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# Interview with Kristin V. Brig

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## *Interview*

Kristin V. Brig, Winner of the James Madison Award for Excellence in Historical Scholarship

1) How did you first learn of the *Madison Historical Review*?

The head of our graduate history department, Dr. Jason Coy, sent out a “listserv” concerning several conferences and up-coming publications. I had never had a paper published before, so I took the opportunity and replied to the MHR’s call for papers.

2) What made you want to pursue a graduate degree in history?

I knew I wanted to devote my life to research the moment I began working with nineteenth-century documents in the UK National Archives. Of course I had considered graduate school prior to the fact, but that singular archival experience confirmed my calling. The feel of documents slipping through my careful fingers, touching poor law union correspondence from the 1830s and 1840s, stayed with me long after I departed London two weeks later. It gave me a yearning for more serious archival work.

3) Do you have a specific area of interest?

I focus on nineteenth-century British labor history, which encompasses all four parts of the British Isles: England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. Lately, my interests within labor have shifted toward disease and medicine, especially for my master’s thesis.

4) Are there any specific historians who influence the way you study history?

Labor historians E.P. Thompson and Gertrude Himmelfarb have most seriously impacted how I study nineteenth-century Britain. Thompson's classic social history *The Making of the English Working Class* actually first inspired me to do labor history. His methodology and narrative of the average English laborer particularly influences me: he successfully extracts the working-class voice from official documents and turns them into narratives, not mere statistics. Additionally, Himmelfarb's *The Idea of Poverty* and *Poverty and Compassion* provide excellent examples of how to use intellectual history to understand the social and cultural, especially concerning the working classes.

5) Do you have a particular writing style?

I generally write in a narrative form. Until history papers consumed my existence as an undergraduate, I primarily wrote fiction. Since fiction is a narrative form of writing, it easily transferred into my academic writing, a skill that now helps me to narrate history in an easy-to-read way. I often find statistics dull to trudge through; anecdotes move historical plot along much faster and allow historical agents a voice where they had none previously. My professors' writing styles have also bled into my own through my papers' edits and their own academic work. In this paper on Irish charities and the English government, the voice of Dr. Phyllis Jestice, the paper's advisor, is woven into my words and sentences.

6) Could you describe your writing process?

For this paper, I began by scouring nineteenth-century British newspapers, pamphlets, and parliamentary reports in order to understand both sides of the Irish poor relief argument. Once I had sufficient data to fill in a rough outline, I drafted individual chapters. Each chapter was written as its own document. Writing in separate documents prevented me from feeling overwhelmed by the length of the paper and instead allowed me to compose

individual essays, each with a personal due date. Once I finished each draft, I put the paper together, included transitions between chapters, and inversely outlined my paper to see where there were gaps or argument contradictions. Dr. Jestice subsequently edited the paper two, three, four times. The paper then went through a peer review process. After it had gone through this intensive purification, I edited it myself once more to get the finished product. Ultimately, though, the writing process never really ends. The MHR's editorial board caught more mistakes and asked questions that had never occurred to my advisor, me, or any of the peers that read my paper. That being said, the writing process is even now still, theoretically, going.

- 7) Did you face any unexpected challenges in researching this topic?

I live on the wrong side of the ocean to access British sources, which I quickly found out while searching for Irish and parliamentary primary sources. However, from my concurrent dealings with English poor law documents, I knew coming into the topic that the lack of source accessibility would be a challenge. In fact, the real unexpected challenge primarily lay in time management. In addition to this project on philanthropy, the semester was also my first spent with my thesis on inmate disorder in English workhouses. Very little overlap existed between my thesis and my paper on Ireland, so I had to learn how to juggle both at the same time. Figuring out how to divide one's time between two or more major research projects at the same time can be extremely difficult, sometimes even to the point of utter frustration at one in the morning. As the weeks passed, though, alternating between Irish poor relief pamphlets and English poor law union correspondence simply became a process of switching my brain's light bulbs on and off.

- 8) What are your current career plans?

After my master's, I plan to go on to receive my PhD in history in order to become a professor. I am also open to working for the government or even writing books on my own time in imitation of such authors as David McCullough. Whatever I do, I absolutely do not want to have a sedentary office job that requires me to perform the same monotonous work every day.

- 9) What advice do you have for other graduate students submitting work for publication?

I have two principle pieces of advice. First, never underestimate your work! I never expected this particular paper to see even daylight after I finished with it. But I took a risk and sent it in on the off-chance that someone would be interested in Irish philanthropic history, even when people told me how dull they generally found the subject.