

Transcript of Interview with James MacLeod by Tori Schendel Cox

Interviewee: James MacLeod

Interviewer: Tori Schendel Cox

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Transcriber: Kathryn Greenberg

Tori Schendel Cox 00:00

Hi, my name is Tori Schendel Cox and I'm the Virginia G. Schroeder curator of art at the Evansville museum and here we have Dr. James MacLeod with us and he's going to tell us some interesting professional insights of what he's been doing and what it looks like. So, James, thank you for your time today.

James MacLeod 00:16

Hey, thanks for having me. I'm really glad to be here. So yeah, I'm, I'm a professor of history at the University of Evansville and I also serve on the Board of Trustees at the Evansville Museum, and chair the history committee there. So, I have that connection to the museum. And, and, you know, I think I feel really, I often joke about it, that I have a job that is one of these jobs where you, you would do it, you would do it for nothing, you probably don't want that to be broadcast on the World Wide Web. But, you know, it's I think, being a, being a professional historian, as I really, for me anyways, perfect job. Because it's a combination of many, many different things, all of which most of the time are, are really a good place to be teaching. First and foremost, I think it's often a joke that it's great to be paid to force young people to read books and think about important issues and, and learn to, learn to think about these issues and, and then you know, construct arguments about them, and so on. And really just the privilege it is to, to get to spend your life in an environment where education is, is, is as valued, where it's the primary purpose of the institution that you work at, and to, to spend your life surrounded by people of all ages, who are smart, you know, your colleagues, administrators and professors and so on. And then the other part of your life is spent with people who are mostly aged 18 to 22. Mostly smart and mostly want to be there and mostly interested in stuff that you're interested in. And that's, that's great. You know, it's every, every year we get we all get a year older, but, but they're all was, you know, there's always a whole bunch of new 18-year-olds showing up. And it's really, I think, it's, it's tough to think of something that would be more fun than then doing that. And then on top of the teaching stuff, you get to be a historian, which is really terrific as well. And, you know, my, I think probably you know, as in your profession, Tori and every profession, everybody's path is a little bit different. My path definitely is unique in that I was educated in Scotland and thought I really, my PhD was in Scottish religious history, 19th century Scottish religious history. And if I'd stayed in Scotland, that's probably what I would have spent my life studying and teaching about. Certainly 19th century I would probably have ended up knowing more and more about less and less. And then because I ended up getting hired by the University of Evansville to teach at their English campus Harlaxton College 26 years ago,

which is terrifying to contemplate, you know, I ended up having to tweak my, my kind of historical interest, I suppose. I kept working on right now in 19th century history for a while but then when I moved to Evansville in the late 90s, I was again pretty unusually given an opportunity to kind of re, remake my, my research agenda. And that the single thing that I was more interested in than anything else in the world was the first world war, so I was able to kind of change myself into World War One historian and I did a lot of research on particularly the art associated with the war, particularly memorialization. So that was just really great. I was an I was able to construct a class that was focused on that. So, there are generations of U.E. students who ended up learning you know, far more about World War One memorials than they ever wanted to learn, but it's one of the, excuse me, one of the great joys in my life is, periodically I'll get a postcard or someone will send me a photo of a World War One Memorial from some part of the world that they've visited. And they'll be like, Oh, I was, you know, I was walking down the street. And I saw this, and I thought of you Dr. MacLeod. So, so that's pretty cool. So, I kind of made that move from researching Scotland to the 19th century to researching the, the First World War. And then over time, again, just being located in Evansville, and a long way away from Europe. And I realized that it would probably make more sense to be more focused on, on local history. And I really had to that was a huge attitude adjustment for me, because I, I think maybe like, like some people, unfortunately, I had, I would confess that I had a, I can look down my nose a little bit at a local history, I thought, you know, it was it was relatively unimportant. And now I've completely changed my point of view to think that really, local history is the, the foundation on which everything else is built. And so over the last, maybe six, seven years have become a local historian, and my, my last research projects have all been focused on Evansville. And I couldn't be, couldn't be happier about that. And I think the reason for that is that I think, you know, being a local historian is, is tremendously satisfying, because you have a, you have a kind of built-in audience. You know, I've done lots of lectures and talks about the First World War, for example, and people are interested in the First World War, but people feel very disconnected. And even if I was doing it in Europe, I think 100 years ago, people are maybe less connected to than they once were. But local history, everybody's got some sort of connection, right? So, when I was talking about World War Two in Evansville, almost every single public appearance I did, there was somebody in the audience who had some connection to it, sometimes lots of people in the audience, so I got to meet, you know, Rosie the Riveters, and I got to meet people who'd worked at the shipyard and I got to meet people whose you know, grandparents met when they were working in a factory during the war and all that kind of thing. Some little old lady that is a patient of my wife gave my wife a little tub of actual rivets from the P-47 Factory. So, all that kind of thing where you're doing your research and talking about it. But you know, a little bit I suppose, like being in a museum, you know, you have that immediate sense of how people are reacting to it, and you have that sense of people's personal connection to what you're doing. So, I found local history to be a really, really rewarding part of this whole experience. And, and then, maybe another aspect of local history is, you know, kind of how we met, I suppose, is just working through the museum. You know, the museum is such a really vital part of the community and being, being part of that has been a very rewarding experience as well. Seeing how different professionals share their, their knowledge and their expertise and their passion, whether it be art or science or history. We'll place like the Evansville museum as an amazing place to see that. And I was already friends with Tom Lombard, the curator of history of the museum, but getting to work closely with him professionally, through the history committee, has been a real privilege as well to kind of be part of that process, for we're talking about exhibits that are going to happen one year or two years down the line, and be part of the process as we

can figure out how that's going to get done and what might be in it. And then finally, getting to walk into the museum and see the exhibit in place. It's tremendously satisfying, and it must, it must be like that for you too with, with our exhibits. Yeah, exactly. And, you know, at the Evansville museum are so lucky that the different parts of the museum people get along well. And there's collaborative, lots of collaborative experiences. And, you know, you can look at the, the art, you know, the, the art related to women that's in the museum at the moment will be closed, but for the time being, but, you know, the historical significance of that, and understanding the historical stories behind these things. So, I think for all these reasons, I feel very, very privileged and grateful to that this is the job that I kind of stumbled into. And having said all of that, it would be remiss of me not to say also, though, that the downside of being a historian, I think it's always been the case is that the more you know about the past, the more you kinda scratch your head at watching people making the same mistakes. And you know, my, my parents were both born, my dad was born in 1918, actually, and my mom was born in the 1920s. But, you know, I grew up with my parents are mostly or older than most of my peers. So, I kind of grew up with an older generation. And for them, the influenza epidemic of 1918 was, was a really significant part of farm their consciousness, not just the First World War and its impact on their families, but the, the flu, the Spanish flu. So, you know, I was, I was always aware of the Spanish flu, I knew names of people in our family and social circle who died from flu. And then with moving to the United States and learning a little bit about, about it here, just that the line between the communities that did the social distancing, and the shut-down big public events and all that, and those that didn't, is just such a clear lesson to us, I think in these times that microbes, they could care less who you are, they don't care what your politics are, they don't care who you voted for, or whether you're rich or poor, black or white, or whatever, they don't care, you know, they're gonna do what they're gonna do. And the only way that the influenza was stopped was by people making it hard for the virus to spread. And, you know, I fear, obviously, we just heard from the governor again today. But you know, I fear that people are not taking the lessons seriously enough. Today, some of the same mistakes have been made today. And it's just, as a historian, you're just kind of thinking, Man, if you just if you spent 10 minutes reading about the 1918 pandemic, you would have a pretty decent sense of what you should be doing here today. So, I think us talking on either end of a computer screen as we're doing, we're doing the right thing here and I wish more people just learned the lessons of history and followed them.

Tori Schendel Cox 13:29

Absolutely. And that vicious phrase of history repeats itself, it's happening yet again .

James MacLeod 13:35

Oh, yeah, I know it's just it's hard to, my kids have been joking about, you know, well wondering to what extent they'll remember this as they get older. And I fear this is something I'll remember for their whole lives because I think the world is gonna be different, when this is all done. But it's, it's certainly something to have, to be right in the middle of maybe not even in the middle yet of something that's going to be talked about, probably for forever. And, at least until the next terrible pandemic comes along. But, you know, it's also I think, you know, it's tremendously interesting to be to be watching what's happening. And also, you know, you see people doing stuff, making music and even in our neighborhood, the all the local kids are creating art on the sidewalks for sidewalk chalk for people who are walking. And, you know, I think from a from the point of view of a curator of art, you know, I'd be really interested to see what artists do with this experience. You know, as we look back on it, we'll

probably see people whose art changes because of these experiences and same with writers and creative people will have all kinds of they'll, they'll produce amazing things as a response to this. But when you're right in the middle of it, it's kind of hard to see that that's happening.

Tori Schendel Cox 15:11

Yeah, absolutely. But at least, so this is one thing that I'm grateful for, in conjunction to the 1918 influenza is we do have this beautiful community called technology, and whatever you want to see from my colleagues and artists that I've known. Geez, from all the gallery work I used to do the artwork that they're producing right now, it's truly beautiful. To see their interpretations of the outdoor since they're not allowed to go to it. Just the colors, the palettes, the dialogue with the work itself. Again, it's not probably the best way to say it's been creatively thrilling for me to watch and document, but really it has, and it's opening up to some unique opportunities to create exhibitions, videos, blogs, and dialogue of what's going on right now. It just has so much curiosity.

James MacLeod 16:02

Yeah, me too. And I think it's really fascinating that while we are physically apart, you know, that we know do have this ability to be together lots of families, using resources, like zoom or Google meet up or whatever, to have family time. And that sense that you, you know, you can hear voices from Spain, and Italy, and Iran and South Korea, and so on, and kind of get a sense of folks' experiences in a way that wasn't, you know, remotely possible 100 years ago. And, you know, if you go back longer than that, to the, to the Black Death in the 14th century, when I've often wondered, well, I must have been, like, just these vague rumors, you know, coming into port cities about things that people had seen in these other places. And then, you know, you realize that people around you are coughing, and then they're dying, and but with us, you know, it was all you could sort of watch it almost in real time. So, it's a very much a 21st century experience in that way. And yet, we're, how are people responding? They're responding by singing and dancing and producing art. You know, that's what people have done since the beginning of time. You know, we lots of things change, but I think fundamentally, we, we stay the same. I mean, for better and worse, I guess.

Tori Schendel Cox 17:41

Mhmm, absolutely. And if anything, we can sit around a corner and get our copies of a... out and we can make our modern interpretations.

James MacLeod 17:56

No, I mean, I think there's lots of stuff, you know, people have talked about making, you know, Spotify playlists. But I think that idea of looking and literature, what, what people have written about plagues and, and how we respond to plagues. And all of that, I think, is, you know, there's a lot of interesting reading to be done. And again, you don't, the idea that you can borrow these books from your library without having to go to a library can just pull these things up on your phone is pretty amazing. And stuff that just, again, technology is made, made available to us. And we probably should all be reading, you know, super serious books like that, instead of which you're making TikToks with your, so it's, I think you probably need a little bit of both, to, to get through these times. And you know, I think the other thing has struck me just thinking about your situation territory, that with a newborn child, you know, it's just you're, you're looking at the world, all of these terrible things happening. And, and, you know,

sickness and death. And at the same time, you're looking at the amazing, early moments of life. And so that must be a really, I mean, that must occupy your thoughts, I would imagine.

Tori Schendel Cox 19:21

Oh, absolutely. Because when you see those big, beautiful blue eyes, nothing else matters. And yeah, in the moment, and I'm sure you've had children, too. So, you when you understand you just look at that precious baby who has no idea what's going on. And he says the entire world for me, and it's wonderful.

James MacLeod 19:40

Oh, I know, I know. And, you know, that's always been, I think that's always been part of it, too. You know, you think journal, all of these events in history, people were still having children and people were falling in love and older, you know, people were dying and been buried, and young people are getting married. I mean, children. And that's just the way it's always been, and always will be. And, obviously, it's super challenging at the moment because we, the thing that we've always done is come together and do things together and figure things out together. And that's harder, you know, can't do it physically in this situation. But I think just reminding ourselves that these essential aspects of humanity are still there, and still will be there, when this is all done. And hopefully, we can learn some learn some lessons.

Tori Schendel Cox 20:38

Mm hmm. I think we will indeed, well is there anything else you'd like to share with our viewers?

James MacLeod 20:44

I don't I don't think so. I mean, I think just urging people to, to abide by the directives that are getting and to drink lots of water and wash their hands frequently. And that however long it takes, you know, this will end at some point, and that to appreciate the, you know, not just the close community of your family, but appreciate the awesome community that we have here. And to support small businesses and to support organizations like the Evansville Museum, which, you know, have got people through a lot of bad times before, and, and will do again, but we'll certainly need our help as well going forward. So, I would just urge people to do these things.

Tori Schendel Cox 21:36

Absolutely. And that's great words of wisdom. But thank you again for your time today. And we look forward to hearing more about your research and what you do in the community. I always love seeing you at the museum. So again, this is an evident recording and I'm definitely appreciate your time, so bye for now.

James MacLeod 21:53

You bet. You're welcome. Bye bye.