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Doing History: Past in Practice

(HPH14011)

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Reflective Field Journal

The Module Doing History: Past in Practice, covered by Dr Harriett Webster and Dr Lester Mason, was used to help gain and understand skills for writing, researching and doing historical research. The module covered a range of historical approaches, reviewing and analysing different sources that are modern and pre-modern, along with key terminology such as the difference between primary and secondary sources which can be found in the academic field. The current assessment is a reflective field journal. By reflecting on the lectures, the field trips and the module content I can evaluate the impacts the module had, particularly on a student of history, and how the module prepares me to enter the academic world. The assessment evaluates the module content including sources, field trips and historical approaches and provides an opportunity to reflect on the experiences and my learning.

The first set of lectures covered by Dr Harriett Webster focused on the different types of Pre-modern sources, of which the Mediaeval Period was the main focus. We covered key terms before delving into different types of pre-modern sources. We began to understand the difference between primary and secondary sources, along with understanding the meaning behind historiography, the narrative of history, which is crucial to approaching historical texts and history. The discussion focused on the types of sources, for example within archives or public records institutions, and how to approach and analyse them. Pre-modern sources include mediaeval and much earlier evidence. I was amazed at the many different types of

sources available to historians. These include chronicles, which record events in chronological order by monks from the 12th century along with annals which are similar to the chronicles.¹ Then there are Charters, which are formal documents that became popular in the mediaeval period to record legal transactions.² Along with rolls, accounts, letters, treaties, literacy sources such as *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer³, maps, artefacts, buildings, manuscripts and art forms like stained glass windows. During the lecture on different types of pre-modern sources Dr Harriet Webster produced copies of the paintings of the *Wilton Diptych*, the *Luttrell Psalter*, *Mappa Mundi* and the *Chronicon Anglicanum*. The *Mappa Mundi* made me feel intrigued by seeing how people in the mediaeval era viewed the world and their interpretation. By observing these copies, they demonstrated the variety of sources which are available to understand the Mediaeval Period.⁴ We then began to review how to analyse pre-modern sources and how it can be used to understand the past, particularly the mediaeval period. There is a large collection of Manuscripts that have been translated or transcribed, the lecture covered the grey area of those types of manuscripts. Due to the translation many authors at the time would fit their observation into the translation which will then be translated again, twisting the narrative from what was intended originally, especially if the original manuscript has been lost or destroyed. Therefore, there is a wary approach to those types of manuscripts but it gave me the idea that the twist of the narrative can give another insight into other parts of History. Additionally there was an emphasis on

¹ Dr Dianne Tillotson, *Histories, Chronicles and Annals* (2009) <Histories, Chronicles and Annals (atillo.com.au)> [Accessed: 10 February 2024].

² Digital Bodleian Library, *Charters and Seals* (no date) <Charters and Seals (ox.ac.uk)> [Accessed: 10 February 2024]

³ Geoffrey Chaucer, trans. Nevill Coghill, *The Canterbury Tales*, Illustrated, reprint, revised edn. (Penguin Publishing Group, 2003) <The Canterbury Tales - Geoffrey Chaucer - Google Books> [Accessed: 10 February 2024].

⁴ Dr Harriett Webster, 'Example Primary Sources'. University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 16 January 2024. PowerPoint Presentation. [Accessed: 9 February 2024].

how to access archives and different institutions. An Archive is an institution that houses different records, letters and a range of different documentation as well with physical source materials. Also with facsimiles which are a reprinted version of exact replica of original manuscripts, allowing medievalists to have a copy of the original.⁵

The second lecture, by Dr Lester Mason, followed the analysis and historiography from pre-modern to the modern sources and its historiography. The lecture consisted of understanding the method and approach of historiography and different types of modern sources.⁶ Dr Mason introduced the class to different types of historians and their narratives of History, particularly the First and Second World War. Dr Mason explored the range of modern sources and discussed different types such as census records, photographs, maps, films, memory and other forms of sources. Memory was an interesting type of source which also has grey area. Memory has its advantages by having the first hand knowledge of an event along with the emotions but, the disadvantages can be loss of accurate memory.⁷ This was interesting to learn as the mediaeval sources are more complex to analyse as during that time period than photographs, census, newspapers and other modern sources that were not available. This demonstrated to me there is a diverse set of sources available to me as a future historian.⁸ Following on, I was introduced to the different types of historical narrative by Dr Harriett Webster and Dr Lester Mason. We looked at Literary Theory that historians use to give a glimpse of different eras of time by looking at Literature. The theory is interesting to

⁵ Dr Harriett Webster, 'Pre-Modern Sources'. University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 16 January 2024. PowerPoint Presentation. [Accessed: 9 February 2024].

⁶ Dr Lester Mason, 'AHAH 4005 and HPHI 4011 Introduction to Fieldwork'. University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 18 January 2024. PowerPoint Presentation. pp. 2-3. [Accessed: 9 February 2024].

⁷ Dr Lester Mason, 'AHAH 4005 and HPHI 4011 Introduction to Fieldwork'. University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 18 January 2024. PowerPoint Presentation. pp. 2-63. [Accessed: 9 February 2024].

⁸ Dr Lester Mason, 'AHAH 4005 and HPHI 4011 Introduction to Fieldwork'. University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 18 January 2024. PowerPoint Presentation. pp. 2-63. [Accessed: 9 February 2024].

me as it is a way to look at the past from people's creativity and outlook.⁹ We also considered Microhistory, this narrative focuses on the experiences of ordinary people that were used to paint the background events and certain people.¹⁰ Lastly, we looked at digital history, this included discussing information of the reliability of websites to engage with history such as City Witness: Place and Perspective in Medieval Swansea.¹¹ Digitising history I think is the next evolution of teaching history in schools, museums and to the general public. Also, it showed me the new way of doing history and how it can be effective if used to its full advantage.¹² Another type of historiography is Nation State and World systems. Both examine the emergence of countries, their development and relationship with other countries. The narrative I feel focuses on the political, conflict and economic situation of the country rather than its culture and its social order. Dr Mason recommended a book *History in Practice* by Ludmilla Jordanova¹³, to understand the different types of narrative and how to do history.¹⁴ Learning from two different historians I feel gave more a unique insight to the different narratives and their perception when it come to interpretation of

⁹ Dr Harriett Webster, 'Literary Theory'. University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 1 February 2024. PowerPoint Presentation. [Accessed: 9 February 2024].

¹⁰ Dr Harriett Webster, 'Microhistory'. University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 1 February 2024. PowerPoint Presentation. [Accessed: 9 February 2024].

¹¹ Arts and Humanity Research Council, University of Southampton, Queen's University Belfast, King's College London, *Place and Perceptive in Medieval Swansea* (no date) <City Witness (medievalswansea.ac.uk)> [accessed: 11 February 2024]

¹² Dr Harriett Webster, 'Digital History'. University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 16 January 2024. PowerPoint Presentation. [Accessed: 1 February 2024].

¹³ Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice*, 3 edn. (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019) <History in Practice - Ludmilla Jordanova - Google Books> [Accessed: 11 February 2024].

¹⁴ Dr Lester Mason, 'Interpreting the Past: 'Universal' versus 'Nation-State' perspectives since the 18th Century Part 1'. University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 5 February 2024. PowerPoint Presentation. pp. 1-21. [Accessed: 9 February 2024].

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history. It displayed to me how history is an evelong narrative and that historiography is a by-product of different generations.

The first assessment assigned was to pick a primary source and to evaluate it. Using the knowledge from the previous lectures the assessment felt comfortable to approach. Learning about different types of sources and how to analyse them in the historiography context allowed me to attempt a thorough analysis and review how the source fits in the time frame, how it describes the context of what is currently happening and the thoughts and feelings of the people at the time. The assessment allowed freedom to choose your own source, this essentially allowed me to dive into the suffragette movement, a period of history that I find fascinating. As a modern history student I approached a modern source, a letter which documented the force feedings campaign in the early 1900s.¹⁵ To be given the freedom to choose your own source made the assessment enjoyable, especially on a topic that I found compelling with a feeling of becoming an academic historian. The feedback of the first assessment was positive and critical. Dr Lester Mason acknowledged our attempts at analysing as good. To help us for next time Dr Mason lectured on how to reference source materials, how to avoid plagiarism and to proof-read work. The constructive criticism I found was a helpful guide for my next assessment that includes an analytic source and gave me a sense of direction next time.

Field trips were arranged to the National Library of Wales and to the Roderic Bowen Archives on campus. My perception of the trip to the National Library of Wales was that it would consist of touring the library, meeting archivists along with seeing source materials and perhaps to look and take books out. Dr Webster held a meeting to inform the itinerary for the day. However, personally I felt I could have done more to prepare myself before we visited by looking at the website and what the library does. When we arrived at the National

¹⁵ The National Archives, 'Forcible Feeding', Catalogue: Suffragettes of File, HO144/1194/220196< Forcible feeding - The National Archives > [accessed: 12 February 2024].

Library of Wales in Aberystwyth we were escorted to a room to be shown how to effectively use their website. It was interesting but I felt it was unnecessarily long and I was eager to tour the Library. We then went to the Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies. The academics there lectured about their various projects and what the centre does. The lecture was more engaging than the previous activity and tea and coffee were provided. They described how there are opportunities for post-graduates students to work with academics within the field of celtic studies. I would love to have such an opportunity in the future. Later in the day we had a lecture with the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, the lecture covered various topics of the development of the Royal Commission and what work they do to preserve history for example. The talk was very long but the topics were somewhat interesting due to retelling some of the history about the Library and sharing photographs of old Aberystwyth. I did enjoy it when we went down into the archives to look at some blueprints and maps but it was not what I expected. I have a new appreciation for the fact that the archives are not all about the fabulous gilded manuscripts and ancient treasures. Archives also protect a huge range of mundane sources that are never less extremely valuable for historical record. I was hoping to explore the library, to meet archivists and ask them questions about storing the materials along with engaging with manuscripts and other types of materials that are kept within the archive. However, having the opportunity to travel there, I have learned how to access their archives along with the different types of roles that are played within the National Library of Wales and how I can get involved after my undergraduate study if I wish to. I feel I could have asked more questions and actively participated more with the day and this is something I will try to do more of in future modules. The demonstration of the website did give me the confidence to use the website for my future assessments. I acquired a reader's ticket that would allow me to access

their catalogue and go back on my own to experience the library by myself. This gave me a sense of independence and being a historian.

The Roderic Bowen Archives is located on campus and houses different manuscripts and other source materials. There was no perception before going to the Archives as I have been there before and knew what to expect. This trip was hands-on as the class was given permission to touch materials such as a Prayer book and the school charter with the wax seal still intact. It felt like touching history. An extra student accompanied us to the lecture who was an ex-lawyer, with her previous knowledge there was a discussion about the charter which was interesting to hear especially from a modern perspective on a 19th century charter document. It was a great opportunity to ask any questions about archival material to an archivist. From this experience I have learned how to handle old books and how to effectively use those materials. We were given the opportunity to translate a text from each book and this gave a sense of doing history. I thoroughly enjoyed the Roderic Bowen more than the National Library of Wales because we were allowed to handle the material and engage with them, also having the opportunity to talk to an archivist and ask questions. The whole experience inspired me to volunteer within the archives and fully witness the work of archivists.

Writing the reflective journal about the module places all that was taught into a perceptive. Revisiting the lectures enabled me to combine all that I was taught and to understand the technicalities of doing, researching and writing history. I have a new appreciation of how complex the historical narrative is and the vast amount of sources available. There was a balance between having Dr Harriet Webster, a medievalist, and Dr Lester Mason, a modern historian, take this module and demonstrate the many different types of history but also how to approach history in itself. I valued the opportunity to have gone to the National Library of Wales and to the Roderic Bowen Archives, I am grateful to have

experienced the difference between a small archive and a big institution. The participation within the field trips had encouraged me to follow the career of archivist and to volunteer within the Roderic Bowen Archives. The module has prepared me going forward with History, how to approach historiography and how to effectively use sources during my time here at university.

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