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Faculty Spotlight—Dr. William Phillpot

Abstract

William (Bill) Philpott Interview

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Faculty Spotlight—Dr. William Phillpot

Interviewed by Will Moody

1 WHAT ARE YOUR TEACHING INTERESTS? WHAT IS YOUR TEACHING PHILOSOPHY?

I love environmental and U.S. history, and particularly the implications of American involvement overseas, like resource use and tourism. U.S. history is inherently strange and fascinating. I have always been very interested in the history of tourism and leisure, specifically in the American West and Colorado. As far as my teaching philosophy, that's a hard one.

I went to a liberal arts college, a small school with small classes. I try to recreate that environment in a class, but it's not always successful. I want to involve students. What you philosophize, and what you want to do, is not always same as what happens. I want to involve students, I want to have conversation, I want to have debates, I don't want to just do all the talking. Part of that comes from that I think students learn more if they're not talked to, but rather when they work things out in their own heads, through their own writing, and their own speaking. Part of it is that students learn more when they develop confidence in their own intellectual abilities. You help build that confidence by showing them that they can do this by teaching it, by treating them as adults, as colleagues, with respect.

So, involving them in the conversation and not just talking at them is super important. I often think of the phrase that history is all around you. The history that's embedded in ordinary, seemingly ordinary people, seemingly ordinary places and settings where we live our lives. Seemingly ordinary activities, like eating, or throwing things away, or, filling your car with gas. There are histories, and wider connections that reach out from all those things.

I'm always really interested in trying to help students see that their own lives, and that of their families and the places they're from, and the places they live, are charged with history that is really historically important. They're historically relevant to a wider context. That's one of the reasons I got very interested in the histories of places I was familiar with, like the western Colorado, and environmental history, which puts everyday activities in a wider historical context and web of relationships.

2 HOW HAS THE PROCESS, OR THE PROFESSION OF RESEARCH CHANGED OVER THE PAST FEW DECADES IN YOUR FIELD?

A lot, and there are a couple of major areas I think of. One is that any field changes in terms of the questions people ask, and the kinds of answers people come to. So, that's sort of the history of any discipline, right? The historical profession has changed a lot in terms of becoming, I think, far more inclusive, and not always perfectly. Many more people, I think, are relevant to historical data, which is a critical inquiry now. Both in terms of the people asking the questions, and the people they're asking questions about. The profession has become less dominated by white men, which is a good thing. We're still not all the way. It has definitely proven that history is about more than white men. I would say that that's an ongoing process.

More realms of human life are becoming part of historical discipline now. Everyday life, popular culture, people's relationship to nature, all of those things that sort of come into family life, family dynamics, gender dynamics, all of those things have become much more part of the historical profession in the last 30 to 40 years. The other area I would speak to would be technology. Technology has really changed historical research. There's so much more online than there used to be, so many more digitized primary sources. Now, that's not to say all of them are, we still travel, we still go to archives. Those are indispensable because there will never be enough money or time to put everything online. There's still so much lost, and there's still so much that's never digitized. Historical research has become much more flexible. I would say there is more time saving in some realms of it because there's so much more online now.

That's especially true, by the way, for undergraduates. Because of that, I can assign cool research projects now that I couldn't have assigned 20 years ago, even 10 years ago, because there's so many more terrific resources that they can find online now. Students can find primary sources online, whereas in the past, you know, they wouldn't have been able to find much of anything unless they went to an archive. So, it's really helped undergrads.

3 DESCRIBE YOUR CURRENT RESEARCH IN LAYMAN'S TERMS.

I'm in the early stages of a new book project, which is why it's a little mushy as well. Research is very inefficient, and a very uncertain process. In the early stages, I'm taking a disaster, The South Platte River Flood of 1965 in Denver, which was arguably the greatest natural disaster ever to hit this place. I'm trying to trace it back both in terms of its causes, and then its consequences. I'm really interested in how that river was neglected up to the point of its flooding. I'm trying to connect it to the social neglect, what I call the social collective, of people living along that river. Historically, that river was a dump, it was a sink not just for trash and hazardous waste, but also for people who were segregated and marginalized.

African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and others living in the city were often relegated into neighborhoods that were largely along the river. As were industries, dirty industries like smelting and brewing. I'm trying to link the environmental neglect of the river to the social neglect of the river and talk about how that disaster developed in natural and social terms simultaneously. It's sort of taking the flood as the crystallizing incident, but tracing it backward, and then trying to trace it forward and see what came out of it.

4 WHAT WOULD YOU CHANGE TO IMPROVE HOW WORK IN YOUR FIELD IS DONE?

I would like to see us come back as a society, and a political culture, to the idea that undergraduate education is precious and important. I mean, here's part of my bias, a liberal arts education. I don't mean liberal, like, politically liberal, but I mean, liberal arts as in really wide ranging, where students don't just go to a business school. In the process, they broaden themselves, right? They take a diversity of disciplines. They're exposed to a diversity of viewpoints. They grapple with those things. I've seen a longtime trend toward severe underfunding of public education, in particular, severe undervaluing of undergraduate education. More broadly, it's gotten caught up in the culture wars, and the political polarization of our time. With a lot of people saying universities are trying to indoctrinate students, I want to see us move away from that viewpoint, and toward a realization that we have a tremendous system of higher education here. We don't want to sacrifice it to budget slashing or political tribalization.

5 SHARE A TURNING POINT OR DEFINING MOMENT IN YOUR WORK.

When I was working on my undergraduate thesis, an archivist that I had gotten to know really well told me there was this manuscript collection of spy reports in which the owner of a mine had hired spies to infiltrate his employees union and spy on what they were doing during a strike. What this manuscript collection consisted of was the spies infiltrating the union, and then reporting back to the owner. It completely opened my eyes to the possibilities, not just of that thesis, but of incredible primary sources. I was interested in unionism. I was interested in miners, their labor conditions, and their strikes. To have this sort of treasure trove of documents that I could never have known existed before, kind of, fall into my lap, it opened my eyes to the possibilities of how sources can open up new opportunities for research.

If you're really doing open ended, open minded inquiry, you let the documents lead you. That set of documents totally transformed my research, but also taught me wider lessons in the process, not just for that thesis, but more broadly, as I moved forward in my own historical career. I would also point to certain teachers I had along the way who taught me that I could. My graduate advisor, Bill Cronin, was such a wonderful teacher, and such a generous mentor. He opened my eyes to the possibilities of environmental history, which both for him, and for me, became very much about finding the history, rooting yourself in a place, and finding its historical relevance. Charging the everyday with historical significance and deeper meaning. It didn't only shape the field I went into, which was environmental history, but it also made me realize that history was really important in teaching, and relevant in people's lives.

6 WHAT MAKES YOU GET UP IN THE MORNING? WHAT DO YOU LOVE ABOUT WHAT YOU DO?

I love the balance of being able to think, but also being able to interact with other people. I mean, selfishly speaking, I learned a ton when I teach, but I also love to see other people learn. One of the absolutely most thrilling and rewarding things is when I see students figure something out or become truly impassioned about something. Where they just want to read more, and they just want to learn more, and they want to talk more. I love when students get to that point, and it doesn't happen every day. In this line of work, I don't always know when it happens, and I don't really know what they're thinking of the class. Unbeknownst to me, they may love or hate the class. When they love it, that's wonderful. When they hate it, I might not always know, and I don't always know what I could be fixing or what

I could be working on.

I think that working with students is absolutely one of the most rewarding things, working on collective learning, not just among students, but myself. We all work together, and we're all learning through the process. We're going to be thinking through material together, and talking through it, and learning from each other. I don't mean that in sort of a cliched way. It's really true that the professor doesn't always know what's going to happen either. What a gift to have your life and your career be this. I feel really lucky, learning and working with other people to learn, and learning collectively from each other. That, to me, is really inspiring. It's absolutely the best thing about the job. This also circles back to undergraduate research because that's where you get into some of the deepest learning in the history department. When we mentor senior theses, we meet with a student at least once a week. We have these intensive conversations for an hour, sometimes more, once a week. Boy, to see those projects develop, and people's interpretations develop, and the stories take shape. The frustrations in the early stages, when we have no idea what they're doing to later stages, is where the light bulbs start to go off, and the pieces start to fit together. Whatever metaphors you want to use. That is absolutely thrilling to be a part of that.

7 TELL ME WHAT YOU LIKE TO DO WHEN YOU AREN'T WORKING ON RESEARCH.

I love reading, I mean, you know, I really do. It's just a lifelong passion. This summer, we were in Michigan and Wisconsin, and I'm reading more about the Great Lakes region. A lot of my reading is nonfiction. Not always, but I just love learning about places. I love learning about how the world works. That includes scientific stuff. I have a lifelong passion with biology and geology, which in many ways, especially geology, is very historical in a way that I didn't realize when I first started getting interested in it. It's really the history of the earth. I also love music. I desperately wish I could play it or sing it, but I can't. So, I listen to a lot of it, and I think a lot about it.

8 DESCRIBE YOUR CAREER TRAJECTORY AND ANY ZIGZAGS YOU ENCOUNTERED.

I went to grad school straight out of college, and when I was a senior, I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. I applied to both law schools, and history grad schools. I loved history and had majored in history. And I thought I could get a masters in history, study for a couple more years, and then go off and do what I'm going to do with my life. So, I applied to both law

schools and grad schools, I got into some of both, and I deferred my admission to law school to go to graduate school in history. Lo and behold, I loved it. So, after two years, I contacted the law school, and said, can I defer for another two years? Shockingly, they were like, yeah, no problem. So, I went for another two years of history grad school at the University of Wisconsin. After those two years, it was like am I going to go to law school or not? I decided to move forward and earn my PhD. So, I did, but partway through that process, I lost confidence. I lost, I wouldn't say I lost interest, but I lost the sense that this is what I wanted to do. I was worried, gosh, am I just going to spend my life sort of studying arcane, esoteric, historical stuff that nobody cares about except me and two other people? Maybe I should go do something more, sort of like something publicly redeemable.

So, I took time away from my thesis. I was still living in Madison, and I was still enrolled in grad school. I took time away from my dissertation. I kind of put it on hold for over two years. I worked at the Wisconsin State Historical Society, and I'm thinking I would do public history, like museum stuff, historic preservation type stuff, interpretation of historic sites, that kind of work. I did really enjoy that work, but after a couple years of it, I realized that I really missed the research. I really, really, missed the teaching. That was the lightbulb. So, if I go ahead and get my PhD, and try and get a job as a history professor, I could teach. Even though I was in graduate school that whole time, I had a major moment in there where I wasn't sure if I was going to finish my PhD.

9 WAS THERE EVER AN OUTCOME IN YOUR RESEARCH THAT WAS UNEXPECTED OR DID YOU EVER ENCOUNTER A SURPRISING SETBACK? HOW DID YOU REACT AND ADAPT?

The funny thing about historical research is that it's really unpredictable. It's really inefficient. So, when you pick a topic, you really have no idea how it's going to end up. I just described this book project to you, and I have no idea how this book presents. I see what resources, what primary sources I'm able to find, and what I am not able to find. The ones you do find open up new possibilities for your research, and the ones you don't find close others off.

There are always surprises, but I wouldn't call them all that surprising, if that makes sense. I think as historians, we just sort of get used to the idea that when you start on a new project, you just gather all this stuff, and you have no idea yet how it's really going to fit together. You don't know if it's going to work to be honest. There are always surprises and setbacks and things that cause

you to discover, oh, I wasted my time looking at those documents when they're not even going to be relevant to this project. So, it's almost like we expect it. We plead with undergrad researchers as well to expect it, and to know that you're going to spin your wheels sometimes. You're going to search for some documents and discover they don't exist. However, keep your mind open, and keep your curiosity ablaze, and you will find things that you didn't know existed that are awesome. That will really drive the story you tell, and the interpretation you offer. So, it's being patient with the setbacks, with the inefficiency, with the surprising twists and turns that any project takes.

10 WHAT IS THE MOST FRUSTRATING ACTIVITY IN YOUR DAY TO DAY WORK?

I'm not a fast grader, and grading is really painful for me. I don't know why. I think that it's tedious. One thing is that, it's very time consuming, and there are so many other things I'd rather be doing. I think the process of writing something is how students figure things out, and then my feedback on that is how students figure out ways that they know what they're doing right, and what they need to improve on. It's hugely important, which is why I take a lot of time on it, but I can't say that I like it. I can't at all. I'll leave it at that. I don't want to gripe about it. I mean, every job has things that you don't like, right? If you wanted a perfect job, you're never going to find one. That'd be the thing that I struggle the most with, grading, in terms of, I'm very slow at it, and it's hard to do.

11 IF YOU COULD GO BACK IN TIME AND GIVE ADVICE TO YOURSELF BEFORE YOU BEGAN YOUR CAREER WHAT WOULD IT BE?

I often encourage students to take a little bit of time out of school before they go to graduate school. This is partly to see the world outside of school, and just get some perspective, so that if they do go to graduate school, they don't just drift initially into it the way I think I kind of did. So, they go there because they realize there is something they want and need to do with that graduate degree. Another piece of advice comes from teaching, which I do almost every year, but one thing I really want students to do is go into college and keep the spirit that these are four years, or however long, are years during which my job is to expand and improve myself.

That's it. Just seize every opportunity to do that. Don't just laser your way through it or shun the stuff that people are trying to force you to grapple with in classes. Really just try to seize it. Everything I learn,

everybody I meet, could open up new passions that I didn't even know I had, or didn't even know were out there, you know, that may or may not turn into careers, but could just turn into lifelong interests. Push me to see the world and myself in new ways. Your job in these years is to do that kind of stuff. It's like that is your work. That is what you're expected to do. It's such a tremendous opportunity. It makes me honestly sad to see people kind of drift through college, putting in the minimum effort that they can. I don't mean this in a mean way, but it's going to sound mean, why are you here? I really want people when they come to college to think, why am I here, or now that I am here, what am I going to do with it? Some people come from fairly well-off families, families for whom college is what you do after high school.

That doesn't necessarily mean that they know what they want to do with college, or what they could do with college. So, I really want students to think hard about using college as a time to really improve and expand yourself. Take that opportunity really seriously. Seize that opportunity. Take on challenges with the spirit that this is going to make me fuller and better and ultimately happier.