

Thomas Childers, History

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Thomas C. Childers, Jr., the Sheldon and Lucy Hackney Professor Emeritus in the department of history in the School of Arts & Sciences, died on November 7 after a long illness. He was 78.

Born in Cleveland, Tennessee, Dr. Childers grew up playing baseball, basketball, and football; he also tap danced, sang, and wrote articles for his grammar school newspaper. After graduating from high school, he spent a semester at Tennessee Tech. He soon transferred to the University of Tennessee in Knoxville after injuries sidelined his football career, and there, he turned to a new passion—history—under the mentorship of renowned history professor Arthur Haas.

Thomas Childers

After earning his bachelor's degree, Dr. Childers traveled to Germany to study at the Goethe Institute in Passau (and later returned to Mainz, Germany, in 1969 on a Fulbright

Scholarship). While earning his master's degree at the University of Tennessee, he wrote his master's thesis on the Kreisau Circle, a group that met in secret to plan an assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler, and interviewed Countess Freya von Moltke and other prominent figures in the group. This thesis set Dr. Childers on a lifelong course of teaching and scholarship of the history of Germany, and particularly the rise of the Nazis and the Second World War. He then moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to earn a PhD at Harvard University in 1976, a process that was interrupted by service in the U.S. Army Ready Reserves during the Vietnam War.

In 1977, Dr. Childers joined Penn's School of Arts & Sciences as an assistant professor of history. In 1982, he became an associate professor, and four years later, a full professor. Dr. Childers served on Penn's University Council, and in 1987, he received the Ira Abrams Memorial Award for Distinguished Teaching in the Arts and Sciences (*Almanac* (<https://almanac.upenn.edu/archive/v33pdf/n31/042187.pdf>) April 21, 1987 (<https://almanac.upenn.edu/archive/v33pdf/n31/042187.pdf>)). He also received the Richard S. Dunn Award for Distinguished Teaching in History (1999), the inaugural Senior Class Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching (2000), chosen by a popular vote of the graduating senior class, and the Spotlight on Teaching Award as the Best Lecturer in the Humanities (2004), selected by Penn's entire student body. In 2002, Dr. Childers was appointed to the Sheldon and Lucy Hackney Professorship in History (*Almanac* (<https://almanac.upenn.edu/archive/v49/n13/childers.html>) November 19, 2002 (<https://almanac.upenn.edu/archive/v49/n13/childers.html>)). Dr. Childers retired from Penn in 2016.

During his time at Penn, Dr. Childers received numerous fellowships and awards, including the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung Research Grant, a fellowship in European Studies from the American Council of Learned Societies, and a West European Studies Research Grant from Harvard University. In addition to his teaching at Penn, Dr. Childers held visiting professorships at Trinity Hall College, Cambridge; Smith College; and Swarthmore College. He also lectured across the United States and Europe. Dr. Childers wrote and edited several books, including *The Nazi Voter* (1983), *The Formation of the Nazi Constituency* (1987), *Reevaluating the Third Reich: New Controversies, New Interpretations* (1993), and *The Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (2017). He also wrote more broadly about the experiences of WWII soldiers, with *Wings of Morning: The Story of the Last American Bomber Shot Down Over Germany in World War II* (1995), *In the Shadows of War* (2003), and *Soldier from the War Returning: The Greatest Generation's Troubled Homecoming from World War* (2009) receiving wide acclaim for their sensitive depictions of the emotional tolls of war.

He is survived by his wife, Kristen; his son, Nicholas (Vanessa); his daughter, Ava (Tristan); and his sons, James and Timothy; his mother-in-law, Jean; and his granddaughters, Sophia and Claire.

In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to the ACLU or the ASPCA.