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The Future of Early Modern Studies: Embracing the Impact and Public Engagement Agenda

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8. If early modern scholarship is to be healthy in fifty years, what are the most important things that we as scholars and teachers can/should do?

We are currently living through what feels like a coordinated attack on the critical humanities not least from government departments with a neoliberal distrust of what is seen as ivory tower scholarship with no real-world value beyond the interests of a narrow, smug and self-congratulatory academic elite. Research funding is systematically reducing year on year, exacerbated by a culture of austerity and accountability, with sceptics of pure scholarship finding little to value in things early modern, perhaps especially. Historians, literary critics and art historians find it hard to compete for funding with disciplines that connect to the 'real world' problems like medicine or in my own experience, with marine scientists working on micro-plastics. In such a harsh climate it sometimes hard for scholarship on sixteenth-century society and texts to compare itself with research that leads to curing cancer or cleaning up our oceans.

While it is tempting to blame philistine politicians and uncultured bureaucrats for these trends, such downcast pessimism aside, there is much happening in the wider Higher Education sector (and here I situate this article in the context of the UK specifically, since that is the system with which I am most familiar) that will strengthen early modern scholarship and allow it to flourish in 50 years and beyond. As my scientist colleagues unwaveringly tell me the impact and public engagement agendas are a 'gift' to humanities subjects. It is by embracing these new outward-facing arenas in particular that early modern studies will survive, recognized as impactful outside of academia and fulfilling its public engagement role. This hard-edged relevance is far from easy to achieve for scholars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and I speak here as someone who has plied his trade working with rare manuscripts. For years I struggled to envisage how early modern letters could be made relevant to audiences outside of academe. Sure they could entertain as the raw materials for popular biography, but could research arising from their study really be the basis for agentive change.

These external facing drivers are central to the ways in which research is assessed in the UK via the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and through Research Councils such as the Arts and Humanities Research Council (less so with the British Academy and Leverhulme), but they are also found elsewhere around the world, perhaps most notably in Australia where academics face incredibly demanding external conditions. This short article will explore the ways in which early modern scholars can and should engage with the agendas of impact and public engagement, with an emphasis on digital technologies, public history and heritage as three different ways of achieving a relevance and influence beyond academe. I write here as a socio-cultural historian with leanings towards literary and material turns, a Professor of Early Modern British History, who is Director of Research for History, Head of Research for a School of Humanities, and Director of a Research Institute of a large and diverse faculty of Arts and Humanities which encompasses creative practices as well as critical humanities, from research on body piercing and self-mutilation to hard-hat critical bibliography! In these posts, I have a remit to develop and support research environment, facilitate interdisciplinary research, as well as drive the impact and public engagement agendas. I write then as a scholar with an archive fetish, who is never happier than when in a manuscript reading room, but who over the last decade or so has had to reinvent himself as an impact expert, and reorient his research in a

much more outward facing direction than was previously necessary. This redirection of some of my energies is not purely utilitarian in the sense that this is now what is expected of a modern-day scholar operating in the UK sector, but it has in fact enriched my research in ways that are socially and cultural useful.

Digital Technologies

One of the chief ways in which early modern scholars are building future-proofing into their craft is by embracing new digital technologies, whether it be in the guise of sophisticated digital humanities projects or in the ways in which research is disseminated to broader publics through a range of social media outlets. The scholar who nowadays eschews the digital is a dying breed. This kind of stuffy blinkeredness is no longer quaint and eccentric, but outmoded and outdated. A willingness to embrace the digital is a prerequisite for anyone getting an academic job in the current climate.

Digitisation projects like State Papers Online, The Cecil Papers, EEBO and ECCO, though they are all behind paywalls, have made manuscripts and rare books accessible to scholars all over the world so long as they have institutional access. Beyond these digital silos, more analytical projects such as Oxford's Early Modern Letters Online (and my own Women's Early Modern Letters Online project which I co-direct with Kim MacLean-Fiander) have developed dynamic software tools that allow for analysis of big data sets in a way that was previously unthought of, offering new insights into early modern networking.

Alongside the opening up of archives and new knowledge generated by digital capabilities, these intelligent technologies also foster an engagement with a wider audience, through educational interfaces as well as through what is termed citizen humanities. Projects like Map of Early Modern London are trailblazing in the way in which they redirect their scholarly resources for pedagogical uses, their materials being embedded in curricula development at university and school level. In a similar vein citizen humanities projects, crowdsourcing and transcribathons equip non-specialists with the kind of scholarly training to allow them to engage with the rock face of research, while provided for poorly funding research projects invaluable voluntary, skilled labour. Working with local histories societies, friends of archives and museums, and local community groups has become one of the ways in which historians demonstrate wider impact of their research. These kinds of outward facing activities harness the enthusiasm of those with a willingness to learn and passion for knowledge, and offer them intellectual and cultural experiences that enrich and enliven their lives.

The realm of social media offers myriad opportunities to extend the reach of research and scholarship and to network and communicate complex ideas in a way that is easily intelligible and interesting for a general audience. By harnessing social media, the early modern field stays relevant, can showcase its scholarship and engage with external stakeholders in an easy and effective manner. Twitter used in the right way is a powerful tool for scholars engaged in impact, since it allows one to engage with non-HEI beneficiaries of your research, and importantly to audit and measure the change your work has had on them through qualitative evidence.

Podcasting, Public History and *Histories of the Unexpected*

Another new technology that in recent years has enabled scholars to reach diverse audiences is the Podcast. Since the advent of the smart phone with its embedded recording functions podcasting is a genuinely democratic form accessible to anyone. Podcasting on a personal level is something that I have embraced over the past couple of years in a project entitled *Histories of the Unexpected*. It was designed as a way of engaging in public history (used here in the UK understanding of the term as broadly 'all the means, deliberate and otherwise, through which those who are not professional historians acquire their sense of the past', Ludamilla Jordanova), translating my archival scholarship on letters, early modern women, politics, archives, materiality, and even gloves into a form that appealed to a broader general audience. While podcasting lectures and seminar papers is useful for those unable to attend academic conferences and events, such efforts are little more than recording scholarly work for archival purposes. In aspiring to engage with audiences beyond academe, I began working with the TV presenter and historian Sam Willis to develop the *Histories of the Unexpected* brand (historiesoftheunexpected.com), which started out as a podcast that aimed to make history accessible, interesting and fun for as broad an audience as possible, and spawned a book, a book series and most recently a live stage show.

The idea behind the concept is deceptively very simple: it demonstrates that everything has a history, even the most *unexpected* of subjects, and that these subjects link together in unexpected ways. The past to many is still often presented as the study of great men and women, events, wars and revolutions, cultural movements or epochs that move us from the ancient and medieval to the modern world. Some historians privilege different aspects of the past such as religion, society, economics, gender, politics, military affairs or ideas. All of this is useful; it brings different perspectives and insights to our study of the past. However, history as we know and understand it today is exceptionally complex and interconnected, and no one perspective on the past is really adequate in order to unpack it in its entirety. What we aimed to achieve with *Histories of the Unexpected* was to bridge this gap between the well-established scholarly embrace of complexity and the public appetite for digestible but meaningful and thought-provoking history. Our thinking borrows from a range of theoretical and methodological innovations in the way in which history has been studied over the last century. It is a combination of cultural history and object biography with comparative and global history. We are interested in the ways in which the spectacular, the everyday and the mundane can be recovered, and their stories told and interpreted, as well and how they relate not only to broader historical forces and shifts, but also how they connect to well-known events and episodes in the past. Theoretically underpinned and drawing on archival research *Histories of the Unexpected* is at heart a vehicle for communicating history to a general audience.

Our flexible approach allows you to see the historical significance in everything, and extends to all manner of subjects, topics, themes, objects and emotions, and it helps you see how it all links together. It is these connections between different aspects of our past that breathe new life into our understanding of both the past and the present. In practice this worked by taking a particular subject, like boxes, or hair, letters, gloves or the scar, and rather than doing a standard potted history of that subject in any kind of chronological, linear sense, we were interested in showing how the subject could prompt different directions of inquiry; a taxonomy of the subject was followed by a series of case studies, stories and different approaches in an engaging sand lively manner. The unexpected history of the box, for example, started with memory boxes connected to work I'd been doing on the family, as well as a collection of WWII letters in a beautiful velvet box that a student of mine had found in a skip, and from there we moved to archive boxes, safety coffins, sailors' chests and plastic boxes. The history of the orange was

stimulated by discussions stemming from John Gerard's Latin autobiography and the multiple uses of the orange while imprisoned, connected to bribery, Catholic practice and invisible ink.

The format of the delivery was key to making the material accessible and appealing, and we wanted to be different from the nervous shuffling of papers and awkward delivery that is the default of academics giving public lectures. While we are both professional historians with serious scholarly interests – Sam with expertise in maritime history and archaeology, myself with interests in Tudor and Stuart history – we nonetheless wanted to convey a relaxed sense of fun and enthusiasm for history, to present complex ideas and state of the art research in a way that wore our learning very lightly. This presentational side of things was something we worked very hard to develop, and is something that reviews of the podcast have highlighted. Listeners like the sense that there is a depth of knowledge, and they are learning all sorts of new things, in an engaging manner.

The benefit of the concept is that there are endless possibilities for subjects, and so far we have recorded over 100 weekly episodes, which are hosted and produced professionally for us by Dan Snow's History Hit network. In its first year the Podcast had over a million downloads, was supported by ACAST, when it launched it was one of iTunes new and notable podcasts in the UK and US, and was recorded live at the London podcast festival. The podcast has reached diverse audiences around the world, who engage with it in very different ways from school teachers who use episodes as prompts for their lessons; heritage and museum professionals and curators who have been stimulated to rethink about their collections in new ways; to members of the general public for whom listening has become a weekly ritual, as they download it to drive across Exmoor, to alleviate household chores, or even to enliven the school run in Dubai. We have worked with individual practitioners and SMEs within the creative industries and as part of the History Hit Network have sought to transform the media and technologies employed for the communicating of history. Through social media we are able to interact and engage with listeners, whose comments and responses can be recorded and mapped for impact purposes.

The success of the podcast led to the publication of large cross-over book, *Histories of the Unexpected: How Everything has a History* (2018), which demonstrated the concept of the podcast in book form. In it we took 30 different topics each of which was treated in a separate chapter, and each chapter led into the next, with the last coming back full circle to beginning chapter. As well as this large book, we have also written a series of slightly shorter books applying the idea to well-known periods and topics: The Tudors, The Vikings, Romans and WWII. In each volume the idea was to get away from standard narratives, and to attempt something a little more creative. Standard studies of the Tudors, for example, offer a staple diet of monarchs, wives, wars and the Reformation, but instead we approached the period from a series of topics, such as eyes, the chair, faces, accidents, shrinking, and fruit-eating for example, which gave a more novel entry point for discussing the sixteenth century. Thus, through eyes readers were introduced to the idea of surveillance and the watchers; the chapter on chairs was about social control via the ducking stool, the witches interrogation stool and the throne.

In addition to the podcasts and books, the concept has also been translated to the stage in the form of a one-hour live show through collaboration with the award-winning UK-based playwright Daniel Jamieson, who has adapted the works of Charles Dickens, Graham Greene and Michael Morpurgo. Working from the manuscript of the main book, we worked together to develop a fast-paced format that worked not only as a script, but also visually, staged with

props and scenery, working with creatives to produce graphic animations, film clips and audiovisual material. The upshot was a new form of public history vehicle which is entirely new for the field. It is now touring theatres, literary and history festivals in the UK with over thirty dates in the academic year 2018-19. The experience of *Histories of the Unexpected* alongside the production of monographs, peer-reviewed articles and edited collections has been invaluable in many ways, not only in disseminating my research more widely, but also more broadly championing history as a fascinating and worthwhile subject integral to modern society. It is only by engaging broader publics that the humanities will stave off the attacks from those who seek to diminish its intrinsic importance.

Heritage and the Impact Agenda

The impact and public engagement agendas in the UK have also meant that academic departments have begun to think much more strategically about realigning themselves in terms of research. They have sought to develop internal structures that have concentrated research excellence, have forged collaborations and partnerships with non-HEI organisations, and made their research activities much more outward facing in order to build impact into the everyday business of researchers in a way that is sustainable long term. Impact is here to stay, and to survive as a discipline we need to learn to do it! In fact if early modern scholarship is to stay healthy over the next fifty years this is a very positive development that needs to continue. In the UK the AHRC have highlighted heritage as one of the ways in which the arts and humanities can best leverage impact out of their research, and funding has been ringfenced for this area. In response to this, at the University of Plymouth we have developed a Heritage Hub (known as Cornerstone Heritage) to stimulate cross-disciplinary work on heritage that encompasses colleagues working in history, literature, art history and architecture along with law, archaeology, geography, and digital design. This interdisciplinarity works especially well on project-based research, where a variety of disciplines are brought to bear on a given site.

Powderham Castle and its Communities

One of our recent flagship projects in History has involved working in collaboration with Powderham Castle, the earl and countess of Devon and its communities. This is a project we have undertaken in conjunction with a team of historic preservation specialists from Penn Design at the University of Pennsylvania in order to deliver an immersive and thorough investigation of Powderham Castle's architectural history and evolution. Central to our approach is a commitment to working with communities to develop and implement 'socially engaged heritage projects', a form of co-production that places the heritage site and its interests at the heart of the investigation. Research by the 'Plym-Penn' team into the social history, material culture, and evolution of the landscape and the historic fabric of the castle itself will support future programming, interpretation, community engagement and ongoing research at Powderham.

This collaborative project brings together a wealth of international scholarly expertise from both sides of the Atlantic, including world-leading experts from the fields of architectural history, heritage and historic buildings, social and cultural history, gardens and landscape, as well as from the fields of archives and book history. The research in many ways acts as a model for how this kind of project-based heritage research should be undertaken.

The project is underpinned by extensive archival research in the archives room at the castle itself, as well as at Devon Heritage Centre. This work was begun in the summer of 2016 by

two Plymouth-based post-doctoral researchers who did an intensive 3-week scoping exercise of manuscripts at the house, the local record office, The British Library, and Oxford's Bodleian. This paved the way for a team of researchers and interns to work through Powderham's records in the summer of 2015. By far the largest cache of surviving papers relating to Powderham and the family are contained in the local record office (call mark 1508M: Courtenay of Powderham, 13th century- 20th century). Later estate records form the bulk of the collection and these include a valuation of the lands of the attainted Marquis of Exeter, 1539, a survey book, 1574-1640, and a superb group of eighteenth-century surveys, maps and accounts. There are also rentals for the period 1592-1933, letter books and correspondence for 1803-1945, accounts, ledgers and audit books that cover the seventeenth century-1949, labour books for 1839-1946, manorial court rolls and books for the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries, leases for the sixteenth-twentieth centuries, and a separate group of records relating to Irish properties. Among the most useful records to survive are the 80 odd massive account books that survive, which allow for us not only to reconstruct of the building work and gardens, but also provide detail of day-to-day life at Powderham over the centuries.

These archival efforts were complemented analysis of the physical structure and fabric of the castle itself, which began as a medieval structure, which was developed and extended by successive generations. This involved close examination of remaining medieval fabric which required peering behind walls, in closets, in ceilings, up chimneys and the analysis of cracks in plaster and differences in stone and mortar types. In combination with the evidence of maps, architectural plans, paintings and household accounts we were able to produce a set of preservation drawings which show the different stages of architectural development of the castle which feed into the long-term business and heritage strategic planning of the castle and its estate.

A further part of this ongoing research among Powderham's records has seen the Plymouth team recover and digitize the catalogues of rare printed books that are housed in the property. The resulting database is being ordered and checked, and will be available for future generations of researches wanting to consult these volumes. The library contains over 5000 titles for the period 1502-1893, with many undated volumes, but over half the volumes relate to the eighteenth century. Many of the tomes contain ownership marks and annotations, which far from being sacrilegious acts of bibliophilic vandalism, tell us a great deal about who owned the books, and how they were read.

Finally, as part of the project, our collaborative research has developed a series of interpretative pathways through the house, its collections and grounds that connect to diverse audiences. The first is an LGBTQ interpretative pathway centred on the narrative and life history of William, third Viscount Courtenay, who was exiled for his sexuality; secondly, a sensory/disability trail in the American gardens that is connected to research on eighteenth-century gardens, and coproduced in conjunction with local Alzheimer's charitable groups, and at a time when the castle are strategically planning to open up their gardens out of the normal season as part of an all-year-round offer.

Gendered Interpretations of the Victoria and Albert Museum and Vasa Museums

Another example of the application of early modern research – this time on material objects situated in museums – beyond the narrow confines of the academy is a collaborative project with colleagues at the universities of Lund, Leiden and University of Western Australia to work

with the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Vasa in Stcokholm. The project developed from a two-year AHRC network grant project 'Gender, Power and Materiality in Early Modern Europe, 1400-1800', and has as its overriding objective the deepening and expansion of stakeholder engagement. A powerful outcome of the research network was a raising of the awareness of gender (which encompasses women and men, femininities and masculinities, sexualities and identities) as an important interpretive category within the museum environment, and the significant role this can play in generating diverse narratives (as with race and LGBTQ pathways through exhibitions and collections) that have wider societal impact disseminated through curatorial practice, as well as educational and public programming in its broadest sense for schools as well as the general public. Studied from the perspective of gender our research offers a thicker description of objects, which will enhance visitor experience, as a part of the museums' strategies to bring audiences back for revisits and also to help stimulate behavioural change relating to gender and diversity of experiences. In the new phase of work in collaboration with the V&A and Vasa our aims are fourfold: to identify and research a selection of objects in each museum; to consider their presentation; reflect on collaborative practice; and disseminate our research findings.

At the heart of project then is the identification and analysis of a selection of 10-20 objects at the V&A and the Vasa in order to unlock their gendered narratives within the museum's collections, using the gendered interpretive methodology developed studying the gendered history of a single object (the early modern glove) across its lifecycle from commission and manufacture to consumption and display in a museum setting. This gender-informed research forms the basis of interpretive strategies delivered in different formats throughout the museums. The applications of research on these objects will be presented in the V&A and Vasa through interpretation panels/signage, education packages, public events/dialogues, interpretative pathways/self-guided tours through the collections, podcasts and a film.

Reflection on collaborative practice between academics and museum staff is an important part of the project, and we will be running two major stakeholder workshops at the Vasa and V&A, which will bring together the project team and international collaborators in order to work on gendered interpretative pathways, and share best practice. This will result in the development of a model of best practice, which will then be disseminated through a network of Swedish state museums. Finally, wider dissemination of the research will be achieved through public lectures, blogs, social media, and through the *Histories of the Unexpected* podcast platform.

Conclusion

In order for early modern studies in the UK to survive modern day researchers need to be academic amphibians. At the core of what we do as is teaching and research. Inspirational, research-informed teaching is essential in the current competitive HEI landscape, and the culture of the REF requires extremely high quality scholarship delivered in research monographs and peer-reviewed journal articles. But this is no longer enough, and scholars now need to think strategically about the broader impact of their research, about knowledge transfer and public engagement, skills key to training of doctoral students and early career researchers, and are built in as components to Research Leadership Programmes, such as the one I helped establish at the University of Plymouth. These are challenging times for the Humanities, but within this challenge lie the seeds of what will make early modern research ever more relevant, worthwhile and socially engaging. We have a new model of what is required of today's academics. It used to be a matter of whether you had teaching experience and a monograph that got you a job, now it is whether or not you have teaching experience, a monograph *and* a

major grant, *and* an impact case study, *and* a public outreach dimension to your research. This is how high the bar is set for those on the job market in the UK. The key to it all though – and to managing to survive and achieve some degree of work-life balance – is making sure that everything you do stems from the core research that is the lifeblood that sustains most scholars. The best way forward to engage with the current agenda is not to become overwhelmed by it all, but to build in impact activities as part of your everyday work, not as activities separate from it. In this way, it will become second nature, an instinctive part of the role. Scholars now entering the field and the profession are trained in this new way of working, while those of us who are slightly longer in the tooth had to learn it the hard way.