

HISTORY: NEW TEXTS, NEW INTERPRETATIONS

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Editor's note: Shawn spoke with Scott Samuelson on 9 July 2008.

Scott: Are you comfortable calling yourself a historian?

Shawn: My PhD is in U.S. history. By some definitions I consider myself a historian in that I am trained in history, and I teach history. My decision to come to BYU–Idaho means that I'm a history teacher. But to be honest, when I came here I think I gave up a piece of what a historian is. I do not do much research or writing here. My reading is focused on my teaching, not on exploring some piece of the historical story.

Scott: What is your field of expertise?

Shawn: My doctoral dissertation, which I later revised and published, is on nineteenth century American Fatherhood. As a historian, I also deal in issues that sociologists care about like the reasons why people do things. I've had to look at psychology a little bit as well.

Scott: Are you glad to be here?

Shawn: I like it. I've always had a great interest in teaching. In fact, there was one point when I was working on the galleys of my book, and I said to myself, "Just how many people are going to read this book?" So, during the process I began to rethink my priorities, which contributed to my decision to accept the job here. I sometimes miss the research and writing, and I hope to maybe do some more. I do miss the constant re-energizing that comes from research. In the end, though, I'm satisfied with the choice to focus on history teaching.

Scott: You looked at nineteenth century letters and diaries. And how did you find those? How did you sift them? Did you focus on all strata of social-economic class?

Shawn: Middle class, primarily. The source itself sifts. The middle class tends to be more involved in writing diaries and letters than the lower class, obviously. Part of my focus on the middle class comes from a desire to know this group that was so instrumental in American culture in developing ideals

of family life. My search for texts wasn't as systematic as, say, a study in the social sciences. I used collections in the Huntington Library in California and the Newberry Library in Chicago, as well as some published collections, but at times I serendipitously landed on sources.

Scott: Did you limit your study geographically?

Shawn: The northeastern part of the country.

Scott: So, do you encourage your students to do this kind of original research?

Shawn: Yes. All history majors take at least two classes where they actually get into documents, and do research in primary resources. A number of other history classes do that as well. We see analysis of primary texts as central to what a historian does. Students must look in the documents and begin to learn to interpret for themselves.

Scott: I also teach students to interpret documents, but, of course, we have our students look at literary documents. I'm interested in knowing how you approach interpretation. Do you teach theories of interpretation? Do you have students work from critical theories?

Shawn: Historians are always leery of theories even though we end up sometimes being involved and trying to use them. I do introduce students to some theory; selecting elements that I think will help them interpret the past. But historians like to try to be pragmatic. I didn't really use much theory in my research. I did end up relying on some psychoanalysis to understand why fathers were doing the things they were doing.

Scott: But the period of your study is pre-Freud, right?

Shawn: It is, but Freudian ideas permeate academia and society today. For example, I found sons who hated their fathers and loved their mothers, so it was impossible for me to see these tensions without being influenced by Freud; anyone who studies history generally is shaped by more theory than they oftentimes know. It's not like literary theory where you consciously pick it and use it. What we do is more pragmatic, and we're often criticized for such an approach. We're seen as naïve and idealistic sometimes I suppose. Or sometimes we're seen as writers of fiction.

- Scott: I presume some historians would see that as an insult. It doesn't bother me to call history fiction because I have a wide and positive definition of fiction. But whether you are bothered by calling history fiction has to do with theories of objective and subjective reality.
- Shawn: There are those historians who would really resist being accused of writing fiction. I see a lot of similarities between history and fiction, and I would not be concerned if someone said that I was writing more fiction than not. Many will misunderstand that statement, but I think that both history and fiction seek to understand what is true about the human experience. They go about it differently, but there are similarities.
- Scott: Does history depend absolutely upon written texts?
- Shawn: Historians can use sources other than the written text, but yes, without the artifact, all you have is a conjecture. There is still interpretation, regardless, but yes, all history is tied to the artifact. And that's sort of the saving grace for historians. They say well, I'm trying to be true to the primary source.
- Scott: Do you spend time talking with your students about reading?
- Shawn: Well, we try to; we talk about context, perspective, and bias. We teach the need to understand documents in context, but also there's value in applying our own perspective and interpretation to a document. Historians disagree about accepting the context completely or evaluating the document separate from the context. I try to teach students a little about how to approach documents both ways. The gospel, of course, challenges a lot of what is being taught currently in history. The gospel postulates absolutes, but in history relativity or subjectivity is big. I try to give students a sense of seeing history from both a multicultural perspective and also from a perspective of applying absolute values.
- Scott: In my field a seminal debate has raged in the last fifty years. The so-called "new criticism" suggested that the text was everything. Now the reaction against that view has led to cultural studies, for example, where context is very much valued.
- Shawn: I think historians are more skeptical than not of seeing the text in isolation.

- Scott: Talk a little about contextualizing your work on fatherhood in nineteenth century America.
- Shawn: It was important to contextualize these fathers in the middle-class culture of the Antebellum Period—that means accounting for the influence of religion, the Protestant work ethic, the growth of commercialism, etc. I also used the human life-course for context. I began with the issue of work, with the assumption that man picks up his work and then marries. And then he becomes a father and then has young children. He then begins to wrestle with older children who are trying to break away, so there is psychological interplay between the father and the children. Of course, the wife or mother becomes a player in that process as well. Finally, fathers meet old age and, ironically, sometimes a return to dependence.
- Scott: Your study sounds wonderfully interesting and very practical. I wonder if there is a practicality to history that in English we sometimes lack. We are sometimes interested in questions of art and beauty more than people and real-world application. As you look at your work, how do you feel about it?
- Shawn: I don't think my approach was very sophisticated. It was sometimes instinctual, and it was heavily shaped by my own perspective, the gospel, and I found that it was heavily shaped by my own fathering and my relationship with my own father.
- Scott: Were you always a reader?
- Shawn: Yes. I grew up reading a lot.
- Scott: History? Fiction?
- Shawn: I preferred fiction and actually still do when I read for myself.
- Scott: Did your parents read to you?
- Shawn: Yes, especially my mother. And my father at one time collected a lot of books. Our basement was filled with old books, some poor and some very good books as well. So I waded through the good and the bad.
- Scott: Do you think, though, that the wading became important to the way you know as a historian? How does your discipline teach a method of knowing?

Shawn: The historical discipline is based on people coming up with new interpretations of text. If you can find a new source or a new text, that's even better. So there's something very fluid in this process. Historians I think are more willing to accept fluidity in the accepted body of knowledge than a lot of other scholars. In history someone is going to come along with a different interpretation, and soon they will say they have the truth and the past interpretation is wrong. That of course is challenging when you believe in ultimate truth. What I think it really comes down to is that historians acknowledge that it's okay to see things differently because we have different perspectives. There are better interpretations than others and those interpretations tend to hold to the primary sources. But to the historian, it's not difficult to accept that someone else's view has at least enough merit to be considered. This fluidity I think obviously makes us more convincing to the artistic world than the social sciences. ☺