History in Practice

An Interview with Dr Frances Flanagan

Frances Flanagan is an Arts/Law graduate from the University of Western Australia. She has a DPhil in modern Irish history from Oxford University. Her thesis, entitled ‘Your Dream Not Mine: Nationalist Disillusionment and the Memory of Revolution in the Irish Free State’ is soon to be published by Oxford University Press. She has taught history at undergraduate and postgraduate level in both Australia and the UK. Flanagan is currently a postdoctoral research officer at Birkbeck, University of London, working on a Leverhulme Trust project to study public reactions to humanitarian campaigns. She spoke to Elizabeth Gralton about the different opportunities her background in history has offered her.

Elizabeth Gralton: You have a reputation amongst UWA history postgrads as having received an unprecedentedly impressive result for your History honours. You have since gone on to complete an D.Phil at Oxford and are now a postdoctoral fellow at Birkbeck, University of London. As the study of history is not generally driven by the promise of handsome financial remuneration, your success is presumably the result of a genuine passion for the discipline. Would you agree with this assessment? Which aspect of your own studies has inspired your continued passion for history?

Frances Flanagan: I think I was extremely fortunate in having studied with some excellent teachers at UWA. Historiography and modern European history with Richard Bosworth, totalitarian youth with Mark Edele, intellectual history with Rob Stuart and Irish history with Iain Brash were particular stand-outs—their teaching was genuinely inspirational and the subjects which they taught left me deeply interested in thinking critically about nationalism and the variety of ways it has been invented, ritualised, memorialised and contested in the past. My research projects so far have all broadly pursued this theme, generally tackling the experiences of middle-level nationalist opinion-makers and grappling with the way in which their abstract ideals and expectations of social change meshed and collided with the messy contingencies of their lives and events. So, in my undergraduate honours degree, I surveyed some of the people who interpreted Primo Levi’s life as a vehicle for Israeli nationalism, among other things; in my masters degree I looked at British anthropological experts who tried to shape public opinion about the Balkans in the early twentieth century. My DPhil examined the mentalities of a group of Irish nationalists who were alienated and disillusioned by the experience of revolution in the 1920s, when their various theories of the nation did not come to pass in practice.

History as a discipline makes visible categories of thinking which are otherwise
invisible, revealing the things we take for granted as natural, stable and inevitable as being instead constructed, provisional and contingent. The emphasis on being curious, empathic, weighing the evidence before making judgements, using language carefully and precisely and resisting reductionist explanations is all wonderful. Good history seems to demonstrate something about how to engage with the nuance and complexity of the world without being overwhelmed. Sadly, there don’t seem to be many other places in contemporary society that inculcate those kind of skills and outlook quite as directly and forcefully.

EG: I understand that you have a fair amount of experience working in native title. To what extent did your training in history have an impact on/inform this work?

FF: I did a double degree in Arts/Law, and for several years after graduating worked as a lawyer for an Aboriginal native title representative body, representing traditional owners from the mid-West and Pilbara. The process for the recognition of native title is an inherently historical one: the court is fundamentally asking a historian’s question, about the extent to which there has been change and continuity in certain aspects of a society over time—although it necessarily uses a legal methodology and framework to analyse and answer it. Much of the evidence presented in such cases is full of intimate detail about the texture of everyday Indigenous lives, touching on many of the big themes of Australian history like secularisation, urbanisation, labour relations, the rise of rights discourse and the impact of multinational corporations on people’s lives and identities. The evidence presents interesting challenges of interpretation, of course, since the written record was overwhelmingly produced by non-Indigenous sources, so there is a lot of sifting and critical interpretation required. Historical ideas from outside Australia came up again and again in the native title process in surprising and oblique ways. The narrative logic of nineteenth-century European nationalism, for example, seemed to be inchoate in the rhetoric on all sides of litigation. Concepts like self-determination, freedom, and national redemption, for example, none of which technically form a part of the law, seemed to exert a strong cultural force over all of us, and often implicitly structured people’s understandings of the nature of the native title process and their place in it.

EG: You are currently involved in a study on public perceptions of humanitarian campaigns. Can you tell us a little bit more about what this involves and in what ways it relates to your history studies?

FF: At the start of this year I started work as a postdoctoral researcher in a three-year Leverhulme project which is about the ways in which humanitarian and human rights issues are mediated and understood by people in Britain, with a particular emphasis on the relationship between narratives of distant suffering and ‘everyday’ morality. It is a subject which has been largely dominated by social scientific scholarship so far: social psychologists, for instance, have tried to isolate out the universal factors that lead to human beings acting ‘prosocially’; media scholars and have tended to focus on representations of poverty and distant suffering; market researchers have amassed a large literature on the techniques that ‘work’ and ‘don’t work’ to make people give. Philosophers have debated how far our moral obligations can and should extend. Far fewer scholars have delved into the lives and identities of the people who produce and consume those narratives.

Our approach is interdisciplinary. The team includes a psychosocial studies scholar and psychoanalyst (Dr Bruna Seu), a media and communication studies scholar (Dr Shani Orgad), a sociologist (Professor Stan Cohen), and myself, a historian with experience in the human rights NGO sector. Despite the disciplinary differences, we all share a commitment to
looking at cosmopolitan themes in a highly embedded way. We want to capture the way that people think and feel about these issues in a way that is sensitive to their social, cultural and political context; that pays close attention to the role of gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, age, political orientation and geography. Our research subjects will all be invited to talk about these issues in their own words. We would like to try and capture how they grapple with the suffering of people they don’t know in the context of their own lives, and their own experiences of caring and being cared for, of exercising power and having it exercised over them. Although the research relates to contemporary issues, the approach resonates closely with my training in and experience of history. I’ll be doing a thematic and discursive analysis of our primary source data which is not unlike the kind of analysis I did of nationalist literature in my DPhil. This project also involves a substantial biographical element, like my DPhil, and, like my DPhil, also concerns the culture of organisations devoted to social change (the IRA in the case of my PhD, humanitarian NGOs in this project). I’m particularly interested in probing the generational differences between interviewees, and to try and think about their interpretations in as historic terms as possible. We will be interviewing people by age cohort, so it may be possible to trace connections in understanding between those who, for example, lived through the wartime nationalism of the 1940s, or to discern continuities between people who grew up exclusively in the individualist rights discourse of the decades after the 1970s. There are lots of new challenges in the work, too. One area that is notoriously difficult to access as a historian is the reception of these discourses. We tend to be stuck with whatever ad hoc information we can discern from documents like diaries, newspapers and memoirs. In this project I’m able to probe issues of reception systematically, which is quite exciting. The ability to tinker with the sociodemographic composition of the research group is also a new experience—involving both luxuries and anxieties that are very different from trying to work with whatever happens to have been left in the archives.

EG: You mentioned various teachers at UWA that had an influence on your career. Have you had an opportunity to do much teaching yourself in the discipline of history?

FF: I’ve tutored modern European history courses at both UWA and Oxford, doing one-on-one and one-on-two tutorials at Oxford and the usual small group teaching at UWA, as well as a handful of guest lectures at UWA and Reading. My DPhil supervisor sternly warned us of the perils of teaching over-commitment during our degrees, and I followed his advice and concentrated instead on finishing my research as quickly as possible, which turned out to be a fortunate strategy as I had a baby in my last year and would have gone over time on my thesis otherwise.

I enjoy teaching in both the Australian and Oxford systems a great deal, although they are very different in lots of ways. I felt pretty nervous before my first one-on-one tutorial—the prospect of being potentially asked anything by a student over the course of an hour made it seem like a very long time indeed! In practice Oxford tutorials were much easier than I feared, since the discussion is focused on the 2000-3000 word essay that the student has written for that week, and by necessity they arrive very well prepared. These essays aren’t assessed, like essays usually are in Australian courses, and so the dynamic between tutor and student can be quite different, with more of an atmosphere of mutual co-operation as you both work collaboratively to prepare the student for the end-of-course examination, rather than the more adversarial ‘assessment’ relationship that exists in the Australian system. The amount of time you have together in the Oxford system is (comparatively) huge, and gives scope for you to really get to know the student and closely observe and encourage changes in the way they think and write, which can be very rewarding. The focus of history courses at
Oxford are, as a broad rule, more empirical than at UWA, and, apart from a small number of special courses and the dissertation, students spent most of their time working with secondary rather than primary sources. The students cover a breathtaking chronological and geographic range of subjects over the course of their degrees, starting with late antiquity (in Oxford, ‘modern’ history starts in 300 AD!), and most of them only study history to the exclusion of all other subjects, so they really get a very wide span from their degrees and virtually all of them are very seriously committed to their subject. In Australia, the range of students you teach is more diverse (in Oxford nearly of them are 19-21, full-time, and living in college) and they are usually studying other arts subjects at the same time. Australian senior courses tend to be anchored around ‘deep’ research skills rather than the ‘wide’ span required to churn out responses to essay questions in unseen examination conditions. As a result Australian history students are often better prepared to do postgraduate research than the Oxford ones, since many of them have been choosing research topics and identifying primary sources for a number of years. Their essays are also, as a general rule, more interesting to mark!

EG: There is a lot of pressure on PhD students with aspirations towards an academic career to get themselves published as much as possible. What is your publication record like and would you have any advice to give to those of us trying to get a foot in the door?

My publication record is slightly unusual for a recently-graduated UK PhD in its eclecticism: I have a few refereed publications relating to native title, a history journal publication from when I was an undergraduate, some book chapters related to DPhil work in progress, some book reviews and Oxford DNB entries. While the list isn’t as long as I’d like it to be, I’ve been fortunate to have had my DPhil selected by Oxford University Press to be published as a monograph, which will help me in getting a permanent job one day I hope. I have also been very lucky to have found a postdoc position where multidisciplinarity is seen as a virtue rather a sign of dilettantism!

In terms of getting a foot in the door, I really don’t feel terribly qualified to give advice as I’m at such an early stage of my career myself. I would say though from observing others that there are lots of different ways to succeed. I’ve seen some people really concentrate on their thesis research to the exclusion of almost everything else and get research fellowships almost entirely on the strength of their references, which has enabled them to publish brilliant books and then get a permanent jobs. Others have done a wide range of teaching and taken longer to finish their theses, but that teaching experience has stood them in good stead and enabled them to foster excellent contacts which have also lead to jobs. Others still seem to manage to somehow produce half a dozen publications before they finish and do extremely well. What does seem common though is the importance of having a strategy that goes beyond reacting to requests from others to write or teach.

It is obviously important to network as much as possible at conferences and seminars, don’t just introduce yourself to the leading academics in your area but also be sure to forge relationships with other graduate students in your field and work together. If you can get funding to put together a symposium or small conference and publish the proceedings, that can be very helpful. Aiming for at least one good refereed article in an international journal during or soon after your PhD is probably good idea. Prepare for rejection (at some level at least) and long periods of time between submission and publication. Even if your articles are not accepted, the reviewers’ comments are often extremely detailed and engaged and are excellent learning experiences, as well as good practice for the kinds of things you will need think about when it is time to submit your thesis. Although the research assessment systems in both countries do seem to prioritise quantity over quality, I do think it’s important that the
pressure to publish doesn’t distract you from doing a good job of your PhD research, since that will form the base from which you will hopefully publish a book as well as several articles for years to come and it will be the quality of those things that will be most likely to make your name and reputation in the field.

The LIMINA Collective would like to sincerely thank Frances for taking the time to provide such thorough and thoughtful responses to their questions.

Elizabeth Gralton