

5-2018

Bringing History into the Daily Conversation: An Interview with Professor Edward T. O'Donnell

Brett A. Cotter
College of the Holy Cross

Edward T. O'Donnell Ph.D. '86
College of the Holy Cross

Follow this and additional works at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/oflifeandhistory>

 Part of the [Oral History Commons](#), [Public History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cotter, Brett A. and O'Donnell, Edward T. Ph.D. '86 (2018) "Bringing History into the Daily Conversation: An Interview with Professor Edward T. O'Donnell," *Of Life and History*: Vol. 1 , Article 10.
Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/oflifeandhistory/vol1/iss1/10>

This Faculty Dialogue is brought to you for free and open access by CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Of Life and History by an authorized editor of CrossWorks.

Dialogue

Bringing History into the Daily Conversation:

An Interview with Professor Edward T. O'Donnell

Brett Cotter '19

The student work that appears in Of Life and History is made possible by the talents, teaching, and mentorship of the History Department faculty of the College of the Holy Cross. We wish to share some of these faculty members' valuable insights on the process and importance of doing history by publishing an interview with one faculty members for each issue of our journal. This year, Brett A. Cotter '19 sat down with Associate Professor Edward T. O'Donnell '86 to discuss a variety of topics including Professor O'Donnell's path from Holy Cross student to Holy Cross professor and his extensive work as a public historian. The interview appears below with only minimal revisions made for clarity.

In addition to teaching at Holy Cross, Professor O'Donnell is the author of several books including Henry George and the Crisis of Inequality: Progress and Poverty in the Gilded Age America (Columbia University Press, 2015), Ship Ablaze: The Tragedy of the Steamboat General Slocum (Random House/Broadway Books, May 2003), and 1001 Things Everyone Should Know About Irish American History (Random House/Broadway Books, 2002). He is also an active public historian who has delivered history-themed presentations before thousands of educational, business, non-profit organizations and who has provided historical insight and commentary for programs airing on PBS, the History Channel, the Discovery Channel, C-Span, ABC World News Now, NPR, the BBC, and Bloomberg Radio, among others. Since 2016, he has helped spread his passion for and knowledge of American history through his podcast In the Past Lane.

As a student here [at Holy Cross], what would you say drew you to history?

Well, a little background before I got here. My older brother was attending Holy Cross exactly four years ahead of me, so when he graduated, I arrived. He was pre-med but chose to major in history, which is exactly what our father did: pre-med history major. And my mother was a history major as well, so I grew up in a house that just loved history, filled with literally thousands of books. We hit every historic site within two hundred miles of the Boston area. So, I really loved history as a subject and I really didn't like science that much, so I just thought I'd follow in that path. So, I came here intending to be a history pre-med. One semester in and the pre-med part was in ruins on the runway after a spectacular crash and burn! And at

that point it just seemed like I would continue in the history direction. I also knew that I liked to teach, and both my brother and my father also had done a fair amount of teaching at various stages in their careers teaching medical students. So, I thought, maybe I'll just transfer all of those ideas about history and about teaching into a full-on history major and just see where that takes me.

Alright, so what would you say as a student at Holy Cross or at any point in your academic career influenced you to choose the specific path in history that you've taken- Irish-American history and history of the Gilded Age.

Well it's interesting, I really loved being a history major at Holy Cross and studied a lot of those things, a lot of American history, and in those days the requirements weren't quite as advanced as they are now where you have to really think about your thematic concentration, and also the offerings in the department were more US and European in focus. But I loved the history major and I knew by the end of my junior year I was pretty sure I wanted to go right to graduate school, or pretty soon after to grad school, get my PhD, become an historian and teach at a college like Holy Cross. And so, by the time I got to graduate school two years later, the fall of '88, I was wide open to whatever topic. I knew it was going to be US history, but I wasn't really sure if it was going to be colonial history.

One of my graduate school friends- and this is in 1988- his focus was the 1970s, and though I never said it out loud I kept on thinking "that's not history, that's recent events" but of course now, the 1970s are firmly back in the past so that it has in fact become history. So, I toyed with all kinds of ideas, I was really interested in all kinds of things, from the Civil War and Reconstruction and slavery, and there was something in my head telling me, "Don't pigeon-hole yourself, don't go with studying Irish-American history as much as that interests you." So, I really worked to not go in that direction. I think I had gotten advice about just not getting pigeon-holed and not being seen as too predictable. Plus, I was interested in so many other things.

And I was interested in reform. I guess the idea that began to emerge around that was reform movements. I wrote a big project before I got to graduate school on a reform movement, but my first project in graduate school was about education reform for my master's thesis. So, I was interested in reform, but I was also fascinated by taxation, because taxation and reform go hand in hand in a lot of ways, including in that master's essay project I had to do.

So, by the time I had to choose what my dissertation was going to be on- that's the thing that really points you to the first steps in your career path, anyway, defines you and the field you're going to work in- I had really become interested in this guy, Henry George. I cannot remember who told me about Henry George, that he was a reformer. His scheme as a reformer was to address growing inequality in the Gilded Age with this thing called the single tax, which ultimately was never quite fully

explained and never would have quite made much sense, at least in the way he described it. But it was a way to understand the social turmoil of the Gilded Age and this idea that people were kind of casting about for ideas, and ultimately with Henry George what really fascinated me and I think what fascinated people in his day was not the single tax, it was the way he described what's going wrong, and the way he diagnosed the ills of late nineteenth century America. He came up with a kind of kooky prescription, but in his diagnosis, he was able to point out that inequality would destroy democracy, and that's really the big takeaway. And whether you alleviate inequality and save democracy by a single tax or a whole bunch of things including an income tax, well you're essentially heading in the same direction.

So, you've done a lot of work as an historian, as a public historian you've been on a lot of programs to offer insight and commentary, and you have your podcast *In the Past Lane*. So, would you mind elaborating on your role as a public historian and what that means to you?

That's an interesting question. How did I become a public historian? I became a public historian I think before I even heard the phrase. I love to teach so I'm into the intellectual quest as a researcher and a writer and a doer of history, but I've always liked talking to the public, trying to reach average everyday people about ideas and finding ways to make them still smart and still grounded in research and the historical field, but also translating them in ways that engage people. So, a couple things happened.

One is, I was extremely poor. My wife and I got married right before graduate school, two years in we had our first baby, we didn't have two nickels to rub together, so I was always running around trying to make some extra bucks. I got involved doing walking tours for an emerging museum which is now this huge thing called the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, but back in the late 80s it was just a little office with a big idea. The best they could do, there was no museum to show people so they showed them the neighborhood, the Lower East Side. So, I started doing those walking tours, and so did another guy, and we founded a walking tour business hoping to make a few extra bucks on top of that. It turned out to be, next thing you know, we had fourteen people working for us, all graduate students in history, which is the really cool part; that it's not only a money-making enterprise and also a public education enterprise, but was also a way of helping graduate students. I left the company in '96, and I'm still in contact with the guy who runs it, but I never asked him, "Have you ever actually calculated how many tenured professors of history there are out there across the country?" because it's got to be sixty, eighty people who at one time or another worked for Big Onion walking tours and that was a key part of their becoming better teachers, paying their bills, and ultimately finishing their graduate program.

So that's pure public history, right? Out there on the streets, giving walking

tours and trying to make them smart walking tours, not just telling ghost stories and half-truths and the kind of crap that you often hear on a walking tour- not to cast aspersions on out of work actors who have memorized old, outdated guidebooks, but you hear a lot of really sketchy, factually inaccurate and sometimes racially tinged, even unintentionally, commentary about neighborhoods and people. So, we really worked hard to make these growing lists of incredibly interesting walking tours of Wall Street, of Central Park, of Harlem, the Lower East Side; and six versions of the Lower East Side! The multiethnic tour, the Jewish tour, the Irish tour, the Italian tour, tours about riots, tours on President's Day where we would do a tour on presidential New York. You'd be amazed how many presidents did something in Lower Manhattan from the founding all the way to the present day. So that was real pure public history: taking historical knowledge and insight and translating it to really interesting, carefully crafted public presentations.

By then I was working on my dissertation, and there was an Irish history exhibit in formation at the museum in the City of New York, and to make an incredibly long story short, the person who got it off the ground was fired or let go or had a parting of ways with the museum, someone about my age, who was also working in Irish-American history. So, they called me, somehow the word got out that I was this guy studying Irish-American history, gave the occasional Irish-American walking tour, and they said, "Would you like to carry this museum exhibit into fruition, called *Gaelic Gotham: The Irish in New York?*" And I said yes! So, I dove right into that, and super-long story with many ups and downs, but in March of 1996 this full-on, huge exhibit on the Irish in New York went up.

So that's fine, it's been a couple years, and two pretty big public history opportunities came my way. The first, I kind of created by myself, and this other one sort of fell on my lap. The year after that I started doing little history thought pieces on the local NPR, WNYC, because 1998 was the hundredth anniversary of the creation of Greater New York. Before 1898 it was just Manhattan and a bit of the Bronx. Brooklyn was independent, Queens was a whole bunch of independent cities, and so they merged them all into one megacity. So, the mega, five-borough city we have had its hundredth anniversary in 1998.

So, I pitched an idea. By then I knew one of the talk show guys, because as walking tour guides we would come on a few times. I said, "I'm wondering if we could do a regular series, once a month or so for the whole year 1998, where I'd do a piece on the parks and the history of the parks system, history of immigration, history of the mayoralty, history of the Brooklyn Bridge, and it was great, it was a great opportunity to hone my skills. Those are the skills I now use in my podcast—writing for the spoken word.

So those are three very distinct pieces: walking tours, formal museum exhibit, and then public radio think pieces on history, that really got me started. And then ever thereafter there were other museum exhibits and different forms of public

history, helping people create walking tours. And now with digital technology that's also kind of expanded the kinds of things I've been able to do, including now with my own podcast.

Yeah, it's definitely increased the audience. It is important work; not enough people have access to good history.

Well, yeah, it seems like it's a boom-time for historians to be engaged with the public, because we are living in very tumultuous times. I was listening to something on the radio the other day, and the lead-in was, "Whenever we want to know the history, we turn to..." and they name the name of one of their journalists, and it's like: really? He might know a lot about history, but I think you really want to, maybe in tandem with him, talk to an actual historian. So, there is that kind of frustration. When there is an issue with global warming, you talk to a climate scientist. When there's an issue about terrorism, you talk to a terrorism expert. When there's an issue about the economy, you talk to an economist. And when there's an issue about history, you just go to Wikipedia and start cobbling together an article or a featured piece for NPR without actually talking to an historian. I hope that's changing a little bit, but I think there's always a need for historians to be a part of the daily conversation.

A lot of what screws up our politics and screws up our ability to have rational conversations—I mean think about guns, immigration, and inequality, just three issues; if you have a twisted or half-baked or willfully uniformed understanding of history, your ability to actually understand that issue is very, very compromised. Because you'll make grand statements about how America has always this or America has always that, or we've never done this. You're a history major, and you know we preach that everything is way more complicated. Things happen for several reasons, there are multiple causations, there are all kinds of things to take into consideration, and also, we forget our historical memory is very short. Historians are very good at saying, "You know what people are saying about Mexican immigrants today? They said the exact same things about Italians, and a generation earlier they said the exact same thing about the Irish, and the generation before that..." And providing documentation to show people that that's the case. So that when people say, for example, "Well, when my grandparents came here, they came here, they got to work, they didn't go on welfare, they had to learn English right away, they became good citizens." And you're like, yeah maybe, but you're leaving some important details out. First of all, you're making sweeping associations like, they didn't go on welfare. Well, when they got here in 1915 there was no such thing as welfare! So, you don't really get points for that. B., they spoke the language... well yeah, but they came from Ireland! So, you no points for that either. And you can go on and walk people through the kind of mythologies that inform some of the heated ways in which some people view contemporary political issues. So, I think public-facing historians play a

really important role.

If you could maybe also talk about some of your experiences in, for example, conducting history and research and the writing of books, things like that.

Well, I'll give you another piece, another thing that came my way quite by chance, the opportunity to write for a US history textbook, to be a co-author of a textbook. That happened starting in '98. So, a lot of these things converged early on in my career, and that was a true case of just being in the right place at the right time. A bunch of really random things happened that put me there. In fact, the connection point was they looked me up, the acquisition team assembling the team to write this new version of a textbook. Their idea was that the textbook would use images and visuals not just to decorate the pages but to actually be texts, to be part of the narrative. So, a political cartoon about the Fugitive Slave Act wouldn't just be stuck in the corner by some layout guy, it would actually be chosen by me, the writer of that chapter, and in the chapter it would say "As you can see in the political cartoon on the left, Lincoln is depicted as..." So, one of the reasons why I stood out on their radar was because of my public history background, that I had done museum exhibits, used images to try and communicate in a different way. So, these things are all ultimately connected.

So, I've done a variety of things. That textbook was one, my book on Henry George, is, if you want to call it this, pure academic scholarly work, published by Columbia University Press. And I've also done a trade press, which is my book on the General Slocum disaster, which is a steamboat that caught fire. A really horrific but amazing tale, and that was with Random House. So, I published an education publication for college and AP U.S. history kids—and that book is now in its third edition—an academic book on Henry George, and a popular history book, kind of a disaster thriller book, which I published in 2003 which is still alive and still going—they just put it out in audio!

Are there any ongoing projects that you're currently working on—besides maintaining your podcast, of course?

Yes, I'm eating, sleeping, running, teaching, and doing my podcast. [*both laugh*]

Yeah, the podcast, it's a monumental amount of work. And I say that not complaining, but in fascination of how much work it takes to put out a good podcast. When Bill Simmons, proud graduate of the College of the Holy Cross, he now has an incredibly popular sports podcast. But he has a staff. He is the genius talent, but he has people that do all the recording, that do all the planning, that book the guests, that write the pieces, and select the music and all those things.

And my podcast is just little old me, learning things like what microphone to buy, how to hold the microphone, how to speak into a microphone, and what recording software to use, and how to edit the recordings, how to knit together

different files, how to record an interview with someone through Skype-- just endless layers of technological know-how, learning by doing or learning by asking. And then, figuring out how to use, as it is known in radio and now in podcasting bumper music-- instead of just having your voice just suddenly start have a little intro music that seems to fit the mood of the topic. And then when you're finishing the interview, music starts to rise just like it does on NPR like, "Well, it's been great talking to you Brett Cotter about your latest book on Polish-Americans in Central Massachusetts." And then the music gets a little louder and I say "Brett Cotter, scholar of this at Cambridge," etc. And then, "You're listening to *In the Past Lane*, the podcast about history and why it matters." I might actually have several segments, maybe a set-up segment, three, four, five, eight minutes that set up my interview with you about Polish-Americans. So, if you listen to the podcasts, it's not exactly the same every time, but I had to learn how to do that stuff. Then-- I already had a Facebook account and a twitter account—but then you have to learn how to market, how to promote this thing in effective ways to reach people. And then, there are all these new platforms. About a month ago, Spotify announced that they were going to start streaming podcasts— and that means that you have to actually do something [to make that happen]. It took me two hours, but I had to go into my hosting platform, and click and click and choose to upload this and put in this code. It's not that complicated, but when you're really, really busy that's a [whole] thing. But now, my podcast is on Spotify, so that's a good thing. But for everything like that that I accomplished I have a list-- podcasts are now streaming evermore on Alexa and Google Home, those smart speakers. Again, that won't just happen, I actually have to somehow set it to do that, and it's not super complicated but it will involve time and figuring things out.

So, it's a ton of fun, and it ebbs and flows. Every time that I'm thinking, "I just got to ditch this thing, man, it's so much fun and so great and I love it, [but] I just don't have the time and it's bumping up against everything else. And then I'm getting towards the end and I bring up the outro music and then I listen to it, and I say "that's pretty darn good... That's a really good episode, that's a really brilliant person that I had a chat with about their new book and I think I chose the right music to fit the transitions." And then, that boosts your spirits for the next time you're in crisis, and then someone will contact you on Twitter saying "I just played that episode about mass incarceration to my high school sophomores and they had so many questions. It's all we talked about in class." Just the little bit of fan feedback, the listener feedback—when you hear that sort of stuff, you're just like, yeah OK! I'm not breaking any records here, but it's having an impact.

My big moment was when I interviewed Ken Burns. Ken Burns did *not* need to go onto my podcast to promote his Vietnam War documentary, but he was kind enough to do it because I knew somebody who knew somebody who got him to do it. But the most recent interview I'm going to drop later this week is about this book,

which is *The Weeping Time* [*Memory and the Largest Slave Auction in American History*, by Anne C. Bailey], a new book by a scholar at one of the SUNY [Binghamton]. It's about slavery and, in this case, it's about the largest slave auction in US history, [which] took place just before the Civil War—more than three hundred slaves sold over two days. So, it's a great idea, to write a book about this. But she's never going to get onto NPR with this book, or [with] Brian Lamb or any venue where a guy like Ken Burns or David McCullough, the kinds of rock stars [like] Rob Chernow who wrote the biography *Hamilton* who's now the source of the great Hamilton mania. I know people tell me this, that I'm doing an important service to getting some of these more obscure academic voices to reach a much larger audience. So that is a very gratifying thing as well, [because] at various points you really feel like, "you know, I'm not really breaking any records here" but there's some value that's coming out of this in different forms. And what I've done is I've given myself a three-year window.

So, two months ago was my second anniversary. Third week of January—I should know the date by heart—of 2019 will be my three-year anniversary, and that's when I'll look at it and say, "was this a good idea?" I mean, it was definitely a good idea. Tons of fun, really interesting, learned a ton, created all kinds of opportunities. I'm going to fly out to California in April to go to the Organization of American Historians, which is the big annual American history conference, and I'll be at a panel about history and podcasting at that conference, and that will probably be my seventh or eighth consecutive panel that I've been on in the last two years in history or history-related or public history conferences. So that's been kind of cool, to have been recognized as one of these history podcasters and being able to talk to people, whether it's high school teachers or fellow academics.

And one of the most interesting questions, circling back to something you asked earlier which is (and I know I'm probably talking way more than you want)... there's an emerging question about things like podcasting, just like there is about—if not the project you worked on with Professor [Stephanie] Yuhl—but what does a scholar—in the old days it was books and articles: if you wrote a book or you wrote an article, that's history, that's scholarship. And then, over the last twenty-five or thirty years, museum exhibits, documentaries have started to count. And there are questions like, how much do they count for? In some places they count more, some places are a little more old-school. But now with all this new digital technology, a big question in the air is: to what extent can a history podcast be counted as scholarship? Not quite at the same level as academic book, of course, but should it count towards your tenure or your promotion, or [whether you're] seen as a productive scholar, and if so, in what way and how do you evaluate it? Because books and articles, [as] you know from *Historian's Craft*, they get evaluated by peer-editing; other scholars in the field look at these things and say: "Yes, publish this; well maybe publish this but with revisions; don't publish this, it's crap." So that's an interesting

question that's emerging. And Holy Cross has a committee called the Committee on Emerging Scholarship, I think, something like that, trying to figure out internally our own understanding of museum exhibits or oral history projects, digital exhibitions—ones that don't go up in a museum but are just online museum exhibits, so to speak. So, it's an interesting moment in that regard as well. So, after three years, I'll take stock. And part of it, also, is financial too. If I can find a way to hit a certain point of listener-ship, or if I can get a couple of sponsors, I wouldn't make any money on it but that would get me money that I could then use to hire people to do my editing. If I could get somebody to just do my editing, it would, you know, just be transformative in terms of the dramatic reduction in how much time I have to spend on it. So, there's always that.

Well hopefully that does happen!

Yeah, we'll see, and there's a second way, which is you can get people just to donate, just through Patreon. And I established a Patreon page, probably in January. So now, every now and again I get a notice, "someone has pledged a dollar a month. Dollar a month, two dollars a month. It hasn't been a paradigm-shifting moment yet, but if the momentum continues I could reach a point where I would be pulling in a hundred dollars a month or two hundred dollars a month. And if that's the case then that's right about where the cost of farming out editing is actually quite affordable. So, I could accomplish a lot as far as reducing hours and that would make it more manageable. So, we shall see!

So, is there anything that you'd like to close out with for the journal, for any prospective history majors or words of encouragement for history majors?

Well, I think all the things I've talked about here are indicative—and you've probably heard me say [this] in different variations and at other times— [of the fact] that history is a twenty-first century major. And a lot of really remarkable things are happening on this hallway [the history department] and with the kind of project you did—it used to be who did summer research at Holy Cross? The science kids and maybe some economics and psych kids. Now History, English, and other sort of "pure," more traditional humanities disciplines are doing research. And it's not just, you know, researching poetry or researching Civil War battles. It's doing unique, cutting-edge research using digital tools and such. So, I think there's a lot of energy and creativity in the history major, and we are making the case day by day that history is a terrific major for the twenty first century no matter what you want to do. We have career nights, when we bring back recent graduates—we got people in e-commerce companies, Google, commercial real estate, anything you could possibly think of, and their foundational major is history. And I think all these things I've been talking about, there's a way in which it's all part of what's happening in the department, and I'm just a piece of that.