

Dec-2006

# Cultural Commentary: Who We Are: Some Thoughts about Making and Remaking History at Bridgewater State College

Andrew C. Holman

*Bridgewater State College*, [a2holman@bridgew.edu](mailto:a2holman@bridgew.edu)

---

## Recommended Citation

Holman, Andrew C. (2006). Cultural Commentary: Who We Are: Some Thoughts about Making and Remaking History at Bridgewater State College. *Bridgewater Review*, 25(2), 28-30.  
Available at: [http://vc.bridgew.edu/br\\_rev/vol25/iss2/13](http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol25/iss2/13)

# Cultural Commentary

## *Who We Are:* Some Thoughts about Making and Remaking History at Bridgewater State College

Andrew Holman

*History.* Do you sense it? It is here, undeniably—hovering over us, preceding us and following us around, confronting us and reminding us who we are as we get on with our weekly business of teaching and learning. Our history as an institution, like the poor, “always we have with us,” of course; but these days our past has been given a place of special privilege. In the past few months, several scholarly, teaching and administrative projects have been undertaken, each of them intent on digging up, casting and retelling the history of Bridgewater State College. These projects range from the simple—the placing of descriptive plaques in each of the college’s historic buildings, for example—to the profound—the researching and writing of a new, comprehensive scholarly book on the history of the college. Most of these projects will reach fruition soon; that is, within the next two years. As someone whose job (and natural inclination) it is to coax and cajole my students and colleagues alike to think about the past and its effects on us, this new *history-mindedness* at BSC tremendously gratifying and promising. But it also begs explanation and raises the questions of what history is, why it is important, and what it can and cannot do for us.

Bridgewater State College’s history has always been, to some degree, a conspicuous component of our public culture. The college’s origin in 1840 as one of the very first Normal Schools in both Massachusetts and the nation is a fact regularly presented, in our advertisements to students, alumni and faculty recruits. The painted portraits of our presidents (almost all of them) are hung in Boyden Hall’s Executive Council Room, and paeans to our athletic feats are sung in brass and wood, and in glass cases on Tinsley Center walls. Anecdotal stories have been recounted in alumni publications and in occasional issuances from our Public Affairs office, and the College has had its history rendered in several publications—a 1900 *Alumni Record and History* by Albert Gardner Boyden, a 1919 *Memorial Volume* and

a 1933 history (published posthumously) by Arthur Clark Boyden (these Boydens, father and son, were both BSC presidents). Fuller historical narratives were published by late history professor and chair, Dr. Jordan Fiore, whose first rendition appeared in 1940 and whose second—a larger, updated volume—appeared in 1976.

Still, all of this pales in comparison to the more recent collective commitment to recounting our past. In October, 2006–07 Presidential Scholar Dr. Margaret Lowe convened a group called the Friends of BSC History, in an attempt to enumerate, coordinate and encourage ongoing campus projects that concern BSC’s past. What she found was a remarkable and widespread interest: 14 people with disparate projects, all connected by an intention to use our

past to advance the college’s mission. The projects range in nature and scope. There are perennial or program-related interests, such as those of David Wilson and Eva Gaffney in Public Affairs, and of Candace Maguire, Director of Alumni and Development Programs, who tapes oral history accounts every Alumni Weekend from 50<sup>th</sup> Reunion class members when they return to campus. “I love learning about history, but as importantly, I worry about what will be lost if we don’t record the experiences of life on campus 50 years ago,” she said. Preserving the past is part of my job.” In the School of Education and Allied Studies, Dean Anna Bradfield and a faculty-librarian committee are constructing a website about the history of education at BSC, which will assist the College in its applications to accrediting bodies such as the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), but also remind us—the campus community—of the college’s historic mission.

To these programs have been added several special projects. Dr. Lowe’s own work as Presidential Scholar this year focuses on BSC’s Archives and Special Collections, the central repository of documents that record the



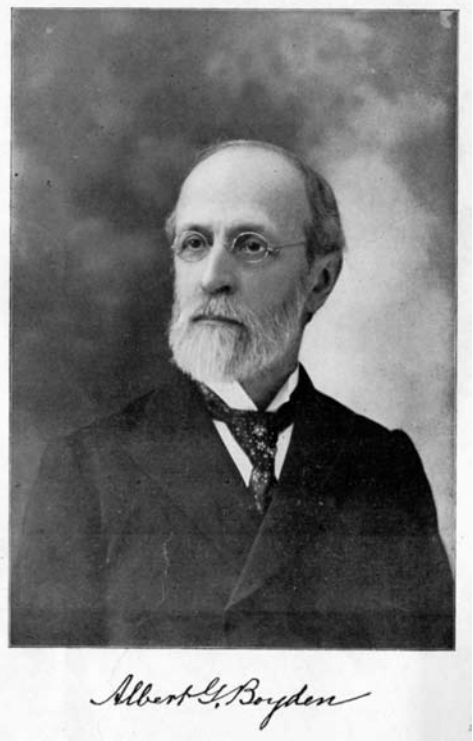
lives, actions and ideas of the people who have composed the college in the past 167 years. Her scholarly interest is in uncovering the stories and voices of former students at BSC, and to place them in the larger history of higher education in the United States. Moreover, she is initiating a campus-wide conversation on how to build and expose BSC's history and archives and make them more useful to the campus community. So far, she seems to have had great success: a second Friends of BSC History meeting took place in December and the group has broadened in numbers and interests.

Perhaps the most ambitious of the new history endeavors involves Dr. Thomas Turner, who has been commissioned by BSC president Dana Mohler-Faria to write a new, "modern," full-length scholarly history of the College. The project is a massive one that has Professor Turner out of the classroom and into the archives daily, where he is discovering anew what a remarkable institution BSC is and always has been. "More than we have ever acknowledged, BSC has an important role in the history of higher education in this country," he said. "From humble beginnings, we have developed an important legacy that includes providing some of the earliest opportunities for African American and women in higher education." Age matters. "Our legitimacy comes in part from our longevity. Few people recognize it, but we are older than Boston College, Boston University, Holy Cross and many other prestigious New England schools."

History is one of the most important bodies of civic knowledge possessed by the people who make up institutional communities such as ours. History, to risk walking the over-worn ground of commonplace, informs us of who we are by revealing where we have been, the choices we have made and not made in the process of getting to today. But for history to be useful, we need to understand more philosophically what it is and what it is not by seeing how it gets made. Long gone are the days when historians believed they could tell the story of the past as unassailable fact, in the words of Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), *wie es eigentlich gewesen* ("as it really happened"). We realize that our sources are too flawed and fragmentary, and our perspectives too unavoidably biased to ever achieve that noble dream. But at the other extreme, history making must be more than mere opinion about what happened and why; more than an imposition of personal perspective on past events. If the cynical *philosophe* Voltaire (1694–1778) believed that history was "after all, merely a pack of tricks that we play on the dead," few of us have believed that ever since. Most historical thinkers (casual and serious, inside and outside academia) have preferred to see the study and writing of history

as something in between these extremes, a *relativist* exercise. American historian Charles Beard (1874–1948) declared this, the orthodox view of modern history in his famous presidential address to the American Historical Association in 1933 entitled "Written History as an Act of Faith." Absolute certainty about past events is impossible since our record of past events is only partial. Therefore, historians must "impose a structure on the past," telling history as "truly" as they can but realizing that their insights and current-day preoccupations will always shape their accounts. As such, there can be no one, final and absolute version of the past. History is a "debate without end." Moreover, *history-mindedness* is itself historic; human beings have not always carried with them the same degree of curiosity or concern about the past, even *their own* pasts. Rather, society's interest in history comes and goes, waxes and wanes, though not irrationally or inexplicably. At BSC these days, we seem to be in the midst of a high wax.

This modern, relativist perspective is a critical one, because it means that, in some measure, we will always look at the past through discriminating or selective lenses, seeking to find some explanation for the troubles or good fortune that we are experiencing today. History making is a *presentist* exercise. This fact can be seen clearly the dominant topical agenda among current historical thinkers: *social* history. Since the 1970s, the vast majority of historical studies produced are preoccupied with the lives and experiences of common men and women; in assessing the past "from the bottom up." This tendency reflects a post-Vietnam and Civil Rights era-inspired sentiment in America that ordinary people's voices and actions should matter as much or more than those of Great Men. Much of social history has sought to capture the diversity of ideas and experi-



ences that have made modern America. That imperative colors, too, our own history-seeking here, on campus at BSC, if the sorts of historical projects that are ongoing provide any measure. Candace Maguire's efforts to capture alumni memories, David Wilson's chronicle of campus anecdotes, and Maggie Lowe's search for student experience all reflect, in different ways, a concern for the ordinary or "grass roots," and an attempt to complement what we know about our leaders with a view from the bottom up.

If we want to have a fuller understanding of the potential and promise of these ventures in BSC history, we should examine their premises. Why (re)do BSC history? And more importantly, why now? Answers to these questions are not uniform given the variety of history-related projects, but they are informative. And they reveal, perhaps, as much about who we are (and think we are) as an institution today as they do about who and what we have been.

Beyond the perennial interest in the past, what explains the new, elevated history mindedness on campus? At the simplest level, the new interest was perhaps epochal; or, put more colloquially, "it was about time." Historical consciousness sometimes works like that. "The old histories were outdated," Dr. Turner notes, and by our standards are not nearly comprehensive enough. "It's an awful long period since a substantial account has been done and there is a lot of history to cover in the intervening years." A second reason may have something to do with our demography at BSC. In the past 10 years, the college has experienced substantial turnover in its leadership, administration and faculty, and our institutional memory and culture have been challenged as a result. History is a wonderful vehicle for explaining to ourselves who we are. As Dr. Lowe notes, with all of our new faces, "we need to know that more than ever. We are in danger of becoming disconnected from the spirit of Bridgewater." A third explanation may have something to do with the troubled times in which we live. History is an important tool for introspection and that can be triggered by the big historical events that might seem at first glance to be remote from BSC or tangential to its business. In 1976, for example, the U.S. Bicentennial inspired an historical consciousness about all aspects of the American past (and may well have motivated Professor Fiore to reissue his history of BSC). Similarly, Professor Lowe notes, "since 9/11, I think that we all have been taking stock of our lives and asking what matters. In a quickly-changing world, a new concern for identity has turned our minds to history, nationally and locally."



Arthur C. Boyden

Above all these factors, fingers commonly point to another source of motivation. The main architect of the new historical consciousness at BSC occupies its top office. Dr. Mohler-Faria's hand can be seen behind many of these history projects. "It may be my training as an historian" he says, "but I think the interest comes from more than that. We have a deep, rich history that must be captured and preserved. In my view, history does more than just entertain and inform; it creates community, and people become invested in it." Others at BSC see Dr. Mohler-Faria's presidential tenure, itself, as an historical moment, and a prod to historical consciousness at BSC. There is a sense that very important things are happening right here, right now. An impres-

sive expansion—in students and faculty, in brick and mortar—coupled with the president's expressed goal to seek for us university status are fuel for that feeling. Peg Mercier, who has served students in the Registrar's office at BSC for 25 years, puts it this way: "he's making history."

Indeed, all of these projects concerning our institution's past are "making history." They are emblems of our current attraction to identity and community and our curiosity about the vast store of facts, stories, images and mentalities that compose our past. This should occasion excitement and celebration. But it should also invite caution. Our historical renderings today can hardly be timeless or perfect. History can never be done. Pace Beard, the fruits of our new historical consciousness today will bear the marks of our generation's enthusiasms, biases and fears, and will, no doubt, suffer future generations' criticisms as being outdated, incomplete, and out of style. Moreover, our history "makeover" will only be as truthful as we wish it to be. Will we render BSC's past, like Oliver Cromwell's portrait, "warts and all," or are some things best forgotten?

*Why Bother with History?*, English historian Beverley Southgate asks in the title to his recent book (2000). Why indeed, he answers, "but for action!" I intend to enjoy the historical action now on campus at BSC and learn as much as I can. It won't last forever.

—Andrew Holman is Associate Professor of History and Associate Editor of the Bridgewater Review.