

RAY KIERSTEAD, Richard F. Schoiz Professor of History and Humanities, has taught at Yale University, Catholic University of America, and as a visiting professor at the University of Texas. After 17 years at Reed, he reflects that the college has "a wonderful way of being creative, adapting, changing, and still keeping its structure. I don't know of any other place that does it in such an interesting fashion." Kierstead believes that the acquisition of knowledge is a part of becoming not only a scholar, but a civilized being and a thoughtful citizen. He views Reed as seriously committed to the pursuit of knowledge and to the inherent value of ideas.

I just returned from Maine, where I was visiting my father, and found that I had 200 e-mail messages. I'm on Bird Chat, so I got lots of messages about the bird world, including about 20 related to the death of a pine siskin and how one should respond to the death of a bird. There are two views. One is sentimental, and the other is biological and says we should be concerned about species and not individual birds. So, this death led to a great row over how one deals with the death of a bird. I found that a wonderful commentary on human nature.

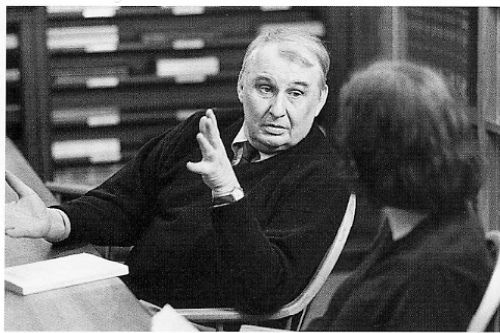
"When I was a senior at Bowdoin College, I received a Fulbright Fellowship. Back then, which was in the 1950s, you could get Fulbrights fairly easily, and a whole shipload of us went to France on the liner *Liberté*. At one point I thought I might like to be a teacher of French, until I decided that my Maine accent was an insuperable barrier to having a good French accent. But I studied French literature and during the Fulbright year got interested in French history, went to graduate school, and became a French historian. I think one reason I appreciate France—Paris mainly—is that it's so different from the environment in which I grew up—upper New England, a fairly close, somewhat puritanical world. I came to love the food and, as all my friends know, the wine. And then there is the French sensibility. There's a kind of intellectual edge to French culture that I have always enjoyed, a temperament, skepticism, attitude towards life

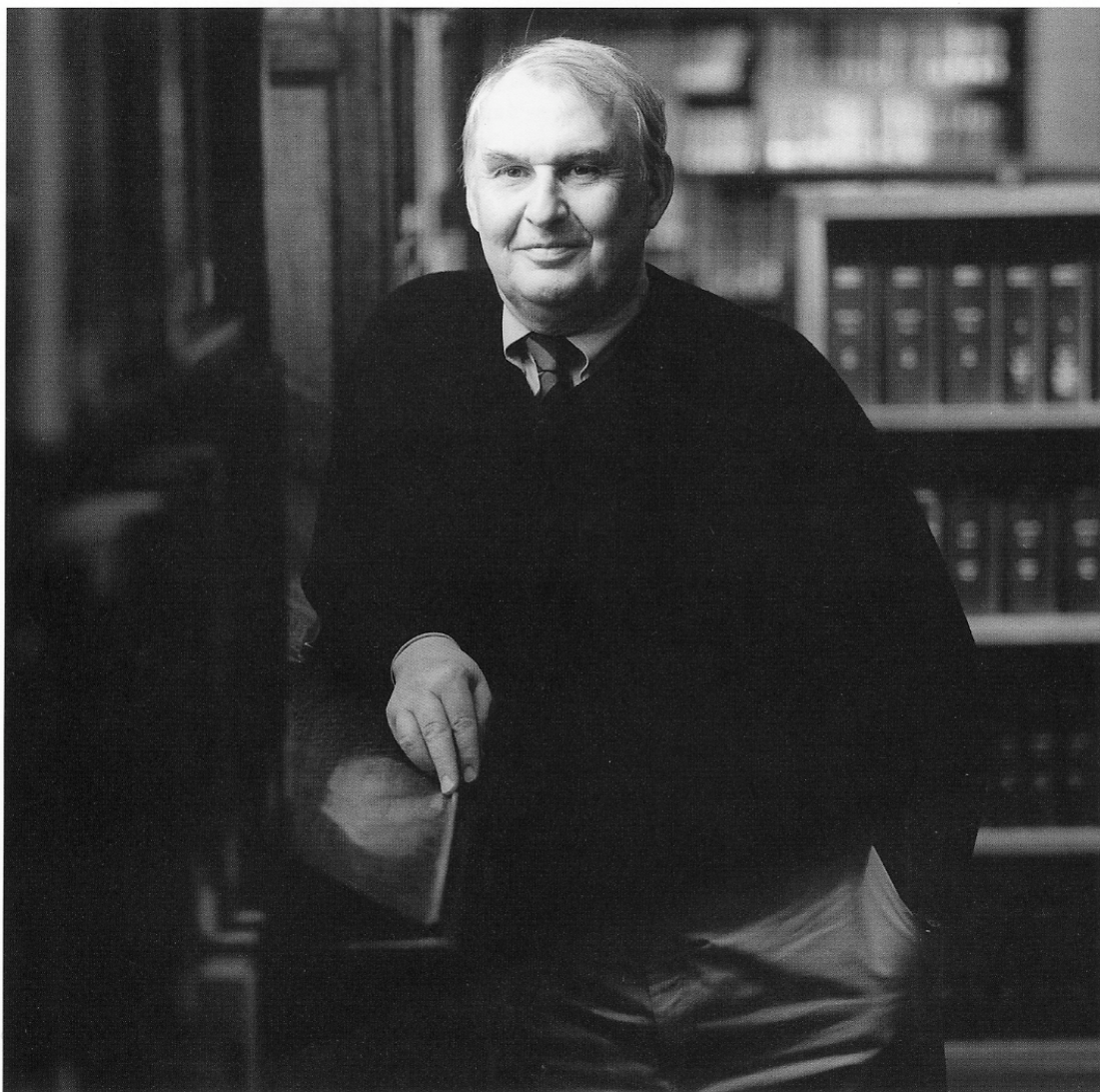
that I appreciate, so it hasn't been just a scholarly journey. It's been real passion for French things.

"I came to Reed 17 years ago. I remember it was late January, and we flew over the Cascades, and there was this green place, and I said, well, that's for me. There were camellias in front of Eliot Hall, and they were very beautiful and blossoming, and to see camellias and green in January was wonderful. Both my wife and I gave up tenured positions—hers as a librarian—to come to Reed. Most of our friends thought we were crazy. I had a long experience teaching humanities at Yale, and what was interesting to me about Reed was that it was then, and is now, one of the few places where there is a focus on humanities teaching. That was really what attracted me, the fact that I could spend half of my time in humanities and half of my time doing history.

"I've said many times that one of the great moments at Reed is the first lecture in Humanities 110. There you see all of the class together in one room, in an atmosphere where they suddenly realize that their lives are changing. The course is very serious, with tough texts and tough work, and yet they're engaging with their peers. Somehow that combination of the social and the intellectual happening to everyone at the same time is wonderful to see. By the end of this year of formidable work, you know that you've made a difference in their lives and they've made a difference to each other, as well. It's a great experience.

"I don't think I'm a terribly austere person, but I have a pretty austere view of education in that I've always felt that the real excitement in an undergraduate education is that you discover things you never thought you'd be interested in. You learn about totally new worlds, how they work, and you plumb ideas that aren't immediately relevant to yourself. There was a time when faculty felt they had to begin the educational process by making things relevant to the student. But my way of engaging students has always been the opposite. All of my classes deal with French cultural history,





French society, from 1500 to 1800, and this isn't immediately relevant to my students. So let's see if they can get excited, if there are ways to stimulate their interest. I make it clear to them immediately that this is a study that will not be like what they did in high school. This is an intellectual exercise, an analytical exercise. The materials for the analysis happen to be drawn from an old world, and in the end you want them to be able to make intelligent statements about that world and how people lived in it. So I try to grab them intellectually at the beginning.

"One class that's pretty heavily subscribed is my course on the French Revolution. I present them with broad interpretations, such as the Marxist

interpretation, and they suddenly realize that their world view will affect the way they look at history. Then I begin to produce alternatives, other ways of looking at the French Revolution in historiography, so right away they understand that there's no truth, that how you look upon the world will in some ways shape the way in which you interpret history. Now, you don't want to push it so far that it becomes absolute relativism, with no way of making a sound argument, but you want them to get a generous respect for these older intellectual traditions and to see that all points of view can have a certain richness to them. So I teach the French Revolution, or any other course, as a set of problems. In that way, I don't become trapped in a

static mold. I'm able to react as new interests emerge and as new questions come up, and incorporate them into my course. For example, the question of women in the French Revolution occupies a fairly significant part of my syllabus now, because good history has become available, where it wasn't when I first started teaching.

"There are years when you have freshman humanities conferences that blow your mind; I had one last year that was just so exciting you couldn't believe it. This year, I have a remarkable group of thesis students. All five of them are very different, very interesting, very smart, and it's just great fun. Heidi Becker is working on the image of motherhood in the French Revolution with a special interest in, believe it or not, breast feeding, because the French revolutionaries had a great interest, for very complicated reasons, in the breast feeding question. Rebecca Fisher, a student in history and literature, is working on themes of adultery in medieval romance. Meri Clark's focus is Latin American history. She is looking at ways in which the Spanish colonists defined race in the new world and the complications of a multiracial society. Susan Zettergren is interested in the process by which social boundaries were drawn in French villages of the 16th and 17th centuries. Erin Conroy is doing a thesis on 20th-century French intellectual history, focusing on right-wing intellectuals and

their attraction to fascism in the 1930s. All different and all exciting. It's how I spend my Friday afternoons.

"I am, as I said, a bird watcher. I'm an oenophile. Not a drunkard, mind you, but an oenophile. As for reading, I just finished a wonderful book about popular revolts in 19th-century France, a story of men who dress as women and come out of the forest at night to beat up on royal officials. I also just finished a biography of de Toqueville, who is my greatest intellectual hero, if I'm still permitted to have heroes. I recently re-read all of the essays of Montaigne, which took me back to my college days, when I first discovered Montaigne. At Reed I feel I have a very good chance of having an enduring intellectual life, because I want to keep reading, I want to keep learning. Reed students are demanding. They have expectations and making your teaching meaningful for them makes your own life exciting. We have an environment here where that can happen."