

POLITICS OF MEMORY

Interdisciplinary Colloquium: The Veracity of Memory (September 23, 2009)

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Photo by Arthur Durity

As we shall see from our three presenters, memory means many different things to many different people, but what, I hope, we can recognize to be a common thread in these presentations is the danger and reality of loss. Professor Rekart's work on memory enters a realm of neurological concretion that it might be easy to lose sight of the whole person in the chemistry and physics of the brain. In fact, one might wonder if there is such a thing as memory. Professor Pattison addresses the loss wrought by Alzheimer's disease, a destruction of ourselves so terrifyingly complete that one must wonder if the person whom Alzheimer's is yet to afflict and the person in the disease's final stages are the same person. As the disease progresses, memories become disordered in regards to chronology, actors, events until it appears no memory remains. Professor Wright's work studies memory's treatment in visual and verbal rhetoric, but all too often, this treatment amounts to loss rather than persistence. Travel to Gettysburg, where Union military unit monuments feature prominently while Confederate monuments are half-hidden in the bushes.

For us as teachers, who are unfortunately unable to fight off the rising count of our years while our students seem to remain forever young, memory loss can occur before our eyes. Traditional-aged undergraduate students at Rivier have no pronounced memory of things we consider earth-shaking: the death of Kennedy, the fall of the Wall, 9/11. For historians, one of the greatest challenges is to convince the public that it is worth remembering people, events, and processes that occurred before the time of current memory. If you are a holocaust survivor, forgetting the holocaust or relegating to one among the twentieth century's many atrocities would amount to a belated Nazi victory. Personally, I find endlessly frustrating my inadequate ability to convince young people of the cold war's harsh realities and daily tensions.

On the other hand, our ability to hold memories is also wonderfully comforting. There are memories of moments in our lives that sustain us, regardless of their proximity to any realities.

But as an historian, scholar, and citizen, there is a loss of memory too dangerous to countenance easily. One might understand the anger with which, after World War II, the Polish government replaced manhole covers in its newly gained territories to eradicate the German names of the foundries that cast these metal lieux de memoire of sorts. Seventy years later, however, the eradication of memory in the form of the Orwellian reshaping of memory on the Internet, of genocidal atrocities, of the often careless

destruction of sometimes millennia-old sites of civilization, and the reconfiguration of the planet's topography, climate, flora and fauna, seems almost to suggest memory does not matter to us as much as we might think, but that cannot be, can it?

Now I give you my learned colleagues, who will present in turn:

- Dr. Elizabethada Wright – Rhetorical Perspectives on Memory
- Dr. Jerome Rekart – Distortion and Decay of Memories from Synapse to Behavior
- Dr. Ivor Pattison – Clinical Presentation, Diagnosis and Treatment of Dementia.

After all three have presented, they will take your questions.

* **Dr. MARTIN MENKE** received his B.A. from Tufts University, and his M.A. and Ph.D. from Boston College. He is Professor of History, Department Coordinator and JYS Chair at Rivier College. His research focuses on 20th-century German political Catholicism, particularly on the German Center Party of the Weimar Republic. He has published articles on questions of Catholicism and German national identity and is working on a monograph concerning the long-term causes of the German Center Party's vote to support the Enabling Act of 1933.