

Sarah Longair, interviewed by Tracey Loughran, 12 September 2025

Sarah Longair is Associate Professor in History at the University of Lincoln. Her research examines the history of the British Empire in East Africa and the Indian Ocean world, in particular through material and visual culture, and architecture. She is co-author of the chapter 'Beyond Text: Objects as Historical Sources' in *A Practical Guide to Studying History* (second edition).

Interview

Tracey Loughran (TL): *Okay, we'll start by setting the scene. So when, where and what did you study at university?*

Sarah Longair (SL): I studied history at university quite a long time ago now. I did what was then called Modern History at Oxford, but that 'modern' meant everything from the Christian era onwards. So it was modern in the very full length of the word. And I went in being very passionate about early modern history. That's what I'd done for my A levels. That's what I really enjoyed. I exclusively took, where I was able to, options that allowed me to channel that interest. While I was there, I did enjoy that material. But I think I was very inspired by a first-year module about Spanish expansion in Central America, and we looked at materials in the Bodleian Library, the codices from Mexico, which are extraordinary. And that was, I think, integral in inspiring a real interest in the wider world beyond early modern Europe, which had been exclusively what I'd looked at before. From that point, I took all the modules which were about global encounters, imperial history. And through that, coming in as somebody very much thinking the early modern was what I wanted to do, I came out absolutely committed to imperial history, histories

This is an edited transcript of an interview carried out on Zoom.

of, in particular, the British Empire. And that was how my university degree changed my vision of what history I was interested in and the parts of the world that were part of my scope of study.

TL: *Had you done any imperial history previously?*

SL: No, no, there was none at school at all. I did my primary schooling in Scotland, so that was almost exclusively Scottish history.

Secondary school in England, where it was very traditional, medieval world, industrial revolution, the world wars. And no, so there hadn't been any imperial. I did one option on the Ottoman Empire. So that was the most global topic that we looked at. But that, again, was an early modern one. So the British Empire was virtually unspoken in the history curriculum when I was taking it in the 1990s in secondary school. So it was really something I just wasn't aware of. And I think now that is very different in schools. So hopefully people will now get that interest inspired a little earlier. Not that it wasn't great as a historian to have that coverage and those phases of interest to come through, and I still draw on some of those ideas. I'm glad I've got that foundation. But it's a different world in terms of where imperial history sits nowadays. Definitely.

TL: *It's really lovely to hear you say that you were inspired by a module in the first year on a topic that you hadn't even thought of studying before, and that just completely changed the course of everything.*

SL: Yeah, absolutely. And I think I say this to my students quite a lot, and on open days as well, that you come in thinking that you really want to do a certain topic, because you are impassioned by the subjects you study at school. If you've got great teachers, you just think, this is really rich material. But then what university can do is open up even more worlds and more avenues. And as you mature through the degree, you get a much better sense of the topics, the historiography, the sources, the things you really want to work with.

TL: *You mentioned historiography. Did you take any skills or historiography or historical theory modules as part of your undergraduate degree?*

SL: No, not explicitly. In the form of the degree that I did, there was one optional historiography module at the first year, which I didn't take because I did something I slightly regret now doing. It was a data-driven, numerical, quantification in history module. And because I'd done maths and further maths at A-level, I thought that would be a good way to channel that interest. But the historiography was folded into each of the courses. So that was something you had to get up to speed on in your own time. There wasn't any explicit support within that. Because at that time, the lectures didn't align with when the courses were, it was quite difficult to map your lectures onto the different modules. So yeah, historiography is something that you learned through doing, as it were, with the support in tutorials. And

that was something I found quite challenging. So I think the support we do now by making it a much more explicit part of the degree, where it's encouraged to think about it in its own thing, and that being a requirement of a degree, I think is really helpful.

TL: *I was asking that question partly because students can be a bit less enthusiastic about taking historiography modules, while it's often something that lecturers are really, really very keen on. So I'm asking some of these questions in the interviews to help students who might not be enthusiastic about historiography to get a sense of the value of it, and also to get a sense from the other side, of the lecturer's perspective on how they feel teaching them. So, do you teach on any kind of historiography or skills modules now?*

SL: I will be teaching on one of our first-year skills modules this year. I haven't taught on it before, and that one will be quite an interesting one. It's a humanities-wide module. So we're trying to think about critical skills, and that's actually focusing on what we do in the digital world, on navigating the digital world, in their degrees, but also the wider world that our students will inhabit. But I also have taught single lectures on one of our historiography modules on postcolonial history. Within my teaching, I try to enthuse my students around historiography, which is challenging, when they've been taught very much at school that it's about the events, and they want to be able to discuss the events, because that's what's exciting. And those things *are* exciting, but it's also trying to fold in how, in a way, the dynamics of history-writing has informed us. In imperial history, the ways in which voices have been silenced, the ways in which pushing back has happened, Orientalism, what happens in Subaltern Studies, it's got quite a rich element which makes it quite compelling to students who're already interested in imperial history because of these histories of power and resistance and what they find compelling about that. So placing the historiography as part of that story, I find gives it that drive and dynamism, which sometimes can be absent when we think about historiography as a kind of flat, quite dry concept. And the fact that the histories were being written as the events were happening. So trying to talk about the British expansion in Africa and I say, well, one of the first books was written in 1892 when the expansion wasn't finished. This is what the author thought. How does that relate to how other people have analysed this? This is what he thought the causes were as the events played out in front of him. So again, that I find is quite successful with helping them see why this stuff can be useful and relevant. But it is a big change. And we'll probably come on to talk about it, but some of the work I do with secondary schools is also about helping support them with the ideas and interpretations, and how we can make those come to life a

bit more for students at that age too, so that they see history more as a process rather than history being ‘the past’.

TL: *That’s a very good phrase. Yeah. So, could you tell me a bit about some of the work you do with schools?*

SL: Well, straight after my degree, I did a PGCE in secondary history teaching, which was probably still the most useful year I’ve ever done in anything, even though it was more than twenty years ago now. Because it gave me a very good sense of, you know, what history teaching in the classroom is like, looking at teaching from the perspective of the teacher rather than the student. But it was during that time that I got very impassioned by museum education, which I hadn’t really known was a career – it wasn’t such a widely known about career in those days – through some volunteering I did alongside my PGCE. I focused my PGCE dissertation on working within museums and schools together. I then decided to pursue a career in museum education, which I did for fourteen years, first in a gallery, and then in the British Museum, where I was for eleven years, working with schools education. The fundamental part of that experience was both learning an extraordinary collection and working with, learning about a complex institution that is dealing with contemporary issues, whilst also integrated with the past through its objects. But also, I was working with objects, learning about objects and working with schools. And those two things are very much central to where I now am, because it was during that time at the British Museum that I began to integrate my passion for imperial history with collection histories, with how the colonial world impacted museum collections, which wasn’t something I’d thought about. We are much more aware of these issues now, but when I was doing this in the early 2000s, I wasn’t quite so aware of a lot of these issues and connections of museums to the colonial world. So, while I was still working at the British Museum, I did my MA and then PhD part-time at Birkbeck. I was working on the history of museums in East Africa whilst working at the British Museum, thinking about these issues within a museum teaching context. All these things together led to me moving into the academic sphere in 2016 at Lincoln, where I brought all of that with me: the object-based approach central to thinking about imperial history, how we can drive forward our understanding of imperial history through objects, but also working with schools, how best can we work to communicate research to schools, effective working practices that I’d learned from working in museums where I’d spent afternoons cold-calling schools about our programmes, talking to teachers about what they need, how can we make things work for them. In the museum, I wasn’t solely responsible for history, I had to work across the school curriculum. So that gave me a very good sense of the way

in which historical material actually feeds into different places in the curriculum, a lot with art and design at secondary age, as well as other topics and ways schools could think about museums as spaces in which to enhance their learning. I now regularly work with schools wherever I can, but it's still informed by going right back to my PCGE, the ways in which you are trained to teach and think about teaching alongside that focus on object-based learning, which features in my teaching and really drives forward my research.

TL: *And what do you like about working with schools?*

SL: I think one of the most exciting things is working directly with pupils and feeling like they care about your research. You can see that your research, the ideas and the material you've presented them with is helping them understand processes or complexities and nuances in the past that they might not access otherwise. And that's fantastically interesting. A school teacher shared with me a miniature cardboard box exhibition, which was an optional thing that students could do based on a unit she'd been developing with me on my research. And it was about my work on Seychelles and the Coco de Mer, which is really obscure, but they'd used that as an avenue to think about environment and empire, and she'd created this exhibition. And, you just think, actually, this is a really good case study. It does say something, it does speak to people. It really allows you to think about what elements of your research have that ability to communicate and transmit ideas and concepts about the past in a really tangible way that a twelve-year-old could then build an exhibition around. So that, I think, is really powerful. I also really, really like working with teachers. Regularly, we come out of meetings with teachers and just say, oh, my goodness, that's the most dynamic meeting I've had, you know. I learn so much from them about what's important in the lesson, how do I get material to make our students reach this outcome, the way they manage the different pressures that they have to deal with. It's just a very dynamic way of thinking about our material. It isn't how we do it in university, but it's very refreshing to talk to them about it and to think about things in these real-life situations. You know, you realize how much freedom we have in the university compared to the quite close constraints that teachers have, and how effectively they manage what they do, you know, still having the space to be creative and bring in this academic material. I recently ran a workshop on an open access publication I'm working on, where we brought teachers in for an all-day workshop with all the authors and some teachers to talk about the research. And, you know, all the academics came out of it just saying what a fun day it was, how exciting it was to talk to people and get their ideas as they were writing their chapters on their research. Not that the teachers were trying to influence their research, it wasn't

necessarily about critiquing, but everybody was just so excited by the way in which we were already thinking, right, why is this relevant? What could I do? You know, teachers just saying, oh, I'd start my lesson with your object, you know, the students would love it. Those kinds of interactions, the immediacy of seeing the impact of your research and then just working with a like-minded, dynamic group of people, who are all trying to achieve different things in different parts of society, is really a very powerful and exciting experience. And it's such a collaborative way of working as well. People often think about history as a lone scholar kind of discipline, but actually most historians are very embedded in different communities in different ways and that kind of hands-on collaboration is one of the things that enthralls a lot of historians.

TL: *In the past few years, there has been a lot of media coverage of debates about empire and Britain's role in empire. There's a strong critique, not one I share, that teaching a critical history of empire in schools is basically indoctrination. How do you negotiate working with schools on something that has become a very hot political topic since you started doing it?*

SL: That's a really important question and something which we're continually talking to teachers about because the landscape is changing so often. I've been collaborating closely with a teacher, Sasha Smith, who I met through an online talk that I gave, but it happens that she actually works in Lincoln, so we could meet and work very effectively in collaboration. One of the reasons she came to me to talk about this, is she said, I'm dissatisfied with how we teach empire. We've got a lot of students who come in parroting voices from their parents about, this is what the empire is. Lincolnshire is Bomber County. Many people here have views that are critical of our more postcolonial readings of imperial history. One of the things she hoped to do through working with me was to see whether approaches using material history could be effective. And one of the reasons we've advocated this approach quite strongly is that teachers find that using objects as the driving force through the lesson allowed them to have conversations about empire, but they were all through the story of the object. So when they came across histories that might be perceived as critical, or these more complicated stories of power, imposition of power, racism, all those kinds of things, because they were studying the story of the object, it felt a little bit less like they were being polemical and telling students what was 'bad' and so on. The lessons assisted students in building lots of historical skills, lots of important content, really important messages about the complexities of empire, but it was the story of the object, which meant that the students took it on in a really strong way, but didn't feel like they were being lectured at.

She hasn't had any criticism of this, but at the same time, students have come out of these sessions really aware of injustices, inequalities in the service of empire. So, you know, I'm not saying we've solved how to teach empire at all, but what this work has done is found ways to support teachers in navigating this really difficult landscape. Most of them are aware of the situation. They don't want to do the balance sheet of empire anymore, because they know that this is not a historically sound way to understand historical processes, but they want tangible alternatives that can give them guiding frameworks to talk about these issues. I was at an event a couple of weeks ago where a teacher said, we are under a lot of pressures to do justice to empire. And obviously everybody has a different idea of what doing justice to empire is. I don't think I answered this teacher's question very effectively, because I was sort of thinking about it on the spot. But what I would try and say is let's do justice to the historical discipline that allows us to interrogate empire and think about the dynamics that we would ask in any historical context about who is in power, how did they gather that power? The more questions we ask about was it right or was it wrong, that's where we get into the tricky territory where certain people want certain views. Instead, if we're asking about the processes, about 'How and why did it expand? Who resisted? What were their motivations?', then we can make a better case for doing better history and not asking inflammatory questions that are going to be seized upon by people saying 'This is woke.' I mean, I don't think it's particularly woke to do those things. These are just quite standard things historians do. The other thing that I think feeds into this is this idea of history being rewritten, that we are belittling history. But the more that we can show students that history is always being rewritten, always there's going to be phases of people writing in a particular way and then responding in a different way, and that that is part of the process of the discipline, the better. We don't just 'know' the past now, and that's it, and now you just learn it and regurgitate it to us. So, there's no easy answer. Some of the options that we presented offer some quite useful avenues for teachers to explore. All of those have to be applied in particular contexts. The way that Sasha was teaching about objects to her largely white Lincolnshire audience would be very different to an inner-city school who would be teaching that with a much more diverse classroom, and so what we want to do is empower teachers to take the material and then work with it in their school context, which has to be part of how these lessons are designed. But I think it's going to be constantly changing, and that we're going to have to keep up to date with those kinds of things. We're lucky in universities that we get much less direct parental voice in our classroom, so we have a bit more freedom, whereas some teachers are having to tread

quite carefully. The better we can try and help them explain the process of the history and the way in which you think about what history really is, then that's also another way we can continue to support them.

TL: *You've spoken about the kind of enthusiasm that school children and often undergraduates have for working with objects. This wasn't something I ever did at school or at university. Do you find that when you start introducing objects as a way of working with history, that the audiences you're working with are surprised by this?*

SL: I didn't do anything explicitly material at school. We did one school trip to the National Portrait Gallery when doing the Tudors at A-Level, where we actually were asked to think about portraits. This was transformative for me. I was like, oh my goodness, we could do this in history. That opened up whole worlds to me. Then, obviously, we weren't examined on it, so I was never able to use that material, but it sparked something. What's very clear to me from working with schools is that actually they are doing quite a bit of material history already at Key Stage 3, so from 11 to 14. For example, a lot of them will use Viking archaeology or something for some of their introductory material. They do it more often when there's an explicit material-based source to start with. Certainly, at primary school, they do more, they do something where they're looking at the helmet and they're doing quite material things. But it's the exam period when it stops. Basically, from 14 to 18, that's when the focus becomes on a very dense curriculum with very little flexibility, with very clear text-based source enquiries and so on. A lot of teachers I've spoken to, when I talk to them about what we do at university, they're like, that's exactly our Key Stage 3 in terms of approaches. University history has a lot more in common with Key Stage 3 in terms of the dynamics and the ways we teach than the A-level period does, where it's such a grind of intense information download for the students, regurgitation in different formats. This is something which I'm talking to exam boards about, about how, actually, how can we make exams more reflect what goes on in the academy? How can we make them more engaging? How can we make them more inclusive? I'm trying to present objects as a way to do this, because then it becomes more integrated and recognized as part of the toolkit of historians throughout. One A-level curriculum unit had an object as a thing to analyse. The AQA 'Migration' module had an object. And, you know, I think they were quite pleased to do that. Some of the exam boards just want to know, how can this work in practice at a national level. But that's something I'll be talking to them about. Particularly for modern history, there's still a lot of catch-up to do, because there isn't the same kind of bodies of literature about this material yet, as for earlier periods, when it's

always been much more integrated about how scholars use these different materials alongside each other. But my approach, it does, it sometimes surprises teachers and students in the first place, because they think we're doing empire, so, therefore, we do maps of the world, we do arrows on maps, that's what their perception of it is. We're trying to promote the use of object biographies, so that they can actually use an object throughout a whole lesson to uncover various histories. But even so, you know, often they'll start off with an object as a starter question. Getting questions, getting curiosity, getting enquiry, objects can so easily do that. Maybe they aren't used to it, but they don't feel intimidated to ask a question about 'What is it? Oh, I think it's for this.' There's a technique which is used in North American art museums called VTS, I think it is, visual thinking strategies, where, at its most basic level, they stand in front of a painting, and you say, tell me what you can see. So what's going on in this painting? Tell me what you can see that makes you say that. So everything is just, tell me a thought, what's your evidence? Tell me a thought, what's your evidence? And in a way, everything is based around that. They can look at an object and say, why do you think this is a drum? Well, it looks like a drum. What exactly are the components of a drum that make you say that, you know, then you start, well, it's got *this* kind of thing. And then suddenly we're doing material analysis, because they're actually describing the form of a thing.

And then we'll talk about, but what don't we know? Do we know how old it is? No, but what could we do to find that out? Yeah, so it's a great way to start asking questions, forming questions, acknowledging uncertainty, finding ways in which we can then say, right, or where do we go now? Now, very rarely is it just an object. They're always used in tandem with a text to help us uncover things or other research or scientific analysis or data. But it's this combination, which shows quite well and replicates in lots of ways the work of historians. And when I talk to teachers about what historians do, I often talk about these two approaches I do with objects. One is starting with an object I don't know anything about, what do I do next? And then mapping that so they can see like that as a journey. The other one is, when I start with a topic, I might say, okay, actually, as I'm currently doing, working on a chapter about material culture and convicts in South Asia, what do I do when I've got a topic, but I don't have the objects, where do I go? And showing them these different avenues using material things as the basis of the research. What we're trying to do there is get a greater familiarity with object-based skills, because as I've tried to show, they actually feed into all the different skills that we want to transmit as historians and apply to every single period. I think the reason empire works

is partly because it isn't expected, so, in a way, it makes you think about the skills a bit more explicitly, because it's a bit unusual, and sometimes you might have to work harder to say, well, what's this telling us? Because it might not be immediately obvious. But then again, that's what you need to do an inquiry, to then do research, to find out what we know, what we don't know, where would we go next?

TL: *Moving onto the last few questions, and I think this one you've partially answered, but how did you end up as a historian?*

SL: I guess I've worked in the field of history throughout my career, from when I was working in an art gallery with Baroque paintings, when I had my first job, and before that as a trainee teacher. But I worked around different parts of history, in different engagements, with different audiences, working with different people. I think when I was a museum educator, I wouldn't have described myself as a historian at that time, necessarily. I was working a lot with objects, and actually, I was doing research, so I could well have done. But it was only once I started doing my part-time academic study that I felt more confident to say now I am an historian. I think it's something where the awareness of what it means to be within the discipline creeps up on you. History was the subject I wanted to do at university. My school wanted me to do maths, because I was more likely to get into Oxford, because I was a girl doing maths, and the statistics were much better. Their priority lay in admissions, rather than what I actually wanted to do. That was actually the time when I needed to defend what I wanted to do. Actually had to say, no, this is the thing I really want to do. So I think that conviction then was quite powerful. Since then, everything has then kept within the world of history, but it's hugely valuable now where I am, having been in those different situations and seen what history can mean for different audiences from quite an early stage in my career. I've always had to think through different elements of it, less from the theoretical side, much more from the practical side, the experiential side, about, what is this really doing for this particular audience today? I value that still, always thinking about this idea of audience and why we're doing our research. It's quite embedded in how I think.

TL: *And that goes back again to history as being a collaborative endeavour with all sorts of different partners and audiences. So, next question. What do you most like about being a historian?*

SL: I suppose the best bits are the 'wow' moments when things fit together, and those are just very exciting moments. In terms of research, that's where it really is exciting. An archival find, or an object when you map onto, this belonged to this person. Hold on a minute, that person who was doing this at that time, they owned this. Okay, what on earth does this mean? And finding those things.

I think serendipity in the archive can be extraordinary. As part of my PhD research in Zanzibar, I was looking at the history of the museum building, and it's quite an interesting building for lots of reasons anyway, but I was talking to the archivist, and he said, 'Oh, there's some old pictures that you might want to see, some old drawings. They're folded inside, it's not really got its own class mark, would you like to see those as well?' And I just said yes, and he brought out the original plans of the museum, which were nothing like what was actually built, and I was like, 'What on earth? Okay, now I have to explain a whole set of other things that are going on.' Nobody had looked at this since 1919, really, or 1920, and certainly not what it means in the case of what this quite monumental building has meant for Zanzibar and the representation of its history. So those are quite special kind of moments. But also, there are also those moments when you can see things fitting together for students, when you realize that students have their own 'wow' moments, and see why something's relevant, what something means, what are the implications of some idea they've put forward. It's having your own wow moments and guiding others in having them, which I find very exciting.

TL: *What do you think has changed most about the student experience since you were an undergraduate?*

SL: Quite a lot. I mean, I can't speak for what's going on in Oxford nowadays. But the things I value in Lincoln are the attention to student learning, to the way in which students learn, how we can best support students. The range of topics that we think about. You know, I was introduced to bits of imperial history, but now it's just completely normalized that all students are exposed to lots of different periods right at the start, so that they can get a handle on where they might contribute and where they might work. It's really positive that we're democratizing the discipline. We are hopefully moving away from the idea of who can and who can't be a historian, and that can only be for the best, and it'll make history better for more voices and more ideas from students of all backgrounds, thinking this is a subject they could do. We've got to do a lot of work on that in the current climate, and we need to keep doing it, but ...

Our students here at Lincoln, many of them are the first generation coming to university, and I'm so pleased that they can see history as something for them. And I just hope that this is something we can continue to champion across the university sector. And, things like objects being part of it. The thing that I loved about my first year, as I mentioned, was going to the Bodleian Library and seeing this codex in person, and that was the most memorable part of my degree. The more opportunities like that that we can do with students, the better. We make these kinds of approaches much more

integral, so if students want to do that more, they can. And of course, there's challenges. I hand-wrote all my essays, I didn't have to do footnotes, for better or worse, so there's huge, huge differences. There weren't computers, robots to write things for us, but there's so many positives that are now part of our discipline, which I think is really good practice spread across the country, and people paying attention to teaching, which was in its infancy, really, I think it's fair to say, in the 2000s. I don't want to disparage my predecessors, but there's just been so much more emphasis on actually how do we think about how we teach, much more universally, and that can only be a good thing.

TL: *So this is the final question. What's your top tip for students today on getting the most out of studying history at university?*

SL: Hmm. I suppose, throw yourself into it. Do your reading. Be curious, continue to be curious, ask questions. That's the main thing that will drive you forward in all of your topics, and some of the compulsory ones you need to do, then when you start to be able to choose and select your own pathway, continue to ask those questions. That has been a guiding thread throughout our conversation, but that's one of the most transferable skills we can have as historians, is to continually to be curious and try to answer questions through research, but keep asking, because that helps us engage with the discipline, engage with our topics, engage with our sources in the most productive way. It's inspiring. Young children are so curious, and asking questions is such an integral part of what young people do, and we don't want to dampen that through exam pressures or thinking there's one right answer. We don't want to crush that intrinsic curiosity that should be part of all university degrees.