

## **Interview with a Professor:**

### **Dr. Beverly Lemire**

*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?**

Inspiration begins with interest. My interest in history came from the stories my grandmother told me, stories she heard from her grandmother and how this woman survived and helped her family survive during the American Civil War, by hiding food from marauding soldiers and facing down one band of looters. As I grew up, I realized that there were histories all around me and I wanted to learn more. Although I didn’t much like history as it was taught in school, when I reached university I found history classes the most satisfying. A research question came to me while I was studying for a second year exam. I followed that question through my Masters and part of my PhD and opened historical issues that hadn’t been addressed before and that are still being debated today. Following the questions—that has been my inspiration.

##### **What challenges did you face getting into the discipline?**

Women academics of my generation often share similar experiences of the academy from decades ago; we found that the academy was not always welcoming to women scholars as professionals or receptive to the topics they wished to pursue. Those were generational challenges.

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

Histories now include more voices and kinds of people from the past including more previously marginalized peoples. There is also a greater emphasis on examining the transnational and cross-cultural contacts among peoples, the ways material culture was transformed and the results of complex interactions. Power dynamics are also now recognized to have subtle and unexpected repercussions. Surprising histories can be written, such as one recently published by Judith Carney. She uncovered the long-term effects of the plants African slaves brought or planted in the Americas once landed from slave ships. Their activities over generations transformed the food cultures of the Southern US, the Caribbean and parts of South America. To illustrate, Judith relates the apocryphal tale that circulated in parts of the Caribbean of a West African woman hiding grains of rice in her hair as she was brought off the slave ship, rice she knew how to plant, that she saved for whatever faced her in this New World. The writing of that kind of history exemplifies the changes I have seen in the discipline since I was a student.

## **Section 2: Current Professional Role**

### **Please explain your area of specialization briefly.**

I want to better explain the great changes that took place in the material world of common peoples in the West between 1600 and 1820, changes that in Europe began with the greater contact with the great manufacturing centres of China and India after 1500. The growing use of goods we take for granted, like coffee, tea, sugar, cotton clothing, and tobacco, are all a function of these transformations. The fashion for these commodities took different forms and involved a range of peoples from the Americas through Eurasia. This is part of early globalization. My goal is to explain the phenomenon of fashion and consumerism in that era that redefined material life. And I use comparative examples from across Eurasia to assess these phenomena.

### **What is unique about your approach to history?**

My approach to history is not unique; but the topics I examined (like the secondhand clothing trade) and the issues that interested me (like popular fashions) were rather unusual when I began some decades ago. My work involves standard archival research. But I also study of objects, most of which are housed in museums—this focus is illustrated in my recent book *Cotton* (2011). This sort of methodology is now described as historical material culture studies, an adaptation from anthropology—we must be grateful to anthropologists for many things.

## **Section 3: Research Interests and Primary Source Use**

### **What sources do you rely on for your research?**

I use a wide range of sources, from newspapers and court records (to see what ordinary people owned and how that changed over time) to 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>-century sailors' wills and instructional guides for servants doing the laundry. I also look at museums collections as necessary, particularly women's needlework.

### **Has your research changed your worldview? How?**

Yes. I fell into British history, although always interested in other world regions. I then realized that my work was improved by adopting a comparative approach. Being invited to join the Global Economic History Network at few years ago allowed me to understand human development in a new way. Being curious about how other regions experienced change at the same time is vital. The process of discovery and reinterpretation is exhilarating and it doesn't end.

## **Section 4: Advice to students**

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

Be curious! Ask questions! Follow your passion and find answers.

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

I invite students to realize that history is an on-going creative exercise that can bring new meaning to their lives and how they understand the world.