

Thoughts on Switching Fields:

In academia, if you are trained as a British historian, you generally remain a British historian for your career. As a graduate student, I knew that this rule was not an absolute because I had watched my advisor, a seventeenth-century British medical historian, learn Dutch while he was in his 40s, and then write a book which dealt with a Dutch physician ---but the conformist nature of academia and the rarity with which this kind of transition is done meant that I did not see my own career as having this kind of flexibility.

Still, when a job as an historian for the U.S. Public Health Service opened up, I applied. At the time, the government used KSAs (basically a series of essays) for their job applications. Having to craft a series of essays explaining why my background in British medical history would enable me to become a better historian for the U.S. Public Health Service than my fellow applicants, most of whom were Americanists by training, pushed me to think broadly. This ability to think broadly is crucial for a public historian (public historians generally have to become experts in many, many different types of history and they routinely flip back and forth between periods and subfields).

Changing fields has presented a wonderful challenge for me. I also think that having begun my career as an early modern British historian has made me a better American historian. I have a very deep familiarity with the world view of the British subjects who lived in the British colonies during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Additionally, having trained as a British historian, I have a stronger understanding of America's place in the world and what is---and is *not*---unique about America.

In 2010, my book on American history---a study of federally-funded sex education---will be released. I think that this publication has helped to clarify for me that I have now become an American historian, while remaining a British historian.

Do I Miss British History?

No. I don't miss it because I have never left this field. I still read widely on this subject and I relish my reading as I do it for myself. I no longer read wondering whether the book I am reading can be used in the classroom and I no longer worry about how I will feel when students complain about a book I love.

Best of all, I can use my knowledge of British history in any way I chose. Right now I am writing a murder mystery set in Edinburgh in 1756. This is something I never would have had the courage to do as a professor, tenured or not. And yet, this is extraordinarily fulfilling. It is also pushing me to explore questions from a range of perspectives. Some of these are as simple as the question of how the legal system in eighteenth-century Edinburgh actually worked or, in a question related to my current work as a preservationist (albeit an American one), how the unique architecture and setting of eighteenth-century Edinburgh shaped interactions between the rich and poor in the city. These are questions I might have explored in my scholarship but I am not as certain that my scholarship would have led me to ask questions such as how fictional writers can use

history and/or who owns history. As I struggle to fit my fictional characters into a very real time and place, I now think about these questions from the perspective of both an historian *and* a fiction-writer---something I never would have done had I remained in academia and something which has made me reassess how I view and understand history.

Living in Washington DC, where there are wonderful bookstores, libraries, and public lectures also means that I commonly attend lectures on British history. I frequently see outstanding British theater at the Folger, the Shakespeare Theater, and DC's many other theaters. I visit (and belong to) the city's many museums and I have the opportunity to see not only new exhibits but also pay many repeat visits to some of my favorite pieces of art (I love eighteenth-century British artists such as Ramsey, Reynolds, Devis, Raeburn etc.). In Washington DC, I have access to fantastic archives which include materials relevant to British history. And because I married a bibliophile *par excellence* (although not, alas, an Anglophile!) we have been able to build a house of books, many, many of them the British history books I could never afford as a professor.

And, oh yes, because I earn a good living, I am able to travel to Scotland, a country which I deeply love, when I please and without having to apply for a grant! In fact, in the summer of 2009, we spent a wonderful two weeks there.

So, the real answer to this question is: I am still an historian. What I chose to study and how I chose to use my knowledge in this area is up to me.

What could be better?