Facing Backward on the Progress Train: Part II
by Emilio DeGrazia

Henry Sibley: Divided Heart
reviewed by Robert Brusic

A Report on the NCIS Conference
by Rhoda Lewin
Editorial Notes

This issue of the Forum is the last that will appear in this format. MISF is embarking on a joint publishing venture with MACAE (Minnesota Association for Continuing Adult Education) to produce a semi-annual journal tentatively called "Practical Thinking." The general goal of this new journal will be to "offer...a thoughtful critique of issues, ideas and practices impacting the continuing education of adults."

At the suggestion of Shirley Whiting, I approached Vic Klimo ski, editor of MACAE publications, about this idea last August. MACAE and MISF have common concerns in the areas of critical thinking and education. MISF is slightly tipped toward intellectual inquiry and MACAE leans in the direction of education, but both Vic and I feel that there is enough cross-over to explore a common publishing venture.

Our organizations are small (each has about 100 members) so a joint venture will give us an increased readership, an increased writership, and maybe increased visibility in the wider world.

Our boards have agreed that we will try this experiment until January 2007; at that time we will reevaluate the project.

The first issue of the new journal, scheduled for July 2005, will feature essays on memoir writing, on the new knowledge, and on ideology in the workplace. We will continue to review books by authors who belong to our organizations; Marilyn Chiat's new book The Spiritual Traveler will be reviewed in our first issue. We also plan to critique pertinent websites

This move is not without shadow; I will miss filling this column with reflections on the diverse articles that have been submitted for publication.

In addition, both organizations wonder if we will lose our separate identities. There is no sense in which this is a functional merger of our organizations. MACAE will continue to publish an online newsletter to keep its members informed of local and topical events. MISF, recognizing a good idea, will begin to do the same: an online newsletter in some form will appear in your e-mail sometime this spring.

Both Vic and I see this venture as an interdisciplinary challenge, which should result in greater life for our respective organizations. If you have concerns or questions please do not hesitate to write to me; further if you have an article that you would like to submit to this new journal, we would be most happy to see it.

I am again grateful to Emilio DeGrazia for his fine reflection on American history, "Facing Backward on the Progress Train." His thoughts are especially pertinent in the face of changes that our current President is trying to make in the way we understand the past. I also want to thank Robert Brusic for his thoughtful review of Rhoda Gilman's book on Henry Sibley; it is a careful read of a compassionate book. And Rhoda Lewin has brought us a fine report on the NCIS convention in New York last October; she reminds us that world of Independent Scholarship extends beyond the borders of Minnesota.

Lucy Brusic

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FACING BACKWARD ON THE PROGRESS TRAIN: PART II

by Emilio DeGrazia

In Part I of this article (The Forum, Fall 2004) DeGrazia described how facing backward on a train taking him from Minnesota to his 98 year-old father in Detroit changed his view of forward-looking American enterprises. While widening his perspective and making him more aware of the past's presence, the backward view renders the future more realistically invisible. His father's response to twentieth century "Progress," which brought with its amazing new technologies horrific violence, is a resigned retreat into conventional religion. As the train speeds toward Detroit DeGrazia more fully sees the century his father has lived, but sees it in a darker light and wonders what his proper response should be.

Part II

It is ironic to contemplate America's decline at a time when its imperial ambitions have been revived by the criminal acts of 9-11. America did not fall apart with the collapse of the World Trade Center towers. While its morality stayed loose, its moralism hardened, and the government, with its invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, sponsored a heroic response at odds with any notion of defeat or decline. That response was calculated to extend America's global influence and reach, particularly into the Middle East. Call it a Passage to India. In short, it's been business as usual and full steam ahead for the Progress train.

But as an observer waking late, going at a railroad rate, and sitting backward on a real train rushing toward Detroit I'm eerily uncertain about where we're going. It's profoundly troubling to look ahead without concluding that current technologies are so devastating and accessible that all nations, no matter how far ahead of the game, are vulnerable. Can it be that those societies that are the most technologically dependent are also the most vulnerable? I speed toward my father worried about what the world has wrought, imagining him strangely silent and still, as if our latest troubles are nothing unusual or new, just one more episode to endure in the 98 years he's seen. In his conservative long view there's nothing new under the sun. The earth will keep turning, and though generations come and go, only an Act of God will put a final stop to the predictably wobbly spins of history. We're miles apart on most things, even when we're in the same dark room. I see no reassuring cycles of history. I think we live in unprecedented times. From where I sit in the speeding train I see a wide landscape unfolding, a slow darkness descending on it. Call it a sense of tragedy.

The darkness the train leaves in its wake makes it as tempting to believe in the American Progress myth as it is to surrender to my Christian father's Buddha pose. There's a sleep-inducing comfort in the rhythmic clacking of the railroad tracks, as if they provide the metrics by which to regulate even the 9-11 uncertainties. I tell myself to sit back and enjoy the ride, trust the machinery. The talking fish tells me, "Don't worry, be happy." All my life two vast oceans have protected me from major foreign invasions. These bodies of water, along with a temperate climate, rich natural resources, and a diverse innovative genius given freedom by the continent's size and distance from Old World authority structures, also have allowed me to enjoy a prosperity untroubled by the woes of the less fortunate working much harder in less habitable circumstances. The terrorist fears and tasteless violence that routinely play themselves out on video screens have become routine, but they only vaguely terrorize and intimidate. So I find myself encouraged to go warily, if not happily, forward as one of the divinely self-appointed exceptions in history, my City on the Hill immune to the ravages of war, disease, and poverty.

But I don't deeply believe this cheerful tale. There's too much for me to contextualize and digest, creating what Geoffrey O'Brien refers to as "something like the wallpaper of a distorted public reality, a stream of images that moves forward without ever looking back." [New York Review of Books, August 12, 2004] As distressing information and imagery proliferate, my America makes little room for confusion or tragedy in its story lines. The epic idealism of the government's 9-11 response, cast as a War against Evil, conforms well with the requirements of melodramatic adventure narratives, the stuff of Hollywood. In such narratives Good and Evil are clearly distinct, winners and losers eventually emerge, and satisfying closure, a happy ending, is achieved. Tragedy tells a more complex tale. In tragedy evil is seldom outsourced. It wears familiar everyday clothes and unmaskes itself by slow degrees, showing us

continued on next page
ourselves behind its masks. In tragedy the hero suffers, caught in a web of circumstance by one of the few threads he’s spun. And in tragedy the unintended consequence, like an abandoned child wronged and silenced in a dim past, returns from obscurity to have its bitter say.

It’s been customary to keep this child out of American homes. More than a century ago William Dean Howells, father of literary realism, inveighed against tragedy as a narrative form inappropriate to general American prosperity. Writers, he said, should stick to “the smiling aspects of life,” for these were the more American. Tourists passing by Terre Haute, Indiana, will find no historical marker identifying it as the birthplace of Theodore Dreiser, author of American Tragedy. The Progress train—call it the Empire Builder—has no patience for tragedy. From the beginning the scope of the nation’s ambition, the hope and energy of its dreamers, has been proportional to available space on the continent. As the West was won, America swelled with imperial pride—the new nation’s railroad tracks stitching together eastern and vast western territories into a Union bounded by two great seas. In 1871 Whitman, in his poem “Passage to India,” made an eloquent case for extending the American empire beyond the seas; the transatlantic cable and Suez Canal were to complete American expansion into a “roudeur” begun by the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad. East and West would someday meet—on American terms natives on foreign shores need not discuss.

Narratives that define the American way of life

The general narratives that define the American way of life—the Horatio Alger myth that tells us that a little luck but mainly pluck will lead to worldly success; its Christian analogue and prop assuring us that some seed of faith, works, and Grace will lead to individual eternal reward; the gospel of free enterprise grounded on the belief that liberated market forces, a function of evolutionary processes working in bizarre concert with the Christian God’s purposes, will benefit the world; and the scientific method premised on the notion that nature is governed by predictable laws that yield useful technological offspring—all are based on a story line offering happy paths out of physical, economic, moral, and spiritual wildernesses. Understandably so, given the vast American wilderness, the vast resources and the vast opportunities the new continent offered to so many coming here in search of a better life. The optimism driving these narratives—each of them celebrating the forward-looking individual working hard as a solitaire—is central to American myth-making. Whitman put a spiritual spin on this enthusiasm, visualizing the young nation’s ultimate mission to be the triumph over “strangling problems” and “aged fierce enigmas,” ultimately death itself, “the word more delicious than any.”

It sounds good, but I’m more and more like my Papa, bemused by it all. The Mayo Clinic recently announced the discovery of a gene that causes aging; engineering it presumably will extend life expectancies. The prospect of sitting in the doctor’s office crowded with two hundred-year-old folk waiting to get their genes re-programmed gives me the urge to get off the Progress train, take one of Thoreau’s walks, and smell the flowers. As technological marvels multiply at a breakneck geometrical rate, I’m reminded that speed kills. And while boredom lengthens my days, perhaps affording me the presence of mind to age in my own good time, I’m supposed to wince at anything slow—cars, machines, problem-solving, business. Going at a railroad rate in a jet age accordingly seems a reasonable compromise, especially when the caboose view, with its slow revelation of places just passed, is available. Even though nostalgia, which reduces the complex processes of the past to static moments with entertainment value, is difficult to come by from that point of view, at least I can be sure that nothing stands still. All is motion, therefore new, mysterious, muddled too, widening into complex panoramas. In this unsteady stream of time and events, where blind prophecy and hindsight converge, what genuine knowledge stands still enough to be fully grasped? Not, I hope, the passivity my father has achieved, depressed by his belief in man’s natural depravity. Certainly not the wisdom of age, especially at my age. I see clearly only that all knowledge is subject to the rule of uncertainty principles.

I’m uncomfortable being a pessimist doing nothing but meditating on the train. I should be up and doing something useful, presumably saleable. I should be wondering what—and where—next. And a predictable weariness sets in at the thought. Can the greatest benefit come from inventing and peddling nothing new, relying on what has worked, selectively resurrecting the old, the used, the slow?

I am confused, therefore I think, perhaps needing relief from a hangover caused by taking in too much space. The automobile has allowed me to get out and away, but it’s also cursed us with oil wars, bad water and air, and terrible traffic jams. The railroad stitched East and West together, but what wounds are yet to be healed because the tracks also divided the agrarian Midwest from the agrarian South? If American movement no longer flows east to west, and if the frontier’s vast stretches are privately owned, where is there to go? The vast agricultural tracts are all staked out, the farmers abandoning their land and small towns. The new technology is doing in the family farm. The cities swell, and the suburbs, refuge for new American dreamers manipulating their hard-won acreage to face a frontier that no longer exists, sprawl. More of us have less and less space, and the urge to take off is checked by more and more No Trespassing signs.

So space and cyberspace are the new frontiers, even though the planets, stars, and galaxies are too far out for us to plumb anything except the weaknesses of our expensive instruments. We’re left to explore the virtual places where tragedy perhaps
Sitting Backward on the Progress Train

hides best—deep in the alchemical mysteries of genomes and nanotechnologies. If once my American story told me I could stand tall in a spacious field of waving grain, now no story tells me how to be a global citizen while believing in technologies so microscopic and anonymous that they have precious little room for me, let alone a neighborhood or community. Our new fate flows along fragile fiber-optic lines.

The train slows as it approaches another broken-down town, one with a nuclear power plant lofting steam into the sky over the Lake Michigan shore. The train blares a warning at a crossing. Get out of my way. Cars wait on both sides of the track for the train to pass. The train momentarily calls the shots until it gets out of town. Meanwhile the nuclear power plant, unmoved, governs this whole region wordlessly. Nor has any gene ever spoken its mind to me in a language I can understand.

Waiting for and on a train is a trade off I'm still willing to make, even if I ignore the way the railroads were favored in such a way that they now dominate the sight lines and accessibility of significant stretches of the American landscape. But the newer technologies terrify, the newest most. Looking out from a speeding train I can't see what's lurking in the grass, the serpent eyeing me. In my mind I see Boris Karloff as Frankenstein monster, the name sticking to the creature, not to the scientist whose moral aberrations disfigured his own creative genius. Only vaguely do I see the living thing conjured by Mary Shelley almost two hundred years ago, a young woman who saw clearly even then that the inventions of science, no matter how brilliant, have presence and power, that these creations control their creators, even destroy them, and that once they're brought into being they don't happily serve and go away. Maybe, when we're done with them, we can dispose of our nuclear power plants in space? I doubt it. And what tiny gremlins will the newest genetically engineered concoctions generate? The train window view allows a pleasant escape from these invisibilities. Out of sight, out of mind. No serpents in these neatly plowed fields.

Progress carries terrible consequences

I see my father's sad, resigned face as I'm tempted to face forward in the train again, pretending that Progress, our most important product, carries no terrible unintended consequences in its wake. From inside I can barely hear the dark minor key played by critics of the American progress myth, how it begins to swell like a doomsday chord, its low hum muted by the noise of business as usual. Even E. M. Forster, well-traveled European who confronted Whitman's American optimism head-on in his 1924 novel Passage to India, rests in mainly forgotten peace, his voice quieted by the chant on the last page of his wonderful book. For once Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and secular humanist sing the same tune: East and West will not really meet, "No, not yet." Probably never, especially since we can't shake the habit of forcing the issue.

Do we live in unprecedented times full of unprecedented dangers of global scope? We'll cheerfully solve them in the same old way. We'll engineer new inventions to ward off the problems the old technologies have visited on us.

Is it too late to reinvent ourselves?

I look with melancholic nostalgia at the scientific and humanistic traditions that allowed us to remake the world, the noble striving of the makers of the Enlightenment tradition whose work resulted in the so-called triumph of Western Civilization, even as its dark prophets, always playing in a minor key, warned that a Faustian hubris was blinding the civilizers to the dark wisdom many of the ancient Greeks knew well: that heroes fail soon after their victories, that for every leap forward into spring there is a fall, usually (like current warfare) asymmetrical. We, children of science, technology, and democratic capitalism, have presumed to be the sole protagonist in our Progress narratives and its omniscient narrator as well. Though we paused to wage the most destructive wars in history against ourselves and left millions of minor characters miserable in the wake of our marches into Third World lands, we seldom paused to doubt that we were the Engines that Could.

From the train window I see many plain rectangular buildings. Windowless and dull, these structures don't invite my gaze, let alone allow me to see what goes on in them, who's making or doing what. I imagine virtuous people dutifully at work, many of these individuals full of brilliance and imaginative potential. Many of them do not love their work. I want to ask them if it's the process, product, or purpose that turns them off. Purpose? They're seldom asked about that, even as the walls hum with the word "Quality." The purpose is profit, the real basis of the story's plot, theme, and bottom line morality. Quality has to gear down for that.

It's almost time to get off. I see my father waiting for me at the end of my ride, my own life, like that of the general population of Americans, slowing toward the stasis of death. From where he sits my father sees the mulecart of his youth replaced by the automobile. Then come the telephone and radio, the airplane and TV, the spaceship and computer chip, Hollywood and the Bomb. He says his life passed in a blur. He can't make sense of it. He reaches way back for consolation of some sort, resurrects the old story of Jesus, imposes it on the chaos of his twentieth century life, and wills it into belief. The passion moves him most. With the suffering Jesus he can identify his own lifetime of hard work and all the troubles he's seen; in the resurrection and promise of heaven he can have his happy ending too.

Who has a better fiction for him, one that more credibly allows him to explain the meaning and purpose of his life? Can he

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trust that science, with its materialistic premises and empirical methodology, will help him understand the profound forces lurking intangibly in his heart and mind? Can he buy into some version of Darwin’s narrative, social or biological, that sees him as a mutant survivor in a drama driven by savagery and chance? Why not play the lottery? Should he deem himself a corporate citizen glued to the Wall Street serial and sudden death football games, retired laborer whose role is to consume, invest wisely, play golf, watch more football and be done with it? How does he, and especially his hungry-minded children, square the materialism of capitalism with the anti-materialistic demands of Christianity? And where for him is the new learning—humane, comprehensive, authentic—that will help him connect the dots?

Why look backward?

What then is to be gained by the backward gaze? Call it the necessary sense of tragedy. Since I’m an ordinary guy living by the stories I love, and since somebody else’s story may kill me because I’m cast as villain in it, I want stories that help me survive and prosper by telling as much of the truth as can be known. The tragic sense by itself doesn’t tell all the truth, as no story can, but it requires the presence of a nemesis necessary to all attempts at artistic, scholarly, and scientific truth-telling. It is vital to know that the past, our only present, is where we truly live, and that the narrative unfolding there neither features nor is largely shaped by us. Even as we at once observe, record, and participate in this narrative as conquerors, we often are victimized by our victories. Looking backward we begin to see how events conspire with accidents to make our present comfort zones possible, and how missteps, bad calculations, chance, and *hubris* make disasters inevitable.

Sitting still, even on a speeding train, gives me the presence of mind to conjure the words of the Persian poet Rumi:

*When a man makes up a story for his child,*  
*He becomes a father and a child*  
*Together, listening.*

The words, profoundly simple, arrest me in their revelation of the true relations of things. They render the standard language of rationalism and science obsolete. Object and subject dissolve in this poetic reality, leaving me to stand in awe at the wonder-fullness of creation so often marginalized by our finest minds, our institutions of higher learning, our commercial enterprises, and our government agencies. I wonder: What story can I conjure for my father that will be true to the sad happiness of his life? More bewilderingly, what basic new myths can our culture evolve to erode the ones that have falsified the sad happiness of American experience? The materialistic empiricism of the old science won’t do; nor will its technological offspring enduringly satisfy or distract, for they have left home to live in a marketplace offering no view of a landfill. And how can the old religious myths serve, if their use is to strengthen superstition and intolerance?

I stand when the train comes to a stop. As I gaze far down the track I see its iron rails converging like parallel lines destined to meet in infinity. My mind narrows too, thinking the world is not for me, I should get off, go away somewhere. There is no escape. I shift my view to the throng of people crowding the station to get on with the ordinary business of life. For a moment I think I see my mother, who passed away two years ago, among those lugging their bags to the train. I don’t look forward to carrying my things on foot from place to place. There’s no getting off the Progress train; nor is there any stopping it short of a catastrophe, call it a tragedy. I’m caught between the desire to be carried along, even carried away, and the comfort of having my feet on the ground. I want my Progress train to satisfy my basic need for a safe and sober ride through life. Nothing more. That would be enough.

It is probably too late.

As I step down and face the city streets I see what a dot I am in the lonely crowd. The idealistic humanism, not merely secular, that has sustained me over the years dissolves and disappears into a swollen city humming in the distance like a giant machine. The roads of excess have led to this dysfunctional maze of traffic and business. The word “enough” loses all meaning here. But my father waits for me in there, sitting alone most of the time, his youthful *hubris* (what there ever was of it) spent. Soon I and millions of other Americans will be like him, too old to care about profitable and reckless new enterprises, and all around will be millions, most of them children, hungry for a taste of rice or bread.

False cheerfulness demeans me, makes me less than who I really am, so I refuse to lie to my Papa. I will have to find truthful words for him, invent some new narrative that will put into some perspective the old myths that have carried us here, a new story that features a few of the nameless little engines that just can’t.

*Emilio DeGrazia, a longtime resident of Winona, has published two collections of fiction and two novels. He and his wife Monica have co-edited Twenty-Six Minnesota Writers (1995) and Thirty-Three Minnesota Poets (2000). Recently he completed Seasonings, his first collection of poetry, and he continues to work on a collection of creative non-fiction.*
Book review

**Henry Hastings Sibley: Divided Heart** reviewed by Robert Brusic


If one were to search for characters essential to the history of individual states in the United States, Roger Williams or Sam Houston would rise to the top in terms of fervor or flair. But readers wishing to find a founder who was steady, righteous, though perhaps prickly and patrician, might enjoy Rhoda Gilman’s book. She limns her subject in the very first sentence of the Preface. “As businessman, territorial representative, treaty negotiator, state governor, military leader, writer, and elder statesman, Henry Hastings Sibley played a more varied and influential role in shaping the character of the Upper Mississippi valley than any other individual.” (vii)

The story of Sibley’s life unfolds in three waves of narrative. The first wave encompasses Sibley’s early life as he traveled from Detroit to the eastern shore of the Mississippi which was then the frontier. Initially reluctant to assume business responsibilities in the Upper Mississippi in the seedy, cutthroat world of the American fur trade, Sibley eventually accepted Ramsay Crooks’ invitation to be both junior partner and independent manager in the business. While he often had cause to regret that decision over the years, Sibley accepted the post, and, in his own words, “assented to the agreement, whereby I became for the remainder of my life, a denizen of what is now the magnificent state of Minnesota.” (38)

This part of the book gives an account not only of Sibley’s growing years (from 1811 to about 1850), but it also details the very complex world of the fur trade. Readers who have been raised on colorful narratives or paintings of voyageurs, will have their perceptions enlarged when they read about the skullcargery, the politics, the economic pressures, and the questionable practices (especially with the American Indians) that form the backbone of the narrative.

The story is enriched by a rough and tumble cast of characters including the likes of the hotheaded Lawrence Talliaferro, the ambitious Franklin Steele, the shrewd Alexander Faribault, and the swarthy and uninhibited Joseph Renville. Other important characters appear and play their roles in passing, movers and shakers like John Fremont, William Boutwell, and Joseph Nicollet as well as artists like George Catlin and Charles Deas. The latter painted Sibley’s dog, Lion, in 184—just one of the illustrations that are spread throughout the book.

A second narrative wave, in some ways the centerpiece of the book, is a detailed account of the Treaties of Traverse des Sioux and Mendota in 1851. The political, economic, and racial infighting surrounding these important documents is depicted fairly but with a withering authorial eye. After all, these treaties opened the western side of the Mississippi for both settlement and exploitation; and they set the stage for the bitter and horrific clashes a decade later. As one of Sibley’s friends and business partners, Hercules Dousman observed with more prescience than he knew, “The Sioux treaty will hang like a curse over our heads the balance of our lives.” (134)

The shadow of this curse looms throughout the remainder of the book, which includes the story of Minnesota statehood, involvement in the Civil War, and the rise of industry and population. Sibley expanded his role as businessman to include a spotty career in the military. He rose to the rank of brigadier general in 1862, mostly by default and his leadership in dealing with the Uprising. This story and Sibley’s part in it is told in careful detail. Sibley was often critical of the government’s policies toward Native Americans; yet, ironically, he both shaped and participated in those policies. In this sense, perhaps, the general is a figure to be both pitted and censured. Gilman tells the grisly story without varnishing the legend or vanishing into romanticism.

During this phase of Sibley’s life he continued to play a significant role in Minnesota history. He was the first governor, though for a short and not particularly distinguished period of time. For a brief period he owned a newspaper, The Pioneer; and for the rest of his days he served as president of the Minnesota Historical Society and as a regent of the University of Minnesota. Throughout his life Sibley, unlike many of his contemporaries, affirmed and acted on the link between business and civic responsibility. “Out of (his early) experience came an assumption that the business community had a positive obligation to provide for the city’s improvement and social welfare.” (224)

The story of Sibley’s life is well told by Gilman. While her writing style does not rise to the level of such historians as David McCullough or H. W. Brands, she more than adequately covers the ground. At times it is difficult to see the whole because of way she bundles the parts. That is, one gets the impression that a certain familiarity with Minnesota history is a prerequisite for a fuller understanding of Sibley’s life and context. For instance, there are four maps, but none of them lists places that are prominent in the narrative (like Lake Pepin, Lac qui Parle, or Cedar River). Moreover, these maps lack distance legends, so one is not sure how far one place is from another.

One comes away from this biography, however, sensing that it is a balanced account of Sibley’s life. In addition to the things he did, we learn what kind of person he was: prickly

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National Coalition of Independent Scholars Meets in New York

by Rhoda Lewin

One of the highlights of the National Coalition of Independent Scholars’ 7th biennial conference in New York City October 15-17, 2004, was the 2004 update of NCIS’s 28-page Fellowships and Grants for Independent Scholars. It includes a long list of foundations and other grant sources, and extremely helpful information on how to apply for grants, and how to access other funding, as well.

Conference sessions, and a display of members’ published works and other items, were at a historic building, the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen Building, a short walk from our low-cost Day’s Inn hotel. More than 60 people attended, including NCIS founders, long-time friends, and newcomers from Canada, Switzerland, and all over the United States.

In a feature story in that weekend’s New York Sun, NCIS founder Ron Gross said being an independent scholar gives you “freedom to follow your own bliss, and freedom from papers to grade and departmental meetings to attend.” Other highlights were the fact that academe is beginning to “accept” independents; the Modern Language Association and American Jewish Historical Society’s Academic Council now invite independent scholars to serve on committees. Another interesting statistic was that a majority of current NCIS members are women.

Although there were too many wonderful conference speakers to list here, Ellen Huppert shared useful details on how to organize a successful scholars’ group; her San Francisco group has 501(c)(3) status so they can sponsor members’ grant requests, their “Works in Progress” group evaluates members’ projects, they have monthly writers and play-reading group meetings, and they’ve taped and plan to publish members’ “intellectual biographies.”

Several speakers talked about networking groups. There are an estimated 100 groups like Evan Sinclair’s New York City “Socrates Café,” whose members range in age from teenagers to 80 year olds. They meet at cabarets, vote on topics to discuss, and talk about things like “How do we know if we’re happy?”; “What is art?” and “What is the value of nonsense and the absurd?” Joseph Wosk of Vancouver, B.C., has organized “café chat groups” in Australia, Canada and the U.S. which are hosted by local restaurants; in the summer they also meet for “Philosophy on the Beach.” And last but not least, Bernard Roy has organized a student “chat group” funded by CUNY, and Café Philo, a concept that began in France in 1992. Members, including teachers, auto mechanics, software writers, professors, etc., meet every other week in a local restaurant “to eat, drink, and talk... Nobody has authority...We’re all open to criticism, and can test what we think. And we choose the next meeting’s topic before we leave, so we can think about it and maybe do some research.”

NCIS meetings also give you many things to think about, and many stories to tell. For example, Stephen Wheatley, vice-president of the American Council of Learned Societies, said that before 1946 Americans were winning one out of seven Nobel Prizes; since then they’ve won one out of two. He then asked a provocative question: Did this change take place because the Nazis killed so many German and other European scholars, and so many others fled to the U.S.? Other speakers focused on finding a publisher, negotiating royalties, publishing on the internet, and targeting your audience. And there was so much more — but I’m out of space. For questions, or to order the Grants book, contact NCIS at PO Box 5743, Berkeley, CA 94705-0743, or at <ncis@mindspring.com>

Rhoda Lewin is a founding member of MISP and is on the board of NCIS.

President’s Column

by David Juncker

Many years ago, a small group of independent literary scholars formed a discussion group, shared their projects-in-progress, and produced the first issue of a new journal. These individualists were quite diverse in their interests and projects, yet were united in their attempts to find such truths as they could in their surroundings and their lives, and to report them to the public. The subsequent discussions and journal articles helped founding members to collect and present their thoughts to others as completed written projects. The journal lasted four years, greatly assisting the originators, yet there were very few, if any, new member additions and the journal died four years later, as the originators moved on.

We, in MISP, are such a group today: diverse, inquiring,umbling along at times, willing to subject current mores, belief systems, and our pasts to a closer scrutiny. We are an eclectic admixture, combining: respect for significant parts of our collective pasts, futurists planning actively for a better tomorrow, practitioners of both global awareness and local action...with desires to remain active participants in the present. Trudi Juncker puts it thusly: “MISP is an acronym for ‘misfits.’” Maybe there’s more truth to her description than we care to admit. Yet, an organization that fosters the initiation and continuation of thoughtful analyses of life and civilization from one generation to the next is additionally useful to humanity and our little world.

And what about that small group of independent scholars years ago? The date: July, 1840.

The journal: “The Dial.”
The core of the participants: A. Bronson Alcott,
W. H. Channing, Ralph W. Emerson,
Margaret Fuller, James Russell Lowell,
Elizabeth Peabody, H. D. Thoreau, Walt
Whitman, .........
Member News

The annual meeting of MISF occurred November 20, 2004, with about 20 people attending. Board elections took place with David Juncker being elected president and Terry Dinovo becoming the vice-president. Editor Lucy Brusic and MISF database manager Curt Hillstrom have rejoined the board. Shirley Whiting, the past president, remains on the board, as do Roger Hammer, Phil Dahlen, and Susan Mahmoodi. Dale Schwie continues to serve as treasurer.

After the elections, Judy Yaeager Jones told about her research in writing Sweet Bells Jangled: Laura Redden Searing (reviewed in the last issue of the Forum). After describing how she came to be researching Minnesota Women’s History, she told of finding the Redden papers in family hands and of her ten-year project to organize and print her book. Jones gave Susan Hill Gross and the Upper Midwest Women’s History Center in St. Louis Park, and WHOM, Women Historians of the Midwest, special credit for her interest and development as a historian of women in Minnesota. (Ed. note: Sadly, both these organizations are now defunct.)

News and Notes from Scholars

Alice Schroeder is surrounded by a host of friends who are helping as she begins to make Hospice arrangements. If you would like to write to her or see how she is doing, you can check her website at Caringbridge. <www.caringbridge.org/mn/alicess> Visits can be arranged.

The boys that Phil Dahlen had hoped to adopt decided to stay in the orphanage in Brazil. It seems that the language barrier became an issue. Phil is a board member of MISF.

Brian Mulhern was looking for a new job and found it a frustrating experience; he is now working for United Way. Brian is the archivist of MISF.

Marilyn Chiat has published two books recently: The Spiritual Traveler: Chicago and Illinois (HiddenSpring, an imprint of Paulist Press) and North American Churches: Chapels to Cathedrals (Publications International, Ltd.). Both books are available in bookstores and on the web. The Spiritual Traveler will be reviewed in the first issue of the new journal.

Lucy Brusic and co-researcher Linda Bryan are sponsoring a networking opportunity for researchers, re-enactors, and educators interested in “Minnesota in the Pre-Territory and Territory periods with an Emphasis on its Women.” The meeting will take place Tuesday, March 8, from 7-9:30 p.m. at the Minnesota Humanities Commission/Humanities Education Center, 987 East Iwy, St. Paul. Any person interested in this time period in Minnesota history is welcome—professional and amateurs alike. (Brusic and Bryan have a special interest in ABCFM missionaries to the Ojibwe.) For more information, write <lucy@brusic.net>.

Book Review concluded from page 7

Henry Sibley: Divided Heart

and proud, religious and ambitious, often conflicted and always complex. He was able to interact—often uneasily—with his business peers, with Indians and missionaries, and with a large and varied cast of characters—including Bishop Henry Whipple, William T. Sherman, Alexander Ramsey, and James J. Hill. Gilman also gives a balanced account of his frustrations while carrying out policies he abhorred and of his personal burdens such as losing four children, including his half-Ojibwe daughter Helen.

At the beginning of the book, as noted above, Gilman informs the reader of the breadth of Sibley’s accomplishments. At the end, the author summarizes Sibley’s character as depicted in various biographical accounts. Then she pens a poignant paragraph that is full of insight about Sibley and his overall contribution as a man of his time. “Each version of Sibley’s image, including the shadow side, has elements of truth, yet behind it remains a complex and deeply human individual who spent a lifetime on a series of frontiers and responded to profound and rapid changes in the world around him.” (235)

It could be said that because Sibley was, Minnesota is. Rhoda Gilman gives a good and readable account of this seminal figure who served with singular purpose and divided heart.

Robert Brusic is a Lutheran clergyman with an avid interest in local history.

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Since we are an all-volunteer organization, we depend on the efforts and goodwill of our members to operate the Forum effectively. Because our volunteers are so important to us, we actively and unashamedly solicit your help. If you would like to contribute, please contact Curt Hillstrom <curthillstrom@hotmail.com> or 612-823-5132.

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