

Letters to the Editor- April 2020

April 10, 2020 - A Letter from Jo Tartt, class of 1964, to Rex Wooldridge in response to a recent mass email by The Generals Redoubt

Rex,

I must admit that a few other issues have competed for my attention in these recent days. However, I will take a moment from washing my hands to respond to your query: I will rejoin your group when Washington and Lee owns up to the fact that both the generals were slave owners, that Lee, perhaps a military genius, was far from an American patriot and that many buildings at the university were built by slave labor. To continue to espouse the tradition of high values and moral standards you guys propose requires from all of us associated with the university that all the cards be put on the table. Only then can a meaningful reconciliation can [sic] be approached without blaming or reproach from either side.

Our past is just that . . . our past

You may not be aware of this but Germany has done a remarkable job of confronting openly its past earlier in the last century and measurable healing reconciliation has resulted in its society.

I do some work with a group called Coming to the Table, a national wide group dedicated to help folks come to terms with just the sort of questions being raised now at Washington and Lee. I hope you will take a look at the CTT website and let me know if you have any questions at all.

Jo Tartt

April 10, 2020- A response to Jo Tartt's comments from Rex Wooldridge

Jo,

Much of what you described has been acknowledged by the University and/or trumpeted by recent and current faculty members. The remainder will no doubt be reviewed and thoughtfully addressed by the new Director of Institutional History.

Our group is focused on preserving the memory of contributions our namesakes, founders, and others made to the evolution of our great university and not have them pitched into the proverbial ashcan of history by the forces of extreme, authoritarian historical revisionism.

Our past is our past and there is much in it about which to be proud.

Rex Wooldridge

April 11th- A further response from Jo Tartt

Dear Rex,

I don't think I went quite far enough in my previous email properly to explain my point. I am well aware

that elements of the university have acknowledged our past and our part in the history of slavery. However, the mere acknowledgement of a stain on the history of such a place as W&L (and there are certainly plenty of others, perhaps even our whole nation) is only the first step in finding resolution and reconciliation. This too easily lets us off the hook. Admission of past moral errors such as the support of slavery fall short of the mark without some sort of restorative follow up.

Mind you I am not here advocating any sort of monetary reparations. I know such suggestions have been made. But that's too often simply a way to shrug off a guilty conscience and, in my opinion, has no lasting effect. In the end its rather an empty gesture.

Passions and self justifications run high on both sides of an issue like this. The breach widens with thoughtless angry rhetoric. What is called for is some sort of arena or process in which both sides can simply talk to one another without argument, judgement or recrimination. We are each only human after all, doing the best we can. When humans come together in a spirit of mutual respect and acceptance of differences, miracles can and do often happen.

I'd like to suggest that you and others do two things: First, please do look at the Coming to the Table web site and think of how the group might be used. And second, take a look at ...[a recent] article from *The New York Times* which details how Germany has confronted its World War 2 history.

April 13th- A comment from Neely Young, editor of The Generals Redoubt website.

We welcome Jo Tartt's comments and the potential dialogue which he has recommended. One of the major goals of The Generals Redoubt is to open a conversation with the University regarding our history, values, and traditions. We do believe it is more than "elements" of the university which have "owned up" to the fact of slavery in W&L's past. The History Commission, The President, and the Board of Trustees have all spoken to this issue. The History Commission went further in recommending that a way be found to identify, contact, and seek reconciliation with the descendants of slaves who were held and employed by Washington College. The new Director of Institutional History, Lynn Rainville, will most certainly pursue this goal. Our concern has been and remains that, in this era of political correctness and identity politics, slavery will become the primary or sole focus of historical research, public statements, and university actions. This, we fear, would be as unbalanced an approach as ignoring the issue of slavery altogether.

April 15th- A Response to Jo Tartt from Kaz Herchold, class of 1968

I would be cautious and wary of Mr. Tartt's invocation of Germany as an example we should all emulate. Unfortunately, he omits the fact that Germany, having invaded Poland, having raped, pillaged and destroyed the country, and then systematically having killed millions of innocents on Poland's territory in the Holocaust and during a brutal occupation, has refused, and to this day refuses, to pay any reparations to Poland. They hide instead behind a 1955 agreement foisted on the Polish communist government by Moscow in which the East German communists paid a pittance in so called recompense.

Bringing Germany into this discussion in appallingly misguided since whatever injustices slavery at W&L wrought bears no comparison to the crimes committed by the Germans and the havoc foisted on the world by Germany in World War II. As a Polish American, the son of a Polish officer who spent four and a half years as a German POW as well as a proud alumnus of W&L, I find the suggestion that German

culpability is somehow comparable to the sins of our founders and predecessors egregious and contemptible.

April 20th- A Response from John Howard, class of 1984

I read with interest your recent letters from Mr. Tartt which perfectly incapsulate everything wrong with the administration of Washington and Lee over the last few years.

I earned a degree in American and Latin American History at W&L from 1980-1984. It was a magical world taught by giants. And both Presidents Washington and Lee were discussed in the broadest terms, including slavery, but not just slavery.

It is simply gaslighting to suggest that somehow W&L covered up either man's failings and has yet to acknowledge they owned slaves. The central study of Lee was how could the most decorated war hero of the Republic, a man Lincoln offered command of the Union Army, a man whose character was widely admired before and after the war, a man who successfully restored W&L, and who recruited large numbers of Northerners to the school associate with and lead the Confederacy? A man Presidents Ford and Carter recognized as a patriot worthy of restored citizenship in the 1970's?

That is the paradox of Lee. It is an ancient study at W&L. It should remain at the heart of the University because in it we see how good people stray and can earn a form of redemption.

Much of my family was slaughtered by the Nazis in 1940, so it is particularly painful to see references to German post-war efforts as somehow relevant to W&L. It was a unique chapter in the wholesale slaughter of civilians and the application of industrial methods to accomplish genocide. It has no relevance to the university. As is so often the case, Nazi references are not substantive but used to elevate the moral structure of a writer's cause.

It would be as if I were to claim [that] the backers of the [History] Commission's findings and overwhelming majority of faculty are Marxist/Leninists because they seek to suppress any speech contrary to their worldview and seek to exclude from the faculty and administration conservatives and moderates. I reject these comparisons as idle name-calling, unhelpful, and a complete misuse of history.

For the broader W&L community to return to the comity that existed for over two hundred years, it will be necessary for those who sought to force the Commission's findings and recommendations upon the University to acknowledge their own part in driving a self-righteous agenda of division and hate. As a mediator, I refuse potential assignments when either party refuses to acknowledge their own responsibility. Mr. Tartt's comments, the website for the organization he describes [i.e. The Generals Redoubt], all evidence the pointlessness of a serious reconciliation at this time.

That W&L or The Generals Redoubt have not acknowledged much work remains to establish and embrace its history is simply false. The imperative to add to its long and glorious annals a comprehensive history of slavery, racism, and slowness to embrace civil rights is beyond doubt. But the key word is "add". What Mr. Tartt and others within the administration and faculty seek to do is "replace" that history with a false one.

To paint Lee as Hitler is to invite a repeat of racism and war. Because the study of the essential paradox

of Lee based in fact, is to reveal the real danger. How do great citizens of our Republic make historic mistakes? And more importantly, how do they redeem themselves.

Editor's Comment from Neely Young- April 27th

We have re-printed the comments from writers just as they were sent to us. These comments represent solely the point of view of the writers. We will make one comment on John Howard's response. The Generals Redoubt has recognized that there is much work to be done, but we have begun that work. Our first stated goal is to "pursue opportunities for constructive dialogue between The Generals Redoubt and the Board of Trustees and Administration." We have begun to pursue such opportunities and have even extended our efforts to students and faculty. We will continue to seek ways to establish meaningful and open dialogue.