

Textbook author lectures on difficulties of job

By Daveed Gartenstein-Ross
Old Gold and Black Reporter

Richard Bulliet, a history professor and the director of the center for Middle East studies of Columbia University, lectured in DeTamble Auditorium at 4 p.m. April 15 about common denominators in world history. His talk focused on the process of writing history texts.

Bulliet was one of six authors who worked on the Houghton-Mifflin text *The Earth and Its Peoples*, used in several of the university's history courses this semester.

Bulliet said there are a number of problems inherent to the process of writing history textbooks. "You're going to leave a lot of stuff out, and when you choose something to put in, you won't say much about it," he said, providing the example of attempts to cover the Renaissance in 150 words.

"This is the basic problem you're grappling with that the book is finite, but the subject you're dealing with is not," he said.

Bulliet said it was difficult for six historians to agree on what to include in the book. "The book is the product of a lot of

fighting," he said. "We were hating each other by lunch time. But the fights were very important because they had to do with how you get historians to agree on something. Historians, in the course of time, develop very, very strong views on their topics and don't want others stepping on their views."

The six textbook authors did not simply let each author write about his or her area of expertise, which meant that they had to reach agreements more than would have otherwise been necessary.

"If you do a global history and implicitly say all cultures are equal, how in the world do you fit it into a book that's any sort of tolerable length?" Bulliet said.

"In the past, this has been done by looking at Western civilization," he continued. "It all comes down to the glorious achievements of Europe and America in the 19th and 20th centuries. Round of applause, we all say, 'Wow, we white guys are really good. It's too bad these women and these people of color just don't have it.' We brought you Hitler; we brought you nuclear warfare and imperialism."

Bulliet said that this Eurocentric approach

is no longer feasible, and instead historians ask if there is anything about the human experience that is a common denominator, which can be written about without privileging certain cultures.

The common denominator that Bulliet and his co-authors chose to focus on was the notion of technology and the environment.

"All societies have developed technologies to respond to the challenges set by the environment they lived in," he said.

The authors said they were careful not to define technology as something that is invented and built, however, because that approach tends to exclude women. "The history of technology (invention) just reeks of testosterone," Bulliet said. Therefore they defined technology as "bodies of accumulated knowledge by which people deal with their environments."

"That kind of accumulated lore tends to be non-destructive — you don't have to chop down a tree to get some leaves to cure an ailment," Bulliet said.

They also focused on technologies of globalization in the modern period. "You can include something about Bing Crosby

and the invention of the tape recorder rather than something boring, like who won the last election," Bulliet remarked.

The book's second theme had to be implicit, because the publisher said they couldn't mention it by name. That theme is dominance and diversity.

"We wanted to say diversity should be recognized as being there and being natural, and not some kind of abnormality," Bulliet said.

To illustrate this theme, he provided an anecdote about the discussion over using the word "tribe" in the text.

"The Africa specialist didn't want to use it because it was a word used by imperialists to divide up and dominate Africa. The same things with North American Indians — they aren't tribes, they are nations," Bulliet said.

So they decided to ban the word entirely, until the ancient historian pointed out that "tribe" is a Latin word and was used in Rome to describe divisions within the population. How could the authors ban it when the Romans used it to describe themselves?

The authors decided to use "tribe" in that instance, but then the ancient historian

brought up the twelve tribes of Israel, asking if they would be referred to as the twelve "kinship lineages" of Israel.

So the authors made another exception, but those are the only two instances in which the word "tribe" is located in the text.

Summarizing the many aspects of history of which we are ignorant, and his own role in authoring the text, Bulliet said, "The role of the historian isn't the search for truth, but the verisimilitude of truth — what seems like truth."

Junior Omaar Hena, who uses Bulliet's *The Earth and Its Peoples* for his world civilizations since 1500 course, had high praise for the text.

"You learn about the rise of Western structures of domination," he said. "I learned about things like how the present-day borders in Africa were drawn by Portuguese, French and British imperialists. They drew lines arbitrarily, with no consideration for cultures or religions."

Hena continued, "It is deliberately not a text. You don't think, 'Okay, remember this term, remember this name and date.' It is the closest thing to a New York Times article I've seen in an academic text."



You are my sunshine

A girl enjoys the warm spring sunshine on the Mag Patio. Lately sunny days have been scarce, though summer break is drawing near.

Carlton Ward/Old Gold and Black

Images of East Africa

Summer 1997

Photographs by Carlton Ward Jr.



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