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MEMORIAL

James Van Horn Melton (1952–2025)

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James Van Horn ("Jamie") Melton, Professor of History emeritus at Emory University and former President of the Central European History Society, died unexpectedly on June 28, 2025 in Atlanta. Born in 1952, Melton studied at Vanderbilt and did his graduate work at the University of Chicago, where he completed his doctoral dissertation under Leonard Krieger in 1982. He taught at the University of Arkansas and Florida International University before coming to Emory in 1987. He was an exemplary historian, a beloved teacher, an extraordinary colleague, and a gifted and generous mentor. Melton was a superb archival historian whose work always remained focused on broader historiographical concerns.

Melton's first monograph, a revision of his dissertation, *Absolutism and the Eighteenth-Century Origins of Compulsory Schooling in Prussia and Austria* was a comparative study of Prussian and Austrian attempts to reform education in order to counter a crisis of legitimation.[1] Melton showed how new religious impulses—especially Pietism in Hohenzollern territories and reform Catholicism in Habsburg lands—sought to harness education to inculcate a broader social disciplining and serve the absolutist state. Despite their high aims, Melton noted the limits and constraints these educational reformers faced that, in turn, undermined what they had hoped to preserve.

In his second book, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe*, Melton took as his point of departure Jürgen Habermas's understanding of the transformation of the public sphere in the Enlightenment.[2] Melton's wide-ranging synthesis examined the rise of public opinion in Britain, France, and central Europe. He not only described how new reading and writing publics developed across Europe and the function of salons, taverns, coffee shops, and freemasonry in providing spaces where broader "publics" could flourish, but he also revealed how such "publics" could take less liberal and rational turns than Habermas would lead us to suspect, becoming at times drivers of nationalism and aggressive calls for military action.

In *Religion, Community, and Slavery on the Colonial Southern Frontier*, Melton shifted his scope from Europe to the broader Atlantic world as he examined the path of exiled Protestants from Salzburg who, under Pietist influence, eventually emigrated to Georgia, where they

[1] James Van Horn Melton, *Absolutism and the Eighteenth-Century Origins of Compulsory Schooling in Prussia and Austria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

[2] James Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

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founded the utopian religious community of Ebenezer.[3] Alongside vivid accounts of individual Salzburgers, like Thomas Geschwandel, an alpine miner who settled in Ebenezer, Melton described the struggle of the community to maintain its religious and German identity in the colonial, low-country context of Georgia. Initially opposed to slavery—less because of religious and moral reasons than out of concern for the community's cohesion, as Melton showed—the Ebenezer community eventually accommodated itself to slaveholding, despite ongoing ambivalence among members of the community. Riven by factions and nearly ruined in the Revolutionary War, Ebenezer never recovered its former sense of community or prominence.

Alongside these monographs, Melton was deeply interested in the development of German and Austrian historiography. Together with Howard Kaminsky, he translated Otto Brunner's *Land und Herrschaft* and provided a critical introduction that revealed how Brunner's seminal work developed from its origins during National Socialism into the revisions of the postwar period, and how it proved highly influential in the field during the 1950s and 1960s.[4] Along similar lines, Melton edited with Hartmut Lehmann a major collection of essays on historians who collaborated with and resisted National Socialism and to various degrees shaped postwar historiography and especially social history.[5] Author of numerous articles and essays, Melton also edited several works, including *Cultures of Communication from Reformation to Enlightenment*.[6]

Melton's care, thoughtfulness, common sense, and genuine collegiality made him ideally suited to take on significant leadership positions in the profession and at Emory. At different points in his career, he was tapped to lead three different departments at Emory: History, German Studies, and most recently Portuguese and Spanish Studies, a testament to his broad intellectual interests and administrative verve. For the profession, Melton served as President of the Frühe Neuzeit Interdisziplinär as well as President of the Central European History Society.

Melton was Chair of Emory's Department of History when allegations of academic misconduct were alleged against Michael Bellesiles in 2002, and the university turned to Melton to organize and manage the external review that ultimately found grave irregularities in Bellesiles' research and published work. Melton's concern for the integrity of the profession and even-handedness ensured that the process unfolded promptly and fairly but also with clear conclusions and consequences.

Melton remained active after his retirement from Emory in 2023. He was at work on a larger project on Lorenzo da Ponte, best known as Mozart's librettist for the *Marriage of Figaro, Don Giovanni,* and *Cosí fan tutte*. Da Ponte's peripatetic and colorful life from Venice to Vienna and eventually to New York serves as a transatlantic counterpoise to the Pietist Salzburger refugees of Melton's earlier work. Melton continued his other endeavors, presenting lectures in Austria on the 250th anniversary of the *Schulordnung* in 2024 and contributing an article on "Cultures of the Enlightenment" to the forthcoming *History of the Habsburg Monarchy,* edited by Howard Louthan.

Melton had a playful sense of irony and genuine curiosity that infused his speech, writing, and interactions with scholars and friends and that allowed him to engage serious topics without being gloomy. He enjoyed the work of being an historian, colleague, teacher,

[3] James Van Horn Melton, *Religion, Community, and Slavery on the Colonial Southern Frontier* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[4] Otto Brunner, *Land and Lordship: Structures of Governance in Medieval Austria*, trans. Howard Kaminsky and James Van Horn Melton (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).

[5] Hartmut Lehmann and James Van Horn Melton, eds., *Paths of Continuity: Central European Historiography from the 1930s to the 1950s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[6] James Van Horn Melton, ed., *Cultures of Communication from Reformation to Enlightenment: Constructing Publics in the Early Modern German Lands* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

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and department chair, which made it a pleasure to be his colleague. He leaves behind his wife, the classicist Barbara Lawatsch-Melton, a daughter, Sarah, and a son, Peter, along with his brothers, Edgar and William, and their families. He is greatly missed by his colleagues at Emory and in the profession.

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