

The Full Story

I decided to become an historian when I was 9. That was the year our family traveled to Great Britain and my older sister told me stories about Henry VIII, Bonnie Prince Charlie, and Eleanor of Aquitaine. My father, a rabid Anglophile, and my mother, an omnivorous reader, encouraged my interests and I spent my teen years reading widely about British history (and, to a lesser degree, American, Asian, and European history).

As the daughter of a lawyer and a children's writer, I wasn't exactly sure what it meant to be an historian. I assumed, though, that it would entail spending a lot of my time reading.

During my senior year at Vassar, I interned in the Education Department of the Cloisters Museum and fell in love with working in a museum. Doing research for the staff at the Cloisters, developing a tour, and creating medieval art projects with the many, many children who visited the museum (I can still create tinfoil armor and medieval triptychs with the best of them) were fantastic experiences.

When I graduated from college, I worked in the Education Department of The Walters Art Museum (which was then called The Walters Art Gallery) in Baltimore. Working there underscored the fact that I would need to obtain an advanced degree if I wanted to earn a living which would enable me to eat something other than ramen noodles.

When I entered grad school, I believed, as everyone who has worked in the museum world believes, that historians could do and be many things. But by the time I finished my first year of grad school, I believed that historians did only one thing: work as professors. Not becoming a professor would, I was sure, indicate that I was a failure.

In my last year of grad school, I went on the market in a big way. I applied for jobs everywhere and anywhere. Needless to say, and as every historian knows, the academic job market sucked/sucks (there is no other word for this).

Looking at the websites of many of the departments doing the hiring and comparing the ad to the department proved to be an exercise in frustration. Most departments seemed to cling to a strange belief that one's dissertation defined one's pedagogical abilities; an eighteenth-century historian could not, in other words, teach a course on the nineteenth-century. Even small departments looking for an historian who would teach primarily Western Civ, with perhaps one upper-division undergraduate class in British history, would often demand specific interests and specialties, none of which matched the kinds of courses or students the job candidate would be teaching.

Still I persevered. My first year on the market my only offer was for a post-doctoral fellowship in the history of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, a graduate medical school (UCSF has no undergraduates in the traditional sense). I took the post-doc as that was my only option.

Here, I made what I think of as a classic mistake. Because I was so worried about the job market, I spent my post doc frantically focused on getting a tenure-track job, not on exploring new ideas and new ways of thinking about history (and a graduate school in the biomedical sciences could have really forced me to explore history from a new perspective). The post-doc was a two-year one but, when I was offered a job at Montana State University midway through my first year, I opted to take the job and leave the post-doc.

Even as I took the job, I had incredible doubts. I grew up in the Northeast, in a *very* ethnically, religiously, and racially diverse community. Living in large and very diverse cities has always been very important to me yet here I was heading off to a rural area not known for its diversity or even its proximity to other cities.

Many, many people would love to live in Montana but I am not one of them. I missed museums, theaters, public transportation, racial and ethnic diversity, hanging out with people who are not academics (college towns are generally company towns) etc. I also had begun to question some aspects of what I was doing.

While many graduate programs brag that they do a stellar job preparing their students for academic careers, I think very few really prepare you to think critically about what professors do, how they do it, why they do it, and where they do it. And when I became a professor, I found myself struggling with those issues. I'll mention a few of them here, simply because I am concerned that these are not things which are widely discussed.

- Teaching large lecture classes. Analytical thinking is not something which can easily be taught in a large lecture class. My job entailed teaching large classes on ludicrously huge and complex topics (500 years of European history or, worse yet, 500 years of World History) to first-year students who lacked even a rudimentary knowledge of non-American history or cultures. While teaching assistants lightened my load, I felt the use of assistants simply complicated things for students by adding an additional barrier between me and my students. I am pleased that some state universities have begun to attempt to turn away from teaching these types of large lecture classes in the hope that this will lower their drop-out rates---but because this is an expensive approach to teaching and because many academics loathe teaching introductory courses, I am not optimistic that this trend will soon become widespread.

- Second, teaching students who hate history. My students were overwhelmingly not history majors. Every January or September, kids walked into my class hating history and resenting the fact that they had to take Western Civ or World Civ (courses that were requirements). Yes, sometimes I managed to bring these students around to liking history but I wanted to teach students who walked into the classroom as excited as I have always been about history (at the same time I realized this about my own teaching, I came to have a greater sympathy for the geology professor whose course I took as a sophomore). A friend who is a musician and who teaches piano has told me that teaching what you love to people who do not share your passion can be very, very draining---even when

those students are technically proficient and many of my students were not technically proficient which brings me to point #3.

- Third, many students enter universities and colleges lacking basic skills. Often professors teach at a level which is too difficult for these students and which does little to assist students in acquiring the skills they need (hence the high drop-out rates). I realized that if I were to educate my students---really educate them---I needed to concentrate on teaching very basic skills. The longer I taught, the more I found myself teaching not history, but reading and writing. I think it is commendable when faculty take the time and effort to focus on this (alas, too few do teach these basic skills) but nothing in my grad program had really prepared me for this kind of teaching and I will admit that I found it frustrating as I was eager to teach history.

- Fourth, I noticed that while I grew intellectually and wanted to discuss different concepts and ideas in my upper-class classes each semester, I was always teaching new students. Each semester, I had to explain anew how a parliamentary system works, what the causes of industrialization were etc. Yes, I could and did change the books and assignments every semester but certain basic concepts still had to be at the heart of my lesson plan. A good teacher is one who keeps the course at the students' level, even when he or she has grown in new or different ways. Unfortunately, I did not find the things which would make me a good teacher to be intellectually fulfilling on a personal level.

- Fifth, the disconnect between my teaching and my research interests. While I was fortunate to have the option of teaching several courses in my area of specialization (I did not teach predominantly Western Civ or World Civ in any of my jobs), I felt it was important to teach classes which reflected my students' needs and interests. The classes I taught never included any on eighteenth-century Britain, medical history or even Scottish history---my specific areas of interest. Classes on those subjects were too esoteric for my students (I taught broadly based classes on the history of science, modern Britain etc.). I realize that many faculty solve this problem by creating a graduate program which both frees them from teaching introductory courses (these are taught by graduate students) and provides them with the opportunity to teach courses on their area of expertise. However, that approach to this problem is not one I endorse.

- Finally, like many professors, I hated the fact that the person assessing my teaching and helping to determine whether I would obtain tenure was a 19 year old accounting major who resented having to take a class with a lot of reading and writing.

As I struggled with the reality of teaching at a medium-sized flagship state university, my research also suffered. I now lived in a rural area, teaching at a relatively poor state university with a limited library (although one of the best in the state). Traveling to London and Edinburgh entailed a hellish long-haul flight and was very, very expensive. Living in a place where the culture and the focus is on the concept of the American West also made me feel very out of sync with my research. My British colleagues and archives all felt and literally were thousands and thousands of miles away.

Desperate, I continued to apply for jobs in the hopes that I could at least return to the Northeast. I even began applying for visiting professorships. Of course, this approach is, as my eighteenth-century upper-class century Britons would say, Just Not Done. Hiring committees, all of whom let me know in no uncertain terms that this would be career suicide, sharply questioned why I was considering this in job interviews.

Still I got an offer for a visiting position from a small state university in New York. Reputation-wise, it was a step down. But it was near my family, it was somewhat close to New York City (80 miles away), and I knew I could not stay where I was.

Going from a tenure-track position to a visiting one made me conscious of something I had, I will confess, been only dimly aware of as a tenure-track professor---the rigid and very hierarchical system which puts tenured professors at the top and adjuncts at the bottom (even if the adjunct in question has out-published the tenured professor and won teaching awards). Add in academia's extraordinary lack of racial diversity and I began to wonder why I was working in an environment which did not reflect many of my core values and which had me living in places I did not like.

Midway through what was a two-year visiting professorship, a friend from my post-doc asked me the question my family had been asking for years: "Why don't you just leave academia?" This was the first time I was able to hear the question, think about it, and give an honest answer. Previously, I was so wrapped up in the idea of academic success that leaving academia was unthinkable. But now I was ready to leave.

Leaving Academia:

Leaving academia was very, very difficult for me. I was single at the time so I had no spouse to assist me as I made the shift. I was unemployed for eight months and I collected unemployment insurance during some of that time.

Because I was uncertain about what I wanted, I read a lot of career books. Despite my almost pathological shyness, I began to speak to people about my options, slowly building a non-academic network.

I was astonished to learn that many people were fascinated by my education and background. I was also struck by how many people, working in many, many different places, shared my belief that history had and has meaning outside the classroom. In the eight months that I spent speaking to people in industries as varied as banking, health care, and public relations, I had more interesting---and challenging---conversations about the value of history than I had had in my many years in grad school and teaching.

Ultimately, I received two offers; both of these offers came about, directly and indirectly, through networking. I say indirectly because speaking to people about how to craft my resume and, more specifically, how to apply for federal jobs enabled me to apply, successfully, for a position with the federal government. Both job offers were made to

me because of my research skills. One of the offers entailed working as a public historian for the federal government and I chose that job because it seemed to offer the most diversity and because I was attracted to the idea of public service.

Switching Fields:

Becoming a public historian meant that I became an Americanist. In academia, this kind of shift is seen as pretty much impossible. If you are trained as a British historian, you generally remain a British historian for your career. Oddly, I knew that this rule was not an absolute because I had watched one of my graduate advisors, 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 into a broader way of understanding my skill set. 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 presented a wonderful and still ongoing challenge. 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 and this shapes my understanding of American history and culture. 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. This has helped solidify my new identity as an Americanist.

So, too, has my new job. After working in the Office of the Public Health Service Historian for seven years, I decided it was time for a change. In 2008, I took a job as the Branch Chief of the National Historic Landmarks Program in the National Park Service. This job covers a broad swath of American history. One minute I will be researching the whaling industry in the late eighteenth century; the next, I will be writing about the development of the American aviation industry in the inter-war period. My new job also brings me in contact with people all over the US who love history; these are enthusiastic amateurs---lovers of history---in the most literal sense and I have been impressed by their enthusiasm in preserving and protecting historical sites.

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. Best of all, 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.

As Alex Pang, one of Beyond Academe's profiles and someone I met as a post-doc pointed out, the life of the mind is very portable. I can still easily research and publish on any topic in British history even though I don't hold the title of Professor of British History.

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 an extraordinary range of 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 can and do 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 also 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*, 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!

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?

