Wurgaft explores Jewish history at the College

By KAYLA SHORE ’16 Contributing Writer

Jews at Williams: Exclusion, Exclusion, and Class at New England Liberal Arts College, a new book by historian Benjamin Aked Wurgaft, began a conversation about Jewish history at Williams. This conversation was continued at the panel discussion “A History of the Williams Jewish Experience” on Saturday, Oct. 5, at 4 p.m. in the Brooks-Rogers Recital Hall.

“It’s one thing to write history when the people you’re writing about are all long gone. It’s another thing to write history when everyone is there to tell you exactly who performed,” said President Adam Falk, drawing attention to the large crowd of alumni who attended to listen and engage in this conversation with the panel. Moderated by Jewish chaplain Cantor Bob Epstein, the panel included the author and former College President Francis Oakley, Edward Dorr Griffin Professor of the History of Ideas, Emeritus; President, Emeritus; and Senior Oakley Fellow.

The book, commissioned by the College, explores the history of the Jewish community at Williams, focusing on the role of the fraternity system as well as the construction of the Jewish Religious Center (JRC) in 1990. “My story,” said Wurgaft, “is about the persistent importance of social networks in our own time and the need to be conscious of the relationship between college and class status in American life as early as the 1870s and as late as 2013.”

Class, rather than brazen Anti-Semitism, shaped the Jewish community at the College. “There were elements of prejudice, often invisible, and therefore subjective, in the very social connections that brought young men to Williams in the first place,” he remembered. He faced a crowd that included many he sought to represent in his book, not least of whom was Oakley. The JRC was constructed under Oakley’s leadership, and it was intended primarily to serve religious needs, but he also aspired to cement an atmosphere of acceptance at the College. “It was my deep wish,” he said, “that the opening of the Jewish Religious Center would, speak and render visible a sense of aspiration to become a community of inclusion and as such a community of hope.”

Oakley’s continued involvement with inclusion at this school, as well as the perpetual transformation of history allowed both Wurgaft and the audience to reflect on and contribute to Jewish history at Williams. Inviting stories and ideas from the audience—perhaps better termed participants—Wurgaft opened the discussion and the narrative of Jews at Williams to a new set of voices.

All participants commended Wurgaft’s rendering of the Williams Jewish experience, and many shared personal experiences. Several, including Ralph Epstein ’61, highlighted the exclusion of Jews from fraternities. Epstein, misty-eyed, remembered both the hardship of his days as an ostracized Jewish student and the notion that rape and sexual assault are so difficult to identify with and often seems forced. Thus, the goal of our project is to facilitate a focused and structured conversation that touches on consent, sexual misconduct, active bystanding, male privilege, and general notions of masculinity, and have these messages cross from peers. We are also working with leaders of various female teams to develop a similar structure for a conversation that deals with issues relating to female teams. The final goal of these facilitations is to not have it be a one-time conversation, but to plant the seeds in the team space to hopefully prompt more conversation and action to further improve Williams’ social culture and help end rape and sexual assault at Williams.

Men for Consent organizes against rape, sexual assault

By HENRY BERGMAN ’16 Contributing Writer

At its core, Men for Consent is an activist group composed of Williams students, regardless of gender identification, dedicated to ending rape and sexual assault at Williams College. One question that often arises from such a description is why “men” for Consent? Why not make it Elys for Consent, or people for consent? True, both of those titles more accurately describe our membership, and a recent graduate’s account of the Williams Jewish experience, and many shared personal experiences. Several, including Ralph Epstein ’61, highlighted the exclusion of Jews from fraternities. Epstein, misty-eyed, remembered both the hardship of his days as an ostracized Jewish student and the notion that rape and sexual assault are so difficult to identify with and often seems forced. Thus, the goal of our project is to facilitate a focused and structured conversation that touches on consent, sexual misconduct, active bystanding, male privilege, and general notions of masculinity, and have these messages cross from peers. We are also working with leaders of various female teams to develop a similar structure for a conversation that deals with issues relating to female teams. The final goal of these facilitations is to not have it be a one-time conversation, but to plant the seeds in the team space to hopefully prompt more conversation and action to further improve Williams’ social culture and help end rape and sexual assault at Williams.

Men for Consent exists because as men, we know that rape and sexual assault is that it is difficult to

Meet the DC staff!

Tara Miller ’16 reflects on organizing protest despite inexperience

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Community Spotlight

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Meet the Staff ...

Assistant Directors of the Davis Center

Taj Smith
From: Paterson & Passaic, NJ

Justin Adkins
From: San Diego, CA
Role Models: Emma Goldman, Subcomandante Marcos, Angela Davis

Faculty Fellow

Gail Newman
From: Outside of Troy, NY
Favorite Quote: “It’s a joy to be hidden, and a disaster not to be found”

Program Coordinator

Marcela Peacock
From: Mexico City, “Mexico Lindo y Querido.”
Favorite Quote: One of the greatest misconceptions ever: “mole” is not a chocolate sauce!

Administrative Assistant

Amy Mersalis
From: Nuremberg, Germany - Grew up in North Adams/Williamstown, MA
Favorite Quote: “I’m sorry, did the middle of my sentence interrupt the beginning of yours?”

Student Staff

Aseel Abulhab ’15
Davis Center Intern & Staff Writer

Emily Dugdale ’14
Content and Layout & Editor-in-Chief

Ahmad Greene-Hayes ’16
Davis Center Intern & Staff Writer
Poetry

the activist heart
by KATE FLANAGAN ’14

attn: to all self-born
activist deathmongers
looking to cash in on the
deft of the sinned against.

you make me bitter in the
mouth and violent
on the tongue, make me hurt and
for the most part i have decided
that we should expend
precious energy
trying to be good people,
good for others and good
for ourselves:

and that maybe the rest will
come from that, the simple
radical act of being a person
who offers bandages for wounds
and knows when to set her
megaphone down, set it down.

it should be hard and it should take all
your activist heart to teach your
tongue how to lie still behind the
prison bars of your small teeth
and it should take all the weight
of your activist hands to dench
your unraised fist against the
rising tide of bile
you seem to spew in the direction
of those whose picketlines
criss-cross their own hearts and
whose battlelines are drawn
across their chests.

has it ever occurred to you
that we are in fact quaking
beneath our skin, chilled
quick to the bone by the
coldness of this world, that
we are now frozen in place.

has it ever occurred to you
that we are doing all we can
that we are as active as we
can be, that we are breathing
as hard as we can breathe
without burning holes
in our lungs, in the active pursuit
of taking in oxygen in a world
bent on smothering out
our light.

that we are in the active pursuit of keep-
ing ourselves
in
sane
the active pursuit of keeping our feet on
the ground
in a world in
the pursuit of waking up
every goddamn morning
and taking that first god
damn step out the door,
only to be met with whirlash?
see we are as active as we can be.
we are pushing forward and
leaving change in our wake:
it is the change of my body
inflating its ribcage with my
still-breathing breath, expanding
and it is the change that i
bring by staying alive in a world that, it
seems, is increasingly
trying to kill me.

New book outlines Jewish history, culture at the College

William I want to see is ecumenical,
broadening,” he said, “and this seemed
to be narrowing.”

WCJA co-president Amy Levine
14 strongly disagreed, saying she
was “disturbed by the idea that
WCJA is anything like a frat.”

“I think we’re defined so much
by how welcoming we are,” she said.
“We don’t define a boundary between
where our community begins and
ends.” Levine said that interpreta-
tions such as Blume’s don’t ring true
because WCJA is characterized by “a
break from the past, not a continua-
tion of it.” WCJA along with all other
college organizations, she says, are
very disconnected from the institu-
tion of fraternities.

Abraham Kirby-Galen ’16, also a
member of WCJA, echoed Levine.
“[WCJA is] the opposite of exclusive,”
he said. “We’re one of the most inclu-
sive groups on campus.”

In grappling with the same issues
of inclusion and exclusion of all mem-
bers of the community the history of
Jews at Williams can serve as a posi-
tive model: “Many institutions have
problematic histories,” said Wurgaft.
“What it means to really engage with
that, to try to change that with an eye
towards things as meritorious as social
justice is, I think, a very complicated,
difficult and noble effort.”

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Snapshots: Ephs on the go

Ephs in Action: National Day for Dignity and Respect
Celebrating Berkshire Immigrant Day
The perks of naivety: inexperience leads to success in organizing student protest

By TARA MILLER ’15 Contributing Writer

In September, I unexpectedly ended up organizing an environmental rally in Brattleboro, Vermont a week before the event was to happen. I’d done a fair bit of organizing with my summer environmental research, but never by myself with so little time. Two days before the rally, I was advised by a supportive and more-experienced activist to cancel the event. Likely, few people would show up, and it would just be discouraging for the handful of Williams students who were planning to go. But like the naive, youthful, sometimes-idealistic that I am, I ignored the advice, willing to take the risk that the event might flop and vainly hoping that it wouldn’t.

Two days later, I found myself marching around the streets of Brattleboro with sixty enthusiastic people, chanting and waving signs. The successful turnout was incredibly exhilarating and certainly unexpected. Sometimes other’s experience says something won’t work. My inexperience led to success.

In memory and imagination. "The Celestials in North Adams: Chinese Strikebreakers 1870-1880" is a powerful and exciting photograph, Lee said, "a stunning achievement. The photographs, which are scattered throughout the book, serve many purposes. As inspiration, Shepard said, "they were doors into the emotional state and stakes of my characters. The unidentified Chinese subjects of the portraits also seem like the catalysts for the events, yet still sometimes largely forgotten or undifferentiated," she said. Shepard read two excerpts from her novel, each imbuing the picture that inspired it. "I don’t want to talk about the reasons not to do something; I want to do something." Harnessing that power of implication, Shepird imbued her novel with the vividness that those photographs and a story crafted around them demand, enticed Lee, calling the novel a "stunning achievement." Shepard read two excerpts from her novel, each imbuing the picture that inspired it. "I don’t want to talk about the reasons not to do something; I want to do something."

Future issues will appear online. Check out the Center’s website: http://mcc.williams.edu/

INsight

November 2013

THE DC

Have an opinion on social issues on/off campus?
Write/draw/create for...
Mizzel Badruddin '15 went to high school in London, and came to Williams for the small-school setting and strong academic programs. Here he reflects on retaining his Indonesian identity at the College, the differences between London and Williamstown, and also shares some of his words of wisdom directed toward his fellow Ephs.

How did you get to Williams?

When I was a junior, I was a student in London. I was introduced to LACs, which I hadn’t heard about before. I started doing my own research, including asking some friends. I visited a few that summer in the states and I really liked the idea of studying in a small setting, especially coming from a fairly small high school community. My interest in LACs grew. After visiting Williams, everything just clicked. I liked the setting and the strong academic programs. Thankfully it worked out because in retrospect, it was the best school for me.

I know that you’re on Lebanon Council. What would you like to see in the group that hasn’t been done yet?

I don’t know about not having done yet, but we’re trying to gain traction on our monthly service projects. I’d really like to see that grow into something bigger and something a lot of students are involved in. It’s still a work in progress. In November, we’re planning to have a few Indonesian students in the CDE so it’s a bit better.

What has been the hardest part about the transition between living in London and living in Williamstown?

The lack of things to do in Williamstown. London and Williamstown are polar opposites. I felt like there were options, such as going to a nice Middle Eastern restaurant or a concert. In terms of leisure activities, I think that’s the difference I felt the most. At the same time, I’m definitely very busy, so it’s not that big of a deal. Also, in London, you can get around easily with public transportation and feel more independent as opposed to here, where it’s hard to do much without a car.

What motto or words of wisdom do you live by and why?

A simple motto that I’m trying more to live by is Whatever you do, do it well. It’s important to know that nobody else can understand! It’s also very sensible to believe in myself. It seems more human. Also funny story: the day I got here, I saw a black bear near my car!

What was one of the best classes you took in college and why?

When I first arrived in the U.S., I took a class about world religions taught by Professor Alan Fox. It was funny because, even at a large school like the University of Delaware, the class was consistently voted as the favorite. It exposed to analyzing primary texts, and it also made me more open to other parts of the world. Most importantly, it got me started studying religion and helped me realize why it is a compelling subject to study; it enganges the most fundamental questions, and because there are so many ways to answer those questions, it shows how rich the human imagination can be.

What did you do after graduation?

I came to the U.S. to study as an undergraduate at the University of Delaware. When my parents, and many South parents, sent me here, they weren’t expecting me to study religion so I started off doing Business Administration, which I hated. Eventually, I switched over to premodern Philosophy and English Literature. I went on to get a Master’s at George Washington, focusing on Indian and African studies. I started teaching at George-town University at the same time that I began my Ph.D. There, I realized that I loved teaching. It was a good way to translate my work to the students, to make it more relevant and accessible, and to get feedback. I started thinking that it would be wonderful to teach at a place where pedagogy and research are equally valued. I was lucky enough to find that at Williams.

What is your favorite part about Williams thus far?

I love the students here. I haven’t had a chance to interact with too many yet, since I was hired a little late, my courses weren’t as advertised. But I’ve still had opportunities to engage with students — for example, when I attend the Religion Department’s get-togethers and inter-faith gatherings, I especially like the proactive attitude of the students here, not to mention that they’re brilliant. I also love the nature of Williamstown. The beginning of October here has been ravishing, and very much the opposite of Washington D.C. It’s nice not to be surrounded by a crowded city with concrete. Being surrounded by mountains and woods is much like Williams, so that wasn’t an issue for me personally. But, I struggled with Bio 101 my freshman year. Everyone else in the class seemed to have taken AP Biology in high school, and since I didn’t take it, I felt immensely challenged. It was like I was not smart enough to be here. But, in it all, I had to learn that I was smart enough to be here.

What are a few words of wisdom you might pass on to current Williams students?

I majored in Psychology, because I wanted to “figure everybody out, namely myself” (laughs) and I concentrated in African Studies and International Studies, and received a Certificate in Spanish upon graduation. I can honestly say, that each department shaped the degree I got from Williams in 2008.

What were your personal standout experiences while you were on campus?

Well, when I came to Williams, I was a bit used to culture shocks, as my high school seemed more human. Also funny story: the day I got here, I saw a black bear near my car!

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What motto or words of wisdom do you live by?

Ben Al-Arab, a 13th century Spanish mystic, said: “One must give everything — every situation, every activity, every relationship, etc. — its ‘haq’ (an Arabic word meaning truth or due).”

Words of Wisdom: Each person should actualize his/her full potential. Stop for nothing less. This requires a level of self-knowledge and an understanding of oneself, because not everyone has the same.
I occupy the middle, the in-betweens
Those small-undefined spaces
Away from the binary main streams
Never quite fitting into a box because I’m not a perfect square
Too cool for that kind of math
My dreams are allowed to envision a new path
So I highlight both my wrongs and rights
My buts and ands
My complexity is the best thing about me
The only thing you will ever understand
It is the reason why people both love and fight me
Or rather challenge what I stand for
Which is appreciation for all progressive cultures
Whether they be defined as Democrat, Green or Republican
I can learn from all of them
I am never this or that
Except for when contextual walls limit my ceiling

So I walk through doors of different shades and sizes
Ignoring the traffic honking their horns
Wanting me to drive on a narrow unpaved road
I search for an informed middle ground
From which I can embrace and resist
Understanding everyone’s logic
Wearing any and all labels to which I see fit

Poetry
Rhythmic pulsating beatings
Of that veinful organ,
Tearful organism
Come eat dinner
You need dinner
You’re not dead; she is
You’re thinner
Than she is
You’re crying worse
Than she was
When you hit her:
Rhythmic pulsating beatings
Of that vengeful organ donor,
Tearful organism
Careful organism
She is irretrievable
As she always were
As you’re more than aware
Don’t be dumber
Than she was
Loving her now
As she loved you then
Your beating arm can’t hurt her now
Your beating heart can hurt you.