What Do Historians Do?

Interview with Merry Wiesner-Hanks

Merry Wiesner-Hanks: I'm Merry Wiesner-Hanks, and I'm just recently retired after 40 years of teaching, most of that was at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. I taught for six years at the beginning of my career at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois, but mostly at UW-Milwaukee, great place.

And I began my career as a historian of early modern Europe, mostly focusing on women and gender. And about 20 years ago, I added to that world history or sort of moved into world history, keeping early modern Europe as well. Again, mostly focusing on women and gender, but-- and now sexuality increasingly as well, but I've written on and work on a variety of kinds of things over the years.

Shane Carter, ORIAS Interviewer: So, since you have worked on both early modern European history and also what you call world history, can you define history, please, how you think of history and more specifically, the type of history you do, and maybe you can also identify what world history is?

Merry: Sure, what is history? Ah, lots of books have been written about that, and I think it's because it's a word with a slippery meaning. It means different things in different contexts, like every word, but especially that, so that history sometimes means everything that ever happened in the past, which is a very broad definition of history, sort of small H history.

History also can mean everything we know that happened in the past, which is a tiny subcategory of everything that happened in the past, or it can be what we study about the past, which is an even tinier subcategory of the second subcategory of the first one, so-- and depending-- and I will use any of those meanings in a sentence when I'm talking about it, so it can be any of those kinds of things.

World history, again, is a sort of subset of all of those kinds of things, but I think maybe when we think about world history more as a field or if you talk about world history, and sometimes it's global history and some people say-- see a distinction between them, I don't see a distinction between them. I mean, I'm currently the president of the World History Association and one of the editors of the "Journal of Global History," so I don't see any difference between them, it's just a different way of talking about things.

And world history is a field of history, a kind of research and teaching in history or understanding history that takes the entire world rather than one single country or area as its topic of focus. It doesn't always mean that you're always studying the whole world every single time that you're doing world history, but what you're doing is you're always thinking about larger connections and interactions that go beyond one small area.

So you could write a world history of small places or one topic, there's a great book called "The World and a Small Place in Africa." People have written world histories of-- Molly Warsh wrote a wonderful new book about the world history of pearls, what pearls have-- what pearls have been and meant, and where they've gone and who's worn them and bought them and collected them and everything, I mean, that is really quite wonderful.

So you could write world histories of smaller topics, but in all of that, the-- whatever you're looking at needs to be connected with the world beyond whatever the small region or the topic is, so that's how world history is different from other kinds of histories that are a narrower geographic focus.

ORIAS: It sounds like what you're saying, if I take the world history of pearls as an example, that geographically, you follow the story wherever it goes.

Merry: Absolutely, wherever it goes, and pearls have traveled everywhere. This is why I think that good world history is both researched and done and understood in a different range of scales so that-- again, using pearls as an example, and I keep going back to this because I just said Molly Warsh, who teaches at Pittsburgh, has just written a wonderful new book of pearls in the period that I study, the period from the 14th through the 16th century.

But I mean, I think pearls are something again that could be, you know-- I mean, I have one on my hand right now, so as I'm thinking here, sitting here talking to you about pearls, I can look at this pearl ring that I have on my hand, that was my husband's great-great-grandmother's wedding ring that has come down to me.

Now, the pearl on it is not the pearl that was on her ring because that's long gone, because pearls disintegrate if you just wear them and you do the dishes with them as I do and whatever, so I have a new pearl, well, probably about the fifth new pearl, in fact, or maybe more, but it's still a pearl.

And that ring also, but this is a very old ring, and so the ring, that pearl ring, then connects me to this woman who, of course, I never knew, neither did my husband, but it connects me kind of into family history, it connects-- just on my finger, it connects me into the collection of pearls today because this current pearl that's here is only-- has only been on this ring a couple of years, so someone collected or maybe it's a pearl-- it's a cultured pearl, so they raised this pearl as kind of farmed it today.

So I think that that's why world history I find very fascinating is that you can go from whatever is around you to think about, what are the connections around the world with that?

And then for me, because I'm a historian, what are the historical connections on that? How would a pearl ring be different if I'd been wearing this 500 years ago? If I had a pearl ring 500 years ago, and people did, what would have been different about that pearl, you know, where would it have come from? How is that different than now? So I think that's the kind of thing that can show kind of global connections.

ORIAS: I feel like you've almost answered my next question, which is, what do you love about history? Because it sounds like as you're looking at that, like you get some satisfaction out of being able to trace those things.

Merry: I mean, I've had a long career, and as I tried to think about why I became a historian, I didn't know any historians while I was growing up. I didn't come from an academic family or anything and-- but I think that what you decide to do with your life is often in part an answer to a question, you know, questions we have about, why are things the way they are?

So I think many of us don't like certain things about the world that we see, or we want to change them or we want to just understand them better and so we ask like, well, why are things the way they are, and that's a question that every-- it should be, every academic field answers in its own way.

I mean, it's a theological question, it's a metaphysical question, it's a-- my son is in genetics, it's a genetics question. I mean, he has a different answer for why are things the way they are. It's a physical question.

I think these people who do big history will say, well, that's why they really like it because that allows them to answer questions about why are things the way they are, talking to astrophysicists and chemists and biologists and everything else.

But it's also again, because political scientists answer that question, sociologists have an answer, people in the other-- in the humanities, you know, kind of why are things the way they are, the arts can answer that question.

But to me, as I, you know, as I have thought about what I do, that I've tried to answer kind of why are things the way they are, and that's what fascinates me about history. And also I think with my little pearl example, that when I look around me, and this gets back to your first question about, well, what is the definition of history?

I mean, everything has a history and so everything as I simply look around this room, we're recording this and I look at little things around that are a combination of, you know, serious books and tchotchkes on the shelf picked up from here or there and stuff I inherited from people and, you know, every single thing in that has a history.

One of your questions, kind of the type of history that I do, I do European history. Geographically, I do European history and I do world history. But I also do history of women and gender, which is a kind-- which sort of started as a branch of social history because I wanted to know more about what-- things in the past or what the past meant for women.

ORIAS: Can you talk about one or two kind of interesting questions specifically about women and gender in history that you feel like you've worked on? And talk about like what the question is and then how-- well, first, how do you go about developing the question, but then how do you go about trying to answer the question? And I'm specifically asking about logistics because for a person who has not done it, I think that there are things that I hear historians say that like anyone who has done this knows what you're talking about, and anyone who doesn't, it sounds-- it's a mystery.

Merry: Sometimes historians start with one thing, and I'll give you an example in a minute about when I started with a thing, it was a picture, not a text. But mostly we start with a question and then figure out what things we need to answer that question, how am I going to find the answer to that question?

So the first-- I mean, when I first started as a graduate student 40 years, 40 years ago, women's history wasn't really a historical field, it was just really starting out, so my question was really basic.

I was interested in the period of time-- I've always been interested in this period from sort of 15th, 16th, 17th centuries, lots was happening in that period. This is the time of the Protestant Reformation, it's the time of the European voyages of exploration, it's just-- it's a very dynamic period. It's a time when lots and lots and lots of things are changing, so it's a time period when there's lots going on.

And when I was an undergraduate, and certainly when I was in high school and then as an undergraduate, that all those things going on were all done by men. I mean, all the going on was-- you know, the story of explorations, of voyages, was men and ships going from place to place.

The Renaissance was men artists, and you don't call them men artists, just call them artists, but they're all men. The Reformation was all men, you know, it was Luther and his buddies.

So I was like, okay, so my first question was like really basic, like, okay, like, where are the women and what were they doing when the men were doing all these things? So that, I mean, that sounds-- now it sounds like an incredibly simple question, but 40 years ago or 50 years ago when I was an undergrad, the answer to the question was not in any book that I read.

I mean, it was not in the books that I was reading from my classes, it was not even a question that was asked in those books. So it was a pretty simple question, where are the women and what are they doing?

And then kind of partly also, what did-- whatever this historical changes that we're looking at, Renaissance, for example, or Reformation or voyages of discovery, what did it mean for women?

And that's what started-- so answering those questions is what started me out, and I started off when I was in graduate school then, as one does, writing a master's thesis, which is about a 100-page long paper or so, in which I thought, well, okay, what I'm gonna try to do is figure out what are women doing in this period of the 16th century about-- in some place.

And research language was German, and I was interested in Germany partly-- I'm partly of German background, but, you know, that was what I-- the language I'd learned in high school and continued to work on in college and so I thought, well, okay, I'll look at some place in Germany, and I thought, well, I'll pick a place in Germany where things I was interested in happened there, and I'll try to figure out what I can find out about women there.

And that was the city of Nuremberg, which is a city that was a trade and-- a city of trade and commerce. It was a city that became Protestant, so experienced the Reformation, so it's like a city that was in the middle of lots of stuff that I was interested in and I thought, okay, I'll see what I can do.

And for a master's thesis, that meant staying on this side of the Atlantic, reading things that were available on this side of the Atlantic, which 40 years ago, 45 years ago, wasn't very much.

So it was reading research that other people had done, in which I sort of pull things out of their research, so reading secondary sources on things having to do with Nuremberg, reading things and getting things on it in microfilm, reading a few published things that there were about this question.

And also then trying to find women in things, I mean, there was just very little about women. It was pretty easy to do-- to read everything that had ever been written about women in Nuremberg from the 15th century to 17th century because there was only like two books and a couple of articles.

But it also-- it-- so it meant kind of pulling information about women-- and this is something that's true of all women's history, pulling information about women from things that are not technically about women.

So it meant reading things about the religious change that was going on, oh, here's a woman that somebody happens to mention doing this or that, or things that were about work and work in the city of Nuremberg and, oh, here's women doing this kind of labor or that kind of labor, doing this, you know, and they're sort of-- they just sort of are there by accident and nobody thought to really notice that some-- that here were women doing this or that.

So my research process was using the books that were-- the secondary sources that were available, using some printed primary material that was available. Guild ordinances and laws and some other things that were printed primary sources that I could get through interlibrary loan, and that was what was the source base for my first piece of research on women.

Now, for certain kinds of historical questions, you could do, and people do do, vast amounts of original research never leaving their office or wherever their laptop is because the world comes to you through the web. Not everything, but whatever it is that somebody decided to put up on the web-- has decided to put up on the web, is there because some human person, usually not an algorithm-- when it comes to what sources are on the web, it's not algorithms, it's actual human people who make a decision to put something, to make something available electronically.

I sort of said, you know, doing this-- doing history from the comforts of your own home, the web has made things really wonderfully available and it's fabulous, but I'd also still recommend for anybody doing history that they try to have some kind of a direct experience with an archive or a library or the object, not just looking at it in a picture, but the objects that are connected with the past in that particular way, because it's just different when you're-- you know, and I am a person who works on the 16th century, so the things that I study are old, you know.

But it's just different to think about, okay, I'm holding in my hand or at least looking at a table of some archivist going, "Tut tut, don't hold it in your hand," but I'm touching something, that the pen of a person or the, you know, an object, that a person I'm studying made this or wrote this, like with-- their hand touched this as well, you know.

And now with people who are doing kind of like DNA kind of things, we also know that actually when you do that, because we shed skin everywhere and people 500 years ago did too, that probably when you're doing that, you're actually picking up-- I mean, it's gross in some ways when you think about it, but you're also picking up some of the chemical residue of the person who-- of the person you're studying, which I think is totally cool.

There are other kinds of contemporary tools that historians are using to answer questions that are just-- you know, like what did people eat and what did people wor-- you know, what did people take in terms of what did they ingest in terms of pharmaceuticals in the past? And because all of these things leave microscopic, you know, tiny traces in whatever they happen to touch.

So people, you know, people who are doing research on Leonardo da Vinci or who are doing research on Kepler, who was an astronomer in the 17th century, there's a big-- been a big question about whether he was a drug addict, you know, like, okay, you know, we can maybe trace that through touching, you know, touching texts that he-- so I think that having an engagement with a direct-- I mean, having direct engagement with the actual things from the past is also something that's really-- it's-- it can be exciting.

ORIAS: What I hear when I hear people talking informally, it implies a certain-- like you actually like what you do, which doesn't come through sometimes on what I found--.

Merry: Because when I researched-- say, did my dissertation research or other research that I was doing on women, so much of what I was looking at for the documents that I was working with were things like city council minutes or court records or something like that, and they're not organized, they're just-- they just like by chronological order, so it's some city secretary sitting and taking the minutes of the city council meeting.

I don't know if you've ever been to a city council meeting, but they're really boring today. So you're just sitting and reading through and, you know, scanning through pages and pages and pages that don't have to do with the topic that you're really looking for and interested in.

But that-- but that's another thing I think was wonderful about historical research is that you end up finding things that you didn't know you were interested in the first place, that's the things that kind of emerge.

I mean, I was interested in looking for women in Nuremberg in the 16th century, but I kept finding things about what was going on with Jews, which I was not-- you know, but I thought I could-- I really need to think about-- you know, I need to kind of keep note of that.

That kind of led me into another-- into a different, a slightly different topic than what I'd been interested in. You know, you-- I think many historians, when you talk to them, you say, "Well, you know, like how did you get interested in that?" "Well, I was looking for something else and."

I mean, when I first started out, my master's research and then dissertation was about women in Nuremberg. And many decades later, how I got interested in-- I wrote a book called "The Marvelous Hairy Girls," which is a book about a family of a father and a couple of brothers and three girls who lived around 1600, who had what we now call hypertrichosis, they were extremely hairy, really hairy.

And I got interested in that because I saw a painting of one of the girls when I was looking for something else. I mean, I was looking at paintings by female painters, and suddenly there was this painting of this hairy girl. I was like I couldn't-- I just saw that painting, and that was my example of-- that was starting with a thing, not with a question.

I mean, I was looking at that point for paintings by female artists, then I just flipped a page and looked at this picture, this painting, and said, "What's that?" "Who's that?" And I just suddenly had to know more about this little girl, and so that then led me into writing a book about this little girl and her two sisters.

ORIAS: Well, I'm sure that there's lots more that I would be happy to ask you, but was there anything in particular that you really wanted to make sure that you said that you haven't had a chance to say?

Merry: Oh yes, the one question we didn't talk about was the one you had about, have you ever had a student who told you learning history changed their life? What often happens is that students have a sort of idea about history that is partly because they're-- they've had bad experience of history in middle school and high school, so it's not the best history, and they come into college history and go, ugh, and then they find out that it's not that, that it's really exciting and they come to love it.

And so the people I've had was when people say about, have you changed my life, are people who walk into my office, shut the door, break into tears, and say, "You've ruined my life," and that's just happened to me over the years, I think five times, with almost exactly-- in exactly that way.

In other words, a person came to college thinking that they were going to be something, a business major usually, and that's what their parents really want them to do, and they're happy that-- and they take a history course as a gen ed requirement or whatever-- for whatever-- usually as a gen ed requirement or because it meets at 10 o'clock on Tuesdays and fits into their work schedule. At UW-Milwaukee, most of our students work.

And they really love it, and then they take another history course that's a little more advanced and they really love it and they go, "Rats, my life, what I thought was going to happen-- you know, this is what I thought I was going to be and I was just fine, and now I've got to go home and tell my parents that I want to be a history major," and they just-- so that's what they mean by that, they-- it's just like, okay, you know.

And it's not so much that they've discovered a thing in history, you know, like a fact, but, you know, it's not so much that, it's like they've discovered that learning about the past is something that's so fascinating to them that they just can't not do it, and that's what they mean by that, "You've ruined my life."

I said, "Thanks, you know, that's my role, yay, hooray, welcome to the club of life, you know, of life." So that's, you know, that's-- and we work through it, you know, and they get-- at first, you know, they double major or they get a minor, or they don't tell their parents or they, you know, but they solve that problem or they-- you know, and I think that's another thing about history that's-- to me, that's wonderful is that it doesn't have to be your work, that these are things, again, with the web available or go to-- you know, that many, many people, that say, "Ugh, I hate history," and that you find out that they do history.

They make scrapbooks, they go to museums, they will go wander around cemeteries, they look at old houses like, you know, like they collect pictures, they go to antique stores and rifle through postcards, you know, they do history because it has a meaning to them, they just love it, whether it's their family or just their neighborhood or just themselves.

So that's, you know, it's something that doesn't have to be your life work, but if you decide to make it your life work, yeah, it can ruin your life. So that's my story, I wanted to tell you that one.

ORIAS: I like that. That makes it sound like a gateway drug to something that I'm not sure.

Merry: It's a gateway drug to like ancestry.com, which is, you spend hours and hours and hours on, but it's more useful than Facebook, it's way more fun than Facebook, so-- right, it's Facebook of the past, right?

ORIAS: Yeah.