

Regional

Paulette studies good, bad of Colonial America

Learning about our own history can be both gratifying and disturbing. Gratifying because of the new things we can discover about our ancestors, but disturbing because we sometimes learn things we did not want to know. Someone who studies both the good and the bad of history is Robert Paulett, an assistant professor in the department of historical studies at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. The fact that he grew up in Virginia played a large role, he said, in his decision to become a historian.

"Virginia is particularly history-proud and certainly that is why growing up I don't remember even learning about history," he said, "because I had already been exposed to museums and battle fields and all that." Born in Richmond, Va., he obtained his bachelor's degree from James Madison University and his master's and doctoral degrees in history from the College of William and Mary. Paulett said that he wanted to become a historian because of his desire to know how things work, how human beings make the choices they make and how different forms, forces and ideas have come into fashion – and gone out of fashion. As most historians, he specializes in a particular period of time. For him, it's Colonial America.

"I went to the College of William and Mary, which has one of the top programs in the country for colonial history," he said. "The more I was exposed to it there, the more I realized that this is where I wanted to be, in the colonial period, the 18th century specifically, because it's a century in which the world is changing from an older, medieval view, but you can also see the emergence of the modern capitalist view." Paulett recently published a book titled, "An Empire of Small Places: Mapping the Southeast Anglo-Indian Trade 1732-1795."

"It's a study of a particular set of relationships within the 18th century, within North America in the Southeast," he explained. "It centers on trade between people from the British Empire and the Native Americans of the Southeast, particularly British traders from Georgia and the



Photo by Robert Paulett

Dr. Robert Paulett studying some archival documentation.

Creek Indians, inhabitants of modern day Western Georgia and Central Alabama. What this is all about is how these two groups created this connection between each other, between two cultures and how that requires certain adaptations." He added that his book demonstrates that the British had to accommodate their minds, houses and everything about themselves to this situation where they had to depend

upon Native Americans for survival.

The thing that surprised him the most while researching his book, he said, was that the British who were trading with Indian villages were actually living in houses built by Indians. "They weren't building British houses," he said. "In that way they were living on Indian terms." He said that he was also surprised to learn that the British had to get used to traveling

far over land, which was not normally part of the British experience.

"I think the thing that surprised me most is how in the big maps of the 18th century they relied upon traders' reports and ideas," Paulett said. "You can see elements of that humanness in the maps, in the way they were constructed, in the way they were drawn. I guess that was the moment of 'aha!' when the whole

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project came together." He said that the way maps were drawn reflected the worldviews of the cartographers at the time.

As someone who teaches Colonial America, Paulett said that he sees students interested in that period because the American Revolution is such a profound symbol for people living in the United States. This interest does not necessarily, however, translate into unqualified enthusiasm.

"There is also kind of a reluctance to study it too closely," he said. "If these people become too human, it can make it harder for us. They were different from us. You know they had hundreds of slaves in their property. They wore funny wigs. So it becomes a little tougher to feel they are part of our country." To Paulett this ambivalence cuts both ways.

"There is sort of a built-in interest for people who live in the U.S. to understand the origins of this country, but it's harder to really get to the human side of it, to go to understand the society, the culture, the good and the bad and the dirty part of the 18th century

Although he is fresh from finishing his latest book, Paulett is already working on a number of new projects. "I have a couple projects cooking right now," he said. "One is local. I'm trying to put together a collaborative research program between myself, other history faculty and undergraduates to research the life of William Whiteside, a colonial figure, who is buried on campus here. He was one of the earliest settlers of Illinois."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.