The Historian Behind the History: Conversations with Southern Historians

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Within scholarship, at least historical scholarship, there are various genres of books, of greater or lesser interest to those outside the profession. The academic trade book lies at one end, selling by the truckload and paying for yachts and holidays and private schooling. At the other end, passing largely unnoticed by the mythical 'general reader', lies this kind of book: a set of interviews with historians about doing history. While unlikely to crack the bestseller lists, books like these are tremendously valuable for those of us in the field for the insights they give about what it is we do and how some of our more famous and successful colleagues do it. University presses like the University of Alabama Press should be commended for continuing to publish such books in what we are always told is a very difficult publishing climate.

The ten interviews in this book are reprinted from the pages of *The Southern Historian*, a journal published at the University of Alabama since 1980. It publishes scholarship on the history of the American South written by graduate students, and its editors are graduate students (I was one quite a few years ago). In 2004, the journal's editors decided to start featuring interviews with prominent southern historians, partly as a way of responding to the 'questions that tend to vex most people who pursue a higher degree in the historical field' (p. xi). The interviews were mostly conducted either at the University of Alabama or at the annual conference of the Southern Historical Association between the years of 2004 and 2011 and appeared in the spring issues of *The Southern Historian*. The interviewers were all graduate students studying at the University of Alabama.

The historians interviewed are all important historians of the American South: William Freehling, Laura Edwards, James M. McPherson, Gary W. Gallagher, Richard J. M. Blackett, J. Mills Thornton, Dan T. Carter, Theodore Rosengarten, Glenda Gilmore, and Pete Daniel. Trying to lump and split them in various ways, certain interesting facts emerge. Eight are men, and two are women. Eight currently teach at (or are retired from) research universities, while Rosengarten and Daniel have had careers less tightly tied to academic posts at large institutions. All except Blackett, a Trinidadian, are white. Half of them grew up in the South. In terms of their own longevity within the profession, three completed their PhD study in the 1960s, four in the 1970s, one in the 1980s, and two (both of the women) in the 1990s.

We strive for the noble dream of objectivity, but the scholarly views of historians, maybe more than practitioners of other disciplines, are often shaped in ways subtle or obvious by the history they have lived through, or inherited. Some of the fascinating things in these interviews are the childhood experiences of these historians. Mills Thornton grew up in Montgomery, Alabama, as the civil rights movement was unfolding around him. The experience of having ‘all of the folks you regularly see on the street ... being on the national news’ was an obvious influence on his sense of history and informed his later scholarship on the civil rights movement (p. 104). Laura Edwards moved from Connecticut to Tennessee in fifth grade and suddenly realized ‘that there are differences in different regions of the country’; a few years later at a music school in Michigan those differences were made even clearer, part of what set her on the path towards being a historian of the South. A more oblique but probably no less formative influence was Theodore Rosengarten’s experience ‘growing up in Brooklyn in a Jewish community where many people, all of us, had lost family in Europe during World War II’ (p. 159).

Since race is such an important topic of southern history, it is worth noting the ‘racial conversion narratives’ of a couple of the historians. Glenda Gilmore was 11 years old when the sit-in movement began in her hometown of Greensboro and grew up in a white family with fairly standard segregationist views. Seeing a white college student deliberately defy the rules by sitting at the back of a bus had a big influence on her, as did being challenged on the sidewalk by a teenage African American girl (pp. 166–7). For Dan Carter, from a farm in the Pee Dee region of South Carolina, it was seeing a bus driver terrify and humiliate a little black girl who did not understand where she was meant to sit but also hearing an older cousin explain how his black fellow soldiers in the Pacific had nursed him back to health during the war (p. 130). A few years later, he was one of a ‘bunch of rabble-rousers’ in Columbia at the University of South Carolina and his path was set (p. 131).

As the interviews were conducted by graduate students, most of them have quite a bit about the historians’ own experience of graduate school and also advice for going through the process today. In these sections, we glean wonderful information not just about those interviewed but about their mentors, including C. Vann Woodward, George Tindall, Jacquelyn Hall, and others. Except for Richard Blackett, who did his postgraduate study in American Studies at the University of Manchester, all the interviewees trained in United States institutions, so parts of what they discuss might be confusing or irrelevant for British readers. Perhaps the biggest difference is comprehensive exams; the terror they provoke is nothing new, it turns out. Gary Gallagher recalled, ‘One of my best friends at Texas went into his orals, and I never saw him again. He had a meltdown, walked out of the room, walked out of the program, left Austin, and none of us ever saw him again’ (p. 76). Mostly, though, these are stories about supportive supervisors with a variety of styles of mentoring their students. Some of the graduate school stories verge on the incredible: did you know that Dan Carter wrote the 500 pages of his dissertation about the Scottsboro case in just three months in the spring of 1967? In those days, there was considerable scope for independence, exemplified by Theodore Rosengarten’s experience at Harvard. He and his wife Dale went to Alabama in 1968 and met a sharecropper named Ned Cobb. According to Rosengarten, ‘When I presented the idea of recording Ned Cobb’s life story to my department as the basis of a doctoral dissertation, they said no’, but after the book was out, a dean from Harvard phoned Rosengarten to say that they would accept it after all and give him a PhD (p. 149).

Another interesting theme that tells us much about how the profession has changed is about the dilemmas of

getting a job. At one extreme is James McPherson, who landed his job when ‘the chairman of the department at Princeton called up Vann Woodward one day and said, ‘Do you have any young men [sic]?’’ A relaxed, informal chat later, McPherson had a job. As he modestly acknowledges, ‘The truth is that I was born of the right gender and race at the right time in American history’ (p. 60). Yet even for an older generation of historians, this experience was atypical. There is something vaguely heartening about knowing that Gary Gallagher thought his first AHA meeting was ‘horrificing’ and that he still finds it ‘distinctly uncomfortable’ and ‘a very depressing place’ (p. 70). For those beyond their first job, there are interesting stories about how careers have unfolded, whether at the same institution for a long time (like Mills Thornton, at Michigan from 1974 to 2010), or at different institutions (like William W. Freehling, who went from South Carolina to Harvard to Michigan to Johns Hopkins to SUNY-Buffalo to Kentucky).

Some of the most valuable parts of this book, to historians at all stages of their careers, are the reflections on the process of research and writing, of how ideas evolve and develop and connect to other ideas. There are so many bits of wisdom here that it is difficult to pull out particular examples, but I was struck by something Laura Edwards wrote about her various research projects: ‘It should be the same project to you – the same set of questions that you keep working through. But that project should always look different to other people. If you do the same project and it looks the same to other people, then that’s a problem’ (p. 44). Understanding the continuities across several works through these interviews deepens our understanding of each of them. As Rosengarten says, ‘There isn’t such a gap as you might see between the work I did with Ned Cobb and Thomas B. Chaplin, or between work juxtaposing the Holocaust and African and African American history’ (p. 161).

Obviously, anyone interested in the specific works of these scholars (that is to say, anyone working in this field) would benefit from the reflections of these historians on the main ideas, the influences, and the connections within their major works. Pete Daniel’s experience is a good example. Working on the Booker T. Washington Papers while a graduate student at Maryland and with the resources of the Library of Congress and the National Archives readily at hand led to his study on peonage, and a chapter in that book led to the later book on the 1927 flood. *Breaking the Land* was informed partly by observing agricultural change in Nash County, North Carolina, while *Toxic Drift* was related to two exhibitions he curated at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History. On the lighter side is Richard Blackett’s experience of publishing a first book: ‘And when the book was finished and it was accepted, and appeared, one of the rude awakenings I had is that it had no effect on the world. ... Your book comes out, and the world continues to function as though you didn’t write a book. Which is damn inconsiderate, if you think about it’ (p. 94).

In looking at this volume as a whole, it is worth asking what it is good for. It clearly is indispensable for appreciating in greater depth the work of the ten historians profiled here. The book gives a very good snapshot of the historical profession within the specialty of southern history in the period from the 1960s to the 2000s. I could imagine it being very useful in an introductory graduate seminar both for the intellectual questions it addresses about the topics these historians have written on but also for its value in helping socialize graduate students into the subtle mysteries of the profession. It would also work very well as part of a graduate-level readings seminar on southern history where the students were reading some of the works these historians have written. A relatively minor but annoying failure is that the book has no index.

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