would only create a backlash against them.

In 1944, FDR set up the War Refugee Board, which was kept separate from the State Department, to process refugees fleeing the Nazis. The board took in 120,000 refugees, mostly Jews, but by then, the Holocaust was well on its way to killing six million people.

The Johnson-Reed Act was replaced in 1965 by new laws that set immigration quotas on a worldwide basis rather than per country or race.

—Dan Kohanski

**“Black Swan Records and the Harlem Renaissance: The Story of the First Black-owned Record Company, 1921–1923”**

**presented by Bill Doggett  
February 16, 2025**

During Black History Month, this illuminating multimedia program detailed the history of Black Swan Records, a pioneering Black-owned record label founded in 1921. Harry Pace, a visionary African American, founded the company during the Harlem Renaissance and enabled Black musicians and singers to preserve their talents in recorded sound.

In his PowerPoint presentation, Bill Doggett, the curator of the Archive of Race and Performing Arts, played a wide range of excerpts from his collection of early 20th-century sound recordings, which he extensively illustrated with historic films and photographs. This educational and entertaining program placed the history of the record company within the context of African American history

The program began with his film honoring the 150th anniversary of the 1865 signing of the 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery in the United States following the Civil War. The Jim Crow era, which got its name from a minstrel routine, “Jump Jim Crow,” featured post-Reconstruction laws that enforced racial

segregation in the South and encouraged the rise of White supremacist violence against Blacks that included Ku Klux Klan terrorism and lynchings. During the Great Migration, which began in the 1910s, millions of African Americans relocated *en masse* from the South to the North and the West in search of work and a better life. The arrival of African Americans in Harlem, New York, and other cities and the return of Black soldiers from World War I aggravated the racism of longtime White residents, leading to the “Red Summer” of 1919 in which racial violence targeted African Americans across the United States.

Following Reconstruction and the onset of the Jim Crow era, the prevalence of the phonograph and the demand for records helped popularize pre-Civil War nostalgia. The fictional image of the happy slave and the happy “darky” displayed contempt for the humanity of African Americans. A sound recording of “Nigger Blues-Fox-Trot,” produced by Victor Records, which Bill married to a 1903 film of African American dancers performing the cakewalk, demonstrated how Blacks were viewed at the dawn of recorded sound and film. Other examples of the songs of the time included “Darkey Trickle” and “Coon, Coon, Coon” on the Columbia Phonograph label and “Old Plantation Scenes” and “In Monkey Land” on the Victor Records label. Although it is often difficult to listen to these sound recordings, they exemplify the reality that led to the creation of Black Swan Records.

In Harlem in the spring of 1921, Harry Pace founded his record company, naming it Black Swan Records in honor of Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, the mid-19th-century Black soprano described as having the voice of a swan. The company started within weeks of the destruction of the African American Greenwood District in Tulsa, Oklahoma, by vigilante White supremacist mobs. However, also during this

time, the Harlem Renaissance, an intellectual and cultural revival of African American music, dance, art, and literature, began to flourish and featured such musicians as Duke Ellington.

Black Swan Records recorded a generation of classically trained African American singers, musicians, and composers emerging out of the shadow of the Great Migration and World War I, many of whom had been rejected by White-owned Victor, Columbia, and Edison record companies. Pace recorded such artists as sopranos Revella Hughes (“Thank God for a Garden”) and Antoinette Barnes (“Caro Nome”), baritone tressitura C. Carroll Clark (“Nobody Knows de Trouble I’ve Seen”), and Harrod’s Jubilee Singers (“Joshua Fought the Battle of Jericho”). “Oh Daddy,” sung by Ethel Waters, became one of the most commercially profitable records for the company. Despite the successes, the company declared bankruptcy in 1923, and its master recordings were sold to Paramount Records.

Nevertheless, the legacy of Black Swan Records lived on in several subsequent works including the 1930 ballet, *Sahdji*, by William Grant Still, a composer who had been recorded by the label; the 1933 film, *The Emperor Jones*, adapted from the 1920 Eugene O’Neill play and starring Paul Robeson; and George and Ira Gershwin’s 1935 Harlem Renaissance-inspired folk opera, *Porgy and Bess*.

At Black Swan Records, Harry Pace set an example for other record companies by showcasing African American singers and musicians performing Black music, and his label played a major role in reclaiming African American pride through music.

With its songs, orchestral pieces, films, photographs, and narration, this program is an audiovisual tour de force available for viewing on the IHS YouTube channel.

—Elizabeth Thacker-Estrada

## **“Black Doctor: A Biography of James McCune Smith”**

**presented by Chris Webber**

**March 15, 2025**

James McCune Smith was born in New York City in 1813, when slavery was still legal there, to a single woman who had self-emancipated a few months before. His mother had been brought to New York by her owner, who had come from South Carolina to make his fortune selling cotton. He was not successful, and indeed was reduced to living in the worst neighborhood in the city, Five Points, when he learned his slave was pregnant (we assume by him). When he threatened to whip her, she called out that if he did so, she would rip him to pieces. He then left—in effect manumitting her [releasing her from slavery]—and she set out to make a living while raising James, her newborn son, by taking in laundry and repairing clothes. In later years, James would write a story about a laundry woman based on his early recollections.

James showed his intelligence early on and was able to get the benefit of a good education provided by a Quaker institution. When Lafayette visited America and stopped at the Quaker school, James, at age 11, was the child chosen to give the welcoming speech. He did so well that he was asked to go to Philadelphia and repeat his speech there. But there was no real opportunity for a young Black boy in that era to get much further education, even though New York outlawed slavery in 1827. However, a Black pastor at a local Episcopal church took note of him and set about raising money to send the boy to school in Glasgow. It took four years to raise the funds, but that paid for James to study at the finest university in Scotland, where in five years he earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees as well as his medical degree. James McCune Smith was the first Black American to earn an MD from a major medical school.

Smith then returned to New York and set himself up as a doctor. The city he came back to was not the same one he had left; the abolitionist movement had grown with the help of men such as William Lloyd Garrison and Gerrit Smith, and James McCune Smith soon became involved. He had read widely since he was a child—he was one of few to have read Darwin—and his erudition brought him notice. He was asked to deliver an address to a meeting of the American Abolition Society. Although he was expected to discuss abolition in England and France, both countries he was familiar with, he chose instead to urge the society not to focus on slavery in the South, as had been their aim, but to turn first to cleaning their own house in the North.

He would be equally eloquent—and equally controversial—in his other speeches and writings. He used language similar to that which Martin Luther King, Jr., would use a century later in proclaiming that “I have a dream.” (While it is not known if King ever read Smith, there is some evidence that the young Abraham Lincoln did, as he used almost identical language years later that echoed Smith’s insistence that “right makes might.”)

Smith was asked to organize the 1852 Black American conference in Rochester, New York, the last that would be held before the Civil War. Following that success, Smith was chosen to be president of the ongoing national conference of Black Americans, predecessor to the NAACP. He also wrote the introduction to the second version of Frederick Douglass’ autobiography.

Douglass, however, was not so pleased with Smith’s writing when he asked the doctor to write a weekly column for his new newspaper. He and his readers, the Black elite of the day, expected Smith to write about people like themselves, who made their way to success in antebellum America. Smith, however, chose to write about ordinary Black people living ordinary lives (free lives, so perhaps not so

ordinary for those times) and making a success at that. Douglass published each of those columns, but he made it clear it to Smith that this was not what he had wanted.

Starting in 1841, Dr. Smith began to have serious health issues, which troubled him for the rest of his life. He and his wife had ten children, but five of them died well before maturity. Smith eventually poured out his grief over this in a letter to Gerrit Smith, a close friend (perhaps Smith’s only White friend) and colleague in the abolition movement.

That friendship would be sorely tested in 1857. Horace Greeley had written a column in his newspaper calling Blacks lazy and shiftless, and Gerrit Smith wrote a letter in response saying he agreed with him “in the main.” James McCune Smith was so upset and disturbed by this that he waited eight months until he could be calm enough to write to his friend, using statistics and other research to show Gerrit how he was wrong, and offering to meet with him to discuss this issue further. Gerrit preserved the letter and it is now in the archives, but any response he may have made to James has been lost.

Smith died in November 1865 of pleurisy (an infection of the lining around the lungs) that had afflicted him for many years. He did live long enough to see the end of legal slavery. Frederick Douglass wrote a moving tribute to him.

In Chris’ words, few Americans have worked so hard and so tirelessly to reach their desired destiny as James McCune Smith, a man who deserves to be better remembered in history. He hopes that will be aided by his latest book, *Black Doctor*, the first biography of Dr. Smith.

—Dan Kohanski



## SPECIAL GROUP REPORTS

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### **Inauguration of Jewish History Study Group**

Oscar Berland first suggested a Jewish History Study Group in 1982. Forty-two years later in December 2024 Michael Sevel and Louis Trager made a similar suggestion. IHS president Elizabeth Thacker-Estrada presided over a Zoom brainstorming session on January 26th of this year, with the Jewish History Study Group debuting on Zoom on March 9th. Attending the first meeting were Ted Atlas, Peter Crane, Rosalie Feldman, Dan Kohanski, Peter Meyerhof, Esther Mordant, Oliver Pollak, Liz Schott, Steven Sodokoff, Peter Stansky, Liz Thacker-Estrada, and Louis Trager. This report is based on notes, memory, and Liz Thacker-Estrada employing AI to create a text document of meeting proceedings.

Oliver Pollak suggested attendees discuss their individual paths to research in Jewish history. Dan Kohanski mentioned his book on the idea of God in Judaism and an article he's written on David and Abishag that is currently under review. Peter Stansky talked about his interest in Jews in Britain, particularly focusing on the Disraeli and Sassoon families, as well as the development of Jewish studies programs in American universities. Peter Crane discussed his work on the German-Jewish emigrant experience. Peter Meyerhof conducts research on Sonoma's Jewish immigrants. Ted Atlas, a new Institute member, shared his family's history, including its cigar makers. Liz Schott touched upon her interest in Dorothy Wright Liebes, a fabric designer born in Guerneville, California. Oliver described his turn from English, Southeast Asian, and Southern African history to American Jewish history when he moved to Nebraska in the mid-1970s.

Several future discussion topics were suggested. Liz Schott offered the topic of ambivalence towards one's Jewishness. Peter Crane expressed interest in this topic, while also mentioning the external limitations imposed on Jews in various professions. Esther Mordant expressed her desire to facilitate the discussion of the climate of fear that seized many Jews in the Soviet Union.

The conversation ended with the group expressing appreciation for the discussion and looking forward to finding a convenient time and subject for the next meeting.

—**Oliver B. Pollak**

### **Inauguration of Women's History Study Group**

Appropriately, in March, Women's History Month, a new study group of the Institute for Historical Study began: the Women's History Study Group. Women's history is the study of the role that women have played in history: their contributions to nations and civilizations, their activities on behalf of women's rights, and the achievements of individual and collective women. The formal study of women's history began in the 1970s during the second wave of feminism that sought to achieve equality for women in all aspects of life, expanding beyond the first wave's focus on suffrage.

A brainstorming session was held on March 3rd followed by the first regular meeting on March 24th. Members enjoyed a lively discussion on their projects related to women's history. Anne MacLachlan's project highlights the presence of women in the history of the UC Berkeley German Department and the significance of women graduate students in the development of Berkeley as a research university. Playwright

Jody Offer, with the goal of creating “good parts for women” in American history, has written plays about Julia Morgan, Susan B. Anthony, and the woman-dominated Shirtwaist “Strike of 30,000.” Since 2018, Patricia Southard and I have delivered presentations on US first ladies and women’s rights and plan to write a book on this topic. Although most discussions on women’s rights in the United States begin with the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, Patricia’s research goes back through colonial times. I am also working on a biography of First Lady Abigail Powers Fillmore, and Patricia is interested in a project about women librarians through history.

Members discovered areas of overlap in their projects. Dot Brovarney is working on an account of three women writers in the latter half of the 19th century who were associated with the *Overland Monthly* magazine: Ina Coolbrith, Ninetta Eames, and Milicent Shinn. Both Ina Coolbrith and Ninetta Eames played important roles in the lives of Jack and Charmian London, who are the subjects of a book Susan Nuernberg is writing that is scheduled to be published by the University of Nebraska Press. Based on her research on Charmian London’s diaries, she will present Charmian’s perspective on events rather than the typical narrative centered on Jack London. Susan noted the influence of other women like Ina Coolbrith on Jack’s career, and participants discussed the complexities of the relationships among Jack, Charmian, and Charmian’s aunt, Ninetta Eames.

The discussion resulted in collaboration. With their shared interest in Ina Coolbrith, Dot will speak further with Susan regarding resources at the Huntington Library and the Utah State University Library. Anne, with her focus on women graduate students at UC Berkeley, is interested in Dot’s research on Milicent Shinn, who, in 1898, became the first woman to receive a doctorate from that university. Anne stated that

new materials are being sought for the “150 Years of Women at Berkeley” history project. Jody will send Anne her play, “Scenes from the Life of Julia Morgan,” who graduated in engineering from UC Berkeley in 1894, to be considered for inclusion.

Several books were noted. Jody discussed *Bright Circle: Five Remarkable Women in the Age of Transcendentalism* by Randall Fuller: Mary Moody Emerson, the aunt of Ralph Waldo Emerson; Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, who opened a bookshop in Boston; Margaret Fuller, who held a series of conversations at the bookshop, similar to today’s book clubs; Sophia Peabody Hawthorne, Elizabeth’s younger sister and the wife of Nathaniel Hawthorne; and Lydia Jackson Emerson, the wife of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Other recommended books included *Wifedom: Mrs. Orwell’s Invisible Life*, written by Anna Funder about George Orwell and his wife, Eileen; *Parallel Lives: Five Victorian Marriages* by Phyllis Rose; and *Women in Printing: Northern California, 1857–1890* by Roger Levenson. Dot requested titles of books on women’s sphere in and women writers of the 19th century, and the mythologized and romanticized aspects of California.

Members emphasized the need to actively support the teaching, studying, and writing of women’s history. Among other current events, the recent cancellation of the 2026 Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, Genders, and Sexualities and ouster of the co-presidents of the host organization, the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians, indicate difficult times ahead for historical scholarship on women.

The study group will meet via Zoom on the 4th Monday of the month at 3:00 p.m. Pacific time. Institute members with an interest in the history of women are encouraged to join us.

—Elizabeth Thacker-Estrada

## Writers' Group

The first three sessions of the year gave our group the opportunity to sample three different kinds of writing effort. In January Michael Several presented the first installment of his projected biography of John Riddell Berry, a virtually unknown figure who had minimal impact on history. Michael is hoping to use this biography as a means not only to tell Berry's story (for which he has some solid evidence) but also to open a window on the much larger story of America from the 1850s to the 1930s. His approach is that of an oral historian. Michael plans to conduct a series of fictional "interviews" with his subject in such a way as to weave Berry's life into the larger fabric of the times in which he lived. Michael's presentation elicited a lively discussion that focused on two questions he posed at the outset: What we thought of the oral history/interview format, and whether we found John Berry a sufficiently compelling subject. While the group did not achieve a clear consensus, there was a general agreement that this was a very bold and interesting experiment, and Michael was encouraged to press ahead.

In February the group discussed the proposal that Liz Schott planned to send to Biographers International to be considered for the Hazel Rowley Award, a prize given to support first-time biographers. Liz's subject, Dorothy Wright Liebes, a world-renowned weaver and textile artist, is an important and fascinating figure. Liz's proposal offered the selection committee a writing sample consisting of a series of excerpts from several chapters dealing with Liebes' life in California. The group was strongly supportive of Liz's project, but many felt that her plan to send small snippets from her chapters might not give the selection committee sufficient "meat" to chew on. She was urged to consider sending a complete chapter instead.

At our March session the group considered the second chapter of Liz Thacker-Estrada's biography of First Lady Abigail Powers Fillmore. This segment covered the period of Abigail's life from the time of her marriage to Millard in 1826 into the mid-1830s. It followed her path as a young wife and mother who, at the same time, continued to be actively engaged in educational efforts. It traced her move from the small town of East Aurora to the larger and rapidly growing city of Buffalo, where she emerged as one of its most distinguished women. Liz's chapter impressed the group with its excellent writing and solid research. The main suggestion offered was for Liz to expand the focus of her narrative to include more about the society and culture of western New York, especially Buffalo, which was becoming a vibrant commercial center, thanks to the completion of the Erie Canal.

As always, we are looking for new members. If you are writing something and think that you could benefit from serious and friendly advice, join us. If you are interested in helping other writers improve their efforts, join us. We meet via Zoom the first Saturday of the month at 10 a.m. Email <rrobbins@unm.edu> to put your name on our contact list.

—Rob Robbins

## MEMBER NEWS

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### Two New Members

**Susan Breitzer** holds a PhD in American Jewish history from the University of Iowa. She is an independent historian, educational content writer, and freelance book reviewer for *Kirkus Reviews* and is currently moving into academic developmental editing. She has recorded a podcast for the Organization of American Historians' "Intervals" series on religious responses to the 1918 influenza pandemic and has presented guest lectures at Duke University on "Jewish Perspectives on Faith and Feminism." She contributed one of the five interpretive essays for the "Collecting These Times" digital project on American Jewish responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Ted Atlas**, whose area of interest is 20th-century California history, is the author of the book, *Candlestick Park*, published in 2010 by Arcadia Publishing as part of its Images of Sports series. In 2017, Ted spoke about the dual evolution of football and technology for the Ainsley House History Happy Hour series in Campbell, California, and has worked as a docent at the San Francisco 49ers Museum at Levi's Stadium. He has also published articles in *Aviation* and *Air Attack* magazines. He filed a successful application with the California Office of Historic Preservation that led to the listing of the Willows-Glenn County Airport in the National Register of Historic Places on October 6, 2023. He has given presentations to several service groups, including the Naval Order of San Francisco and the Museum of American Heritage located in Palo Alto. He is currently working on a book about the Bay Area's role in the Cold War.

—Elizabeth Thacker-Estrada

### Other News

**Liz Schott** is scheduled to give a talk in Building One on Treasure Island at 10:30 a.m. on Saturday, May 10th, about Dorothy Wright Liebes, the subject of the biography *Liz* is currently researching and writing. The venue for her talk is quite apt since she'll be discussing how, in the summer of 1938, Liebes embarked on a six-week, nine-country journey across Europe in preparation for her role as the director of the Decorative Arts Pavilion at the Golden Gate International Exposition, scheduled to open on Treasure Island the following year. Her mission was to gather items that illustrated her conviction that "the art spirit of any age may well be measured by the vitality in the design of everyday things." Liebes described the items she collected for display in the pavilion as "useful and beautiful." During her talk Liz will share some of the Liebes family's personal photos from the exhibition.

**Peter Stansky** presented a paper, "George Orwell: Reputation and Reception," at the Pacific Coast Conference on British Studies, on March 29th at Stanford University. Stansky also chaired a session, "20th-Century Social and Intellectual Currents." It was the 50th year of the conference. Stansky's Orwell paper was very well-received, and the Orwell session, proposed by Stansky, drew a fine attendance with many questions and comments. Stansky asked what Orwell would think of the world now. Following are several highlights from Peter's presentation.

During the Vietnam War, the Right tried to co-opt Orwell, but it was a mistake. As Stansky wrote in his book, *Socialist Patriot*, Orwell retained traditional values at the same time that he fought

for individual rights and support for the working people of England. Despite the “advances” of AI, computers, and Trump, Orwell’s books are selling better than ever. His reputation has been smudged. More readers recognize flaws; he was a misogynist, an anti-Semite, and, in some corners of his world, a racist. And yet, he did not fall into the mid-century habit of trying to kill all those for whom he had less esteem.

Stansky saw Orwell start as a moderately successful author. He was fortunate that a book club picked up *The Road to Wigan Pier*. That brought him attention and sales. *Homage to Catalonia* was not a great seller. Stansky notes that Orwell was a “premature” anti-fascist and anti-communist. He gradually won attention as the man of virtue, “St. George.” However, Stansky reminded his audience that Orwell never made claims of virtue. He identified with the ordinary person who has faults.

Orwell gave the government names of individuals who would be blacklisted. Stansky said, “It was not a nice thing to do.” Still, his name echoes loudly. Winston Smith’s life in *1984* is Orwellian. Winston is taken away to be tortured until he realizes he loves Big Brother. Boxer, the horse in *Animal Farm*, works harder than other animals. Pigs want to buy whiskey. They sell Boxer to knackers for money. Not happy books, not even with a tiny, shining hope glowing somewhere. Orwell knows the totalitarians will not let go. Are there other authors whose names became precise descriptions of bad ways of life? Dickensian names, predicaments, and coincidences are often funny—a different league.

A recent book, *Wifedom*, rips Orwell’s reputation for misogyny. The wife is Eileen, Orwell’s wife. Unfortunately for those who enjoy a “tell all” biography, the author makes factual errors—such as where Orwell was born—and seems to race through the writing in order to take swipes at Peter Stansky as well as Orwell.

At the Orwell session, Stewart Weaver spoke on “Orwell’s Cookery: Food and Drink in ‘An Age Like This’” (showing Orwell’s defense of English cooking as his pride of Englishness) and Laura Beers spoke on “Free Speech vs. True Speech in the Work of George Orwell.” (supporting Orwell’s desire for truth in speech over freedom of speech).

Conference presenters came from around the globe, from India to Ghana to England.

—Leslie Friedman

A subject discussed in **Dot Brovarney’s** 2022 book, *Mendocino Refuge*, received high-profile media coverage in 2024. *Newsweek*, *KQED*, and *The San Francisco Chronicle* reported results of the first scientific study based on USGS work at Leonard Lake in the upper Russian River watershed. In 2014, scientists began to remove samples of earth from deep beneath the lake. Ten years later, based on analyses of layered core sediments up to 3,200 years old, Clarke Knight and her team revealed what the *Chronicle* (4/25/24) calls “a first of its kind glimpse into California’s multi-millennial history of atmospheric rivers.” The study indicates the presence of even more intense storms in the distant past than what we’re experiencing now. This data will play an important role in climate change planning. According to *Newsweek* (4/25/24), “Lake sediments provide a natural archive that documents past local and regional precipitation events...aiding our understanding of long-term climate flood linkages...” With some glee, Dot notes the parallel between what we historians strive to accomplish with our archival research and what these scientists are doing with their natural archive: illuminating past events and patterns to inform and benefit our present and future. *Mendocino Refuge: Lake Leonard & Reeves Canyon* is available for order by email or phone from bookstores and museums listed at [www.mendocinorefuge.com](http://www.mendocinorefuge.com).

**—continued from outside front cover**

from the program, and a present-day assessment. I particularly liked the clarifications it included, such as the names of several early science fiction writers and that Orson Welles is a different person from H.G. Wells. The narrator makes the point that Orson Welles wanted to show the importance of not believing everything one hears—certainly still an important message.

The blog seems to be produced for teachers and parents as much as it is for children, with seasonal topics such as short bios of significant women and Blacks and printable valentines. There is an interview with an archivist, an illustrated study of American schools of 200 years ago and a number of other topics I found thoroughly interesting even as an adult.

I was surprised by one aspect of the Smarter Learning Guide Review. That is that while the reviewer lauds the magazine for being less Eurocentric than most history presentations for children, she never mentions what seems to me to be a careful effort to include women and non-European persons in all of its presentations and to include topics that show how history affected them. I wish, for example, I had learned as a child about the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, or that fully a third of cowboys were Black, Native, or Mexican.

I did have a few small quibbles. For example, in the issue on the Gilded Age, the map of American railroads of the era shows none in Indiana, which I know was a major railroad hub beginning during the Civil War, and the books published under the Honest History imprint vary considerably in quality. But in general, I found the facts in the magazine solid and the presentations engaging and can recommend it to anyone seeking a history-related gift for children aged 6–12.

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