

Interview with a Professor:

Dr. Andrew Gow

Constellations is pleased to continue a special segment in the journal, “Interview with a Professor.” Our goal with this project is to connect professors and undergraduate students; undergraduates are often unsure as to how to pursue their interests in history professionally and would like to learn from the experiences of their professors. We strive to make *Constellations* meaningful and engaging for students and hope that this section will allow students to learn from their professors’ personal experiences.

Section 1: Background and early history

What inspired you to study history/classics professionally?

It’s hard to say. I started studying history in 1981; I chose to pursue a Ph.D. in History in 1988, and started in 1989. The choice was made by slow degrees and increments over those seven years, and involved many experiences and people. My undergraduate instructors were wonderful teachers and a few were also wonderful scholars; they inspired me to pursue academic topics in many ways, but entering an academic profession in the 1980s did not seem a very good bet, so I put off the decision. In 1986, one of my former undergraduate instructors talked me into an all-expenses-paid month-long summer school for doctoral students in early modern history at the Herzog August Bibliothek, a state-run research library that evolved out of a former ducal library in the small town of Wolfenbüttel. The distinguished professors (Wolfgang Reinhard, Thomas Brady, August Buck, among others) who led the seminar were great role models. I very much enjoyed it and did a Master’s degree in History at Toronto as a result. Most of my courses there did not really inspire me, though I learned a great deal. I was ready to choose some other career path, such as the diplomatic corps (!) when a chance meeting drew me back into the academy. It was actually a visit by my future supervisor, Heiko Oberman, to the UofT campus, organized somewhat ironically by Lesley Cormack, now our Dean, and then Curator of the Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, that really got me excited about Ph.D. work. There are of course other, deep reasons—psychological, emotional and historical—that led me to study history, but this is not really the place to air them.

What challenges did you face getting into the discipline?

None, really. I chose history largely because it was a much bigger and better-funded field than any other I might have entered. There were no programs in cultural studies yet, for instance. After graduate school I had an extraordinarily clear path compared to many colleagues and friends. Most of it was due to blind luck.

How has the discipline changed since your experience as a student?

This is hard to say, as I had little appreciation of how the discipline as a whole worked in those days. As far as I can recall, History was still being taught, in most classes at the small provincial university where I was an undergraduate, as a straight-on narrative of things that happened in the past. Historians found out about those events by reading documents in archives, then wrote explanations of them that followed the events closely in chronological order; they did not ask questions from outside this framework or borrowed from other disciplines. They learned a ‘craft’ by osmosis, not by reading and thinking about historical method or practice. This was true more of the older model, political and diplomatic history, than of the newer model, then in its heyday, social history.

However, social historians were rarely any more interested than political historians had been in larger intellectual questions. In fact, the philosophy of history, intellectual history and the field of historiography were deeply suspect to most practicing historians I encountered. Cultural history was not part of our curriculum. With one or two exceptions (which really inspired me), I found most of my History classes rather dull; I put much more time and effort into medieval and early modern German literature and language. In retrospect, I know now that massive changes were afoot in the academy elsewhere in the early 1980s—just not at Carleton University. What has not changed is that historians then and now are great moralizers—even moralists—who can rarely resist the temptation to judge the past, to judge the actions and thoughts of our predecessors. I do wish that might change, but I am not particularly hopeful.

Section 2: Current Professional Role

Please explain your area of specialization briefly.

The history of culture and religion in medieval and early modern Europe, but I am also very interested in other fields, such as secularization theory, historiography and intellectual history, as well as Jewish history from the Middle Ages on.

What is unique about your approach to history?

Nothing, really; what is distinctive, perhaps, is that I have often used sources overlooked by other scholars (e.g., my book on the Red Jews), or that were used by other scholars to make very different points. Much of what I have published could be termed ‘revisionist’ history.

Section 3: Research Interests and Primary Source Use

What sources do you rely on for your research?

That depends entirely on my project. I have often used published primary sources to pursue questions no-one has yet asked of them. I have worked on medieval world maps, all of which have been digitized in great detail because they are prestige objects of great cultural value, so I have rarely needed to work with the originals; and since it has almost always been the textual captions and descriptions I have worked on, I have often been one of very few scholars ever to comment on them. Working on medieval manuscripts is always an interesting challenge; I am editing one now with my former Ph.D. student Dr. Robert Desjardins. I worked many months in the State and City Archives at Nuremberg, pursuing a number of questions regarding burgher culture, but the results were meagre—manuscript and printed books and other written materials containing discursive texts offer far more insight into the questions I find most interesting than the types of medieval documents preserved in most archives can.

Has your research changed your worldview? How?

It has made me less sure that we can find answers to all the questions we would like to ask; it has unsettled my confidence in many ways, and forced me to pose my questions in a humbler and more tentative way. It has made me even more sure that the study of history should not lead us to try to construct moral lessons—we are perfectly capable of doing that without bothering with all the training and work that go into doing research! Understanding and moralizing are two very different occupations.

Section 4: Advice to students

What is the message you try to convey to your students?

I want students to become self-replicating intellectual machine tools, whether or not they choose to pursue an academic career. Everything I do with and for students is aimed at that outcome.

How do you make history come alive and meaningful for students?

I'm not sure I do that. Students do it themselves, if they are able.