

College of Arts & Sciences

Dr. Marsha Hamilton: Bridging the Atlantic to Bring American History to British Universities

By Karma de Gruy,
Graduate Student
English Department



Dr. Marsha Hamilton, University of South Alabama Assistant Professor of History, accepted a coveted invitation to travel to Cambridge and Oxford last February to deliver a lecture to each university's Postgraduate Seminar in American History.

Portions of Dr. Hamilton's research on British communities in seventeenth-century Massachusetts appeared last summer in the *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*. This article and the lectures she delivered in England are the culmination of years of investigation into the ways in which early settlers established and defined their own communities and senses of national identity.

"Her work puts her in the forefront of historical scholarship that encompasses both sides of the Atlantic," explains Dr. Clarence Mohr, chair of South Alabama's History Department. "Her visit to Cambridge and Oxford was an opportunity to interact with some very talented students and scholars. I am always glad when my colleagues and the University gain this kind of international exposure," he adds.

As Dr. Hamilton explains, we tend to think of Puritan immigrants from England when we think of settlers in seventeenth-century Massachusetts. But far from being characterized solely by the intersection of politics and religion that fueled the Salem witch trials and fired Nathaniel Hawthorne's imagination in his fictional treatment of Hester Prynne, Massachusetts was also settled by non-English settlers who were not members of the Puritan communities. These alternative communities, according to Hamilton, existed within the larger society and interacted with it through trade and marriage, but still maintained a discrete identity. They did not deliberately establish themselves separately when their numbers increased in Massachusetts after 1650, but influenced the establishment of Atlantic trade, as well as the development of a sense of British identity in North American colonies, through their contributions to an increasingly complex colonial structure.

The kind of scholarship Dr. Hamilton is engaged in, Dr. Mohr explains, is part of a major shift over the past 10 to 15 years in the way that historians understand America's colonial past. This shift "brings more attention to transatlantic interactions," says Mohr, and reflects "a recent broadening of American history" towards "thinking of the Atlantic Ocean as

a bridge rather than a dividing line." The growing popularity of an Atlantic world paradigm in historical writing grows out of what he describes as an "internationalizing impulse" among scholars who examine historical events on both sides of the Atlantic in order to understand how seemingly local developments intersected and converged to shape world events, economies,

Her work puts her in the forefront of historical scholarship that encompasses both sides of the Atlantic.

and national and ethnic identities. Dr. Mohr likens this model of historical inquiry to "viewing the British empire through Massachusetts Bay."

Dr. Anthony Badger, the master of Clare College, Cambridge, has been a key figure in promoting the study of American history in Great Britain. He learned of Dr. Hamilton's work and invited her to share her research and findings with students and faculty as part of Cambridge's postgraduate lecture series.

Dr. Hamilton says the lectures were less formal than she expected, which was fortunate in light of her travel experience, as January ice storms in Atlanta delayed her flight and gave her

Dr. Marsha Hamilton: Bridging the Atlantic to Bring American History to British Universities

continued



spending time with a broad range of general education requirements." As part of the post-graduate educational structure, doctoral candidates, with the guidance of a tutor in their studies and research for dissertation projects, emerge three short years and one very devilish exam later as newly-minted Ph.D.s.

After completing her Master's degree and specializing in Historic Resources Management at the University of California, Riverside, Dr. Hamilton worked for ten years as a full-time museum curator. She completed her doctoral program in 2001 at the State University of New York at Stony Brook and joined the University of South Alabama History Department in 2003. Dr. Hamilton has presented papers at the New England Historical Association Conference, the International Seminar on the History of the Atlantic World at Harvard, and the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture in Glasgow, Scotland.

time only to check in at her hotel and shower before delivering her afternoon lecture at Cambridge. Rather than a stolid and somber audience in a darkened, echoing lecture hall, Dr. Hamilton met a friendly and engaged group of students, scholars, and faculty on her first night in Cambridge. She gave a 45-minute lecture followed by a question and answer session, all in a seminar format. "We had a lively and interesting discussion," she relates. "There was no cavernous building — instead we sat at a table, and they actually passed around wine."

2

After the lecture, she was treated to a dinner of what her hosts jokingly referred to as the "national cuisine" -- Indian food. She did, however, have a chance to experience a high table dinner at St. Catherine's College during her stay at Oxford prior to her second lecture, where she was served a traditional four-course English meal.

The cuisine wasn't the only thing Dr. Hamilton found different about academic life at England's most prestigious colleges. Nor was the nod to tradition and formality in the style of her Oxford dinner the only thing that struck her about the university experience in England. She explains, "I found it interesting to look at teaching styles in England. There, you enter your college with a major and your area of focus is all you study. As undergraduates, students totally immerse themselves in their field, without

Dr. Mohr describes Dr. Hamilton as a prime example of the sort of faculty member who is "as engaged as possible in current intellectual developments." Her research is important and in many ways groundbreaking, he explains, but in addition, on the teaching side, she is an example of the sort of "active scholar whose research informs and shapes [her] class activities."

"Good teaching involves an intellectual push," says Dr. Mohr. "Our teaching mission is greatly enhanced when classroom lectures and seminar discussions are grounded in original investigation. Any major university expects its faculty to conduct original research. Dr. Hamilton and her colleagues on the history faculty are actively engaged in creating the new knowledge that will appear in future textbooks." One of the aims of the Department of History involves what Mohr calls a "conscious design to cover as much of the planet as possible." He explains, "Our majors have the opportunity to be exposed to a broad cross-section of human experience in Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America, Great Britain, and the United States. Faculty members like Dr. Hamilton contribute to the department's larger mission of making national histories intelligible within a comparative context."

Dr. Hamilton is considering ways in which she might adapt some "typically British" approaches to university study to her own classrooms in the History Department. "I think it might be

Dr. Marsha Hamilton: Bridging the Atlantic to Bring American History to British Universities

continued

valuable, in upper division courses, to look in depth at one topic in a class, rather than working for the sort of breadth that might cover four topics in one semester," she explains. "For example, we might spend a semester examining colonial America from the perspective of gender, or class, to become more deeply immersed in relevant documents from the period." This approach may provide students with the chance to engage in what Hamilton calls the "process of history," and contribute with their own research to the larger conversations at work in the field of history. "Our aim is to help students see historical study as an open-ended process of inquiry rather than a static and unchanging body of factual information," adds Mohr.

Dr. Hamilton plans to travel to Scotland this summer to do research on Scottish merchants.

