

**The History Interview, # 1:
David Perry, class of 1995--"Go, learn!"**

David Perry is a freelance journalist, author, and history professor at Dominican University in Chicago. He visited Wesleyan to give a lecture on his current work as a disability rights journalist. I sat down with him, and asked him some questions about history, journalism, and the merits of a liberal arts education.

This interview has been edited for clarity.

Connor Cobb: What do you see as the value, or the utility of history?

David Perry: "For me the value of history is in forming curious minds; the ability to learn things about whatever you're interested in. We practice it by engaging in the past, but history is not about the past, it's about being curious and finding evidence and then making arguments from that evidence, and thinking hard about the production of information and knowledge and culture and society and wealth [...] and figuring how to meet that curiosity with engagement with the past."

CC: What benefit can a student get out of majoring or minoring in history?

DP: "The one thing a really good BA gives you, even better when you have the more focused training on graduate school, is the ability to know what it's like to learn something. [...] I was trained really well to know what it looked like to become an expert in a historical subject; when I was writing my thesis here, when I finished my Gen Eds and started taking pre-modern history classes to my heart's content [...], and when I went to Oxford for my junior year and took two intensive seminars.

I know what it looks like to develop a body of knowledge around a topic. So for a historian, if a new body of knowledge emerges: do that, apply that. And I think we do that all the time: with historians who are managing the Cubs, historians who are presidents, historians who are CEOs, historians who are lawyers, historians who are healthcare workers, and cross pollination from all the disciplines. Because they've learned how to learn, they've learned how to do research, and then whatever they're doing with their life, which doesn't have to be as a history professor, they bring the habits of mind that they learned as a historian to that occupation."

CC: What about, more specifically, the history program at Wesleyan? What does that provide students?

DP:

"I don't think to be a great history student you have to take a class on Antiquity, and a class on Medieval, and a class on Early Modern, and a class on Asia, and a class on Africa, and a class on Europe.

I don't think a history program designed on content coverage is a benefit of studying history, which is really about learning how to learn. Wesleyan does not say:

“Okay, everyone is going to take Western Civ 1 and Western Civ 2, Latin America 1, and Latin America 2”

There’s no way to cover all the history of the world; it’s all about choices. If you do the Western tradition, and the American tradition, what about the Asian tradition? If you do the Asian tradition, what about the African tradition?

You push students towards some diversity, both chronological and geographical, and let them pursue their interests, and that’s absolutely true at Wesleyan. This is why small liberal arts colleges are the greatest undergraduate institutions in the world. And I stand by that.”

CC: What do you see as the crossover between Journalism and History?

DP: “For me the most important thing is about really listening to and paying attention to your sources with great intensity. And that doesn’t mean just believing your sources. I’m a Wesleyan History 362 product (a required course for all majors) and I learned to question objectivity. Your sources always say something interesting and part of your job as the historian or the journalist is to produce some kind of narrative, some kind of frame that makes it visible to the reader. But that is a fraught process; you’re always making choices.

I’m making similar decisions whether I’m writing about 13th-century relic thieves (the subject of Perry’s first book “Sacred Plunder: Venice and the Aftermath of the Fourth Crusade”), or writing about contemporary issues and policy. There are different frames, different issues, and different access, but the habits of mind of the historian and journalist are very similar.”

CC: What’s the difference between the journalistic work and the academic work that you’ve published?

DP: “Academic writing is seminal; it aims at being final. But essay writing proposes an issue and advances it, but not advance in a positivist way [...] That for me is the relationship between my tweets, Facebook posts, daily blog posts, and my essay writing, and hopefully longer form essay writing, and the book that I’m writing (“Disability is Not a Crime”), which is journalistic, narrative non-fiction.

Each one of these is about pushing the conversation forward, and pushing it in a direction that I think it’s worth being moved in, which doesn’t mean I’m always right about the direction it should be moved in.

When I talk to academics about public writing I try to give them courage to make these statements, and tell them that essay writing is iterative. It does no harm, but support it with evidence, and make an argument. We’re trained to analyze things and make arguments and we should do that around issues that we care about and know about. And if we don’t know about it and we care about it; go learn.

David Perry’s work is available on his website: www.thismess.net . His next book “Disability is Not a Crime” is expected to be out in Fall of 2017. In the meantime though, you can follow him on Twitter (https://twitter.com/Lollardfish?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw) and like his page on

Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/ProfessorDMPerry/>), where he posts daily about topics that range from medievalism and academia to contemporary politics and disability.