

Jamie Wood, interviewed by Tracey Loughran, 22 September 2025

Jamie Wood is Director of Short Online Courses and Departmental Lecturer at Oxford Lifelong Learning. At the time of this interview he was Professor of History and Education at the University of Lincoln. He specializes in the social, cultural and religious history of the late antique and early medieval Mediterranean. He has contributed resources on 'Historical Research for Undergraduates' to the *A Practical Guide to Studying History* website.

Interview

Tracey Loughran (TL): *Just to start off with some scene setting, when, where and what did you study at university?*

Jamie Wood (JW): The where is easy because I studied at the University of Manchester for my undergraduate degree, my MA and my PhD, and in fact my postdoc, and then I worked there. So that was easy. The what is I, when I first went to university, I was originally going to study American studies, and then halfway through my gap year, I got a letter, because it was ages ago, saying we've decided to close American Studies to new entry. So I was a bit desperate and scrabbling around, and then I signed up to do American and Latin American Studies, which was still running, which was an interesting course, and it still had some of the American Studies stuff in it. But I think I wasn't mature enough to do the language learning at the time, to a high enough level. And so I just fell out. I didn't really like it very much. So halfway through the year, I flipped into history, and then I had to start again the following year. So I did two first years, the second one in a straight BA in History at the University of Manchester, and it was the best decision. In the end, I just spoke to my parents, and they said, you know, this was what you liked best

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

at school. This is what you were really good at at school. So why don't you try and do that? So I did. So I studied History, and then I did an MA in Medieval History, also at Manchester, and then I did a PhD in Classics and Ancient History, which was very much ancient history focused. So I worked my way earlier in my interests as I went through my studies.

TL: *This is really interesting, because about half of the people I've interviewed so far started off studying something that wasn't history or did a joint degree. Which seems like a really high proportion, given the small number of people. And I'm wondering whether there's something about history that attracts people with interests in a lot of different things, different disciplinary interests?*

JW: Yeah, I think the reason I chose American Studies, and then American and Latin American Studies, was I liked the interdisciplinary idea that you could do history within that, alongside literature, film, politics, pretty much anything you want, from the kind of humanities and social sciences. So I liked that idea. And then I think over the course of doing my undergraduate degree, I realized actually history can encompass all of these things as well. I think that's possibly why I gravitated towards early medieval, late antiquity, because it involves archaeology, it involves history, it involves classics, it involves theology. I guess, all history can involve that, but I felt that I identified with that as something that would allow this pick-and-mix kind of approach. And I really liked, as I got more into it, and what I still love about it is, it's so fragmentary. We have quite a lot of some things and not very much of other things. And you're always working with a jigsaw where more than half the pieces are lost, and then half of the rest of the pieces are from the wrong jigsaw. And you're like, how do you put all this together? And again, that's what attracted me. You have to be a bit creative, I think.

TL: *Had you studied medieval history at all before you started your degree?*

JW: I'd studied British, well, maybe really English medieval history. And I didn't want to do any more British/English history. That's why I was looking at American Studies. And then, as I was able to exercise more choice, as I went through my degree, I really gravitated towards things that were about Europe, or to some degree, the wider world. And I liked that, learning about, sort of, places that I didn't know very much about, or hadn't been to, or that I'd been to and wanted to know more about, because I ended up specializing in Spain and Portugal. I spent some time there on holiday and had been to visit for study. And obviously I've been loads now, but it was that opening up of a place, a foreign culture that I didn't really know very much about, I liked that aspect of it as well.

TL: *Yeah. And you said that when you first started your degree in American and Latin American studies that you weren't mature enough for the language learning. So when and how did you pick up a decent level of Spanish or Portuguese?*

JW: I had some Spanish that I had picked up. I did Spanish at school, but I didn't do an A level in it. And then, when halfway through my gap year, when I realized this is what I'm going to have to do, I then went back and did it at night school at the local college, which was great. But that was only six months, you can't really get that far with it. So I'd built that up and, and I liked the Portuguese because I was learning that from scratch mainly. But there were lots of people in there who had A levels, who had a much higher level of the language. And then later on, when I started being more interested in early medieval and ancient world stuff, I had to learn Latin. By then I think I had more of that attitude, you've got to do this, maybe not every day, but frequently, you can't just coast through it, like you can sometimes in a seminar. You can't hide either, because usually it's taught by, you go around the class and everybody has to say something or talk about how they've translated something. So it's much harder than in a seminar where most of the time, you could hide if you wanted to and nobody was going to pick on you. So it just required a level of maturity that I didn't quite have at that point in time. And then, later on, I just got into it more and I could see more of a point to it when it was directly relevant to my study. So my third-year dissertation was about early medieval Spanish history, and I just was like, right, I'm going to start reading Spanish scholarship, and stuff that had been translated into Spanish from Latin or whatever, so I could access the primary sources that hadn't been translated into English. And I just did it with a dictionary, really mechanistically, because I was into it. Whereas before I couldn't really see the point, I was like, I'm just learning this and it's not being applied. So that was part of it too. It's the motivation as well.

TL: *That's hugely impressive. I've been doing Duolingo French for five years and I still can't hold a basic conversation.*

JW: Yeah, but I was twenty and my brain was still 'plastic'.

TL: *Were language modules provided as part of your undergraduate degree? It sounds like you went in with fairly basic skills and then you've developed them yourself over the course of your career.*

JW: During my undergraduate degree, you could take free choice options, but I didn't do any languages. I mean, I did when I was doing the Latin American Studies, because it was compulsory. I didn't do any when I was doing my undergraduate degree in history. My free choices in the first year were social anthropology, because I just thought that was really interesting. And that's been something I've always quite liked going back to and reading about, because it's

interesting for what it might be able to tell us about the period and the sources I'm interested in, but also social anthropology is so historically interesting, the discipline in itself, because it's so wrapped up with empire and stuff. So that was my sort of choice when I had a choice that wasn't history. And then in my second and third year, I didn't take any free choices. I just chose from the loads of history options we could choose from, or maybe ancient history from the Classics department, but I stuck within history after that. And then, when I went to my MA, basic Latin was compulsory. And then I figured that if I wanted to go on after that, I would need to do more. So while I was doing my MA, I did a GCSE in Latin by correspondence, which is a dweeby thing to do, but that really helped. And then when I started my PhD, I just started working each semester through beginners Latin three, then intermediate Latin one ..., and just worked the way up as far as I could. And I also tried to learn Greek, which I got okay at, but I hardly ever have to use it anymore, so that's pretty rusty now. So, as I got older, I realized this was what I needed to do if this was what I was going to do for my research, and I had to commit to this. And I found it interesting because it was relevant. It felt more relevant than before.

TL: *I think it could be really encouraging to people reading these interviews to think that even if they don't have those language skills at the moment, if they've got an interest, then they can stick to it and do it, and maybe learn languages in a way that they couldn't when they didn't have the same impetus to previously.*

JW: Yeah, I think so. Yeah, absolutely.

TL: *So there was quite a big shift in terms of what you were interested in over the course of doing your undergraduate degree. What was your favourite module?*

JW: Well, I could choose four modules in my third year, and I liked early medieval history, and I liked nineteenth-century Europe, so I did two of each and there were three I really liked. One of the nineteenth-century ones was about *fin-de-siècle* France. That was really, really great because it was very interdisciplinary, and the teacher was really good at engaging us, and we also got taken on a trip to Paris, which was great. It was quite varied, what we would do in the seminars, and it was just very interesting. Also it was quite, what I now understand is cultural history. So it was very, you know, let's look at some theories and think about these things from a variety of different perspectives. So I really liked that one. There was one about Byzantium in the tenth century. And I'm still in touch with that tutor, even though she's long retired. And I loved that because it felt very different to what I'd done before. So you're like learning about a culture that felt quite alien at the same time as they all thought they were Romans. At that time, twenty-five years ago or whatever

it was, that was what diversifying the curriculum looked like, you know, we're going to look at the eastern Mediterranean Romans. But also we could look to Armenia and we looked at interactions with the Caliphate and the Bulgarians and the Russians, so it was like quite international in focus. I really liked that. And then there was one which I did with my dissertation supervisor, which looked at ideas of ethnicity in the early middle ages and the different groups that came in and took over when the Roman Empire ended, and how people have understood what happened in that period, what that meant, and where all these different peoples came from. And that's the one that's probably stuck with me most in terms of what I do now. But also, possibly the most important module was a second-year module, which was something like European intellectual history from Rousseau to Freud. The lectures were fine, and I liked learning about these great thinkers and stuff, but it was the seminars and the seminar tutor who made it. He was really strict, really, just like, this is what I expect of you all. This is what you need to do each week and bring along. You need to prepare these things and bring them along, and I'm going to look at what you've done each week and I'm going to give you a little bit of feedback each week. And that gave a bit of discipline to it. It brought a bit of fear to it as well, which was not necessarily positive at the time, but retrospectively was very positive. And he was really good at teaching how to write. Before that I'd been bumbling along, I would get marks in the sixties most of the time, maybe a high fifties or a mid-sixties. I might've got a couple of firsts, but it felt really random, I didn't really know why or how. And then I got this tutor, and it clicked, like, oh, right, this is what they want. And then after that, I just knew how to do it. The final essay on that module made it real, and then I basically had a sort of cognitive sausage machine in my head for, if I get an assignment, this is what I'm going to do. And then I did that in subsequent essays and in the exams as well, and I got much better marks after that. Whether that was entirely because of the module and the tutor, or it was partly I'd reached a point at which some switch was flicked, that's what I ascribe it to. And I found that very powerful.

TL: *There's something really positive there, about the fact that even a module that wasn't your favourite, could be the one that offered something really important for the overall course of your degree.*

JW: Yeah, yeah. And I think that when I came to teach, I came back to some of those techniques, not the being a bit scary, but having a structure really, because lots of other classes back then were quite, yeah, there's some reading, have you done some reading? Let's talk about some thoughts that I've got. And there might be three or four questions, and the tutor was perfectly capable of filling the time if we

didn't have anything to say. Whereas this was much more like, I've expected you to prepare. Have you prepared? Yes. Then let's work through what you've prepared and we can talk about it. And then he would tell us if he thought we'd missed the point or whatever, but it was good.

TL: *Did you take any skills or historiography or theory modules?*

JW: There must have been some, but I have to say they are the ones that I don't remember very well. I mean, the intellectual history module, that's all theory in a way, but it's not really historiography. So even though I liked some of the modules where there was some theory brought in and applied, it kind of passed me by a little bit, all that, all that stuff. When I got to my MA, the medieval history at Manchester was not heavy with the theory. There was quite an emphasis on methods and stuff, and that was useful. But it's longer than a thousand-year period, so somebody talking to you about how you study history from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is interesting, but it's not really relevant to sixth-century stuff where we have no documents whatsoever, or maybe three documents for the places that I'm interested in. So I'm coming to realize, talking through this, I'm quite instrumental. If it's relevant, the theory and the skills, I can get on board with it. And if it's not, I'm a bit more, well, this is boring.

TL: *I think most historians are quite like that. You know, people tend to talk about history as though it's not a theoretical discipline. But I think what happens is, there's a lot of past, and historians cover very different bits of it, and if they find a theory or something that seems particularly relevant to what they're doing, it just gets integrated into practice. And so it doesn't show up as theory, but it is there, across the discipline, in all sorts of different ways.*

JW: I think that's absolutely right. And it's the same with that interdisciplinarity, you know, like, I'm going to take a bit of archaeology and a bit of something else, it's this attitude of, okay, that suits my needs right now. It's quite extractive, isn't it? I don't think it's bad, but it's just, these are things that I can use to help me think about this problem from the past, things that can give me a different perspective or give me a different block of evidence that I can then bring to bear on this very partial period of time. It's just seeing what would happen to that jigsaw if you threw a few extra pieces in.

TL: *Do you teach on any kind of skills or historiography modules now?*

JW: I have done in the past and I'm doing a new module at the moment, which is a humanities module for the whole school. That is about the relevance of the humanities now, particularly with a focus on dealing with the digital world, but also trying to teach the students some digital skills and make them aware of what they can use. And also,

in relation to AI, how we might want them to engage with it. In the past I've done some historiography teaching. I've taught writing and research skills and dissertation prep modules across the curriculum. So I've done quite a lot of different skills and historiography modules.

TL: *What do you think are the challenges of making that kind of material interesting to students? How do you go about that?*

JW: I would say the first thing is relating it to what they do already. And I think getting them to reflect on the relationship between how we think they should do it at university and then what they've been doing before and trying to make them see that there might be a need to change. And then at the other end, trying to make it relevant to what we're asking them to do. So for instance, I've taught on modules where we've spent quite a lot of time talking to them about how to write essays or, you know, write in general, but we don't actually get them to write an essay till the end. That's the wrong way round because showing them how it's relevant all the way through might awaken them to its use. And a number of the students who perhaps don't like it at the time because they think it's beneath them, or it's boring, or they didn't come to university to do this, *do* see the relevance maybe a year or two years later, or even after they've finished. So it's also a matter of perspective. And then the other thing is, making it as active as possible, and fun even. Having abstract discussions about how you structure a paragraph or whatever is just not going to get anyone on board, but perhaps thinking of ways in which you could construct an activity that would get students to think about that and start to figure out for themselves, even if it seems a bit 'school teachery' might be a productive way of doing it. When I've managed to design activities or figure out ways of getting the students to be active with it, it's definitely much better than when it's a bit more passive. I guess the same would be true of historiography or theory if we're trying to get them to engage with that. There are different schools of thought about how important historiography is and at what point in time you should be engaging the students with the primary sources. I'm definitely of the view that the earlier that we can get them engaged with the sources, the better, and then that could be a vehicle for getting them to see how the historiography or the theory might be relevant because you can then think about, well, how might this help us interpret these sources or think about them more deeply? I think most students do tend to enjoy doing work with the sources as well because that is what they feel they came to university to do. And sometimes, if you're trying to get them to critique a twenty- or a forty- or however many pages-long extract from a secondary source or even an entire book, that's really hard, but starting by them reading something that's

maybe only a paragraph or a page, or even just a line, and starting to develop those skills of nuanced reading of these texts, that's a skill that is transferable to thinking about the longer text, and then you can apply that skill to reading some secondary literature. And also, I'd much rather just be reading cool sources that are a paragraph long than reading fifty pages of some dense secondary literature.

TL: *And the resources you're producing are on historical research for undergraduates. So, what do you think are the particular challenges for undergraduates undertaking historical research?*

JW: I think understanding process, and the scale at which you do the research. You get so many dissertation proposals that don't understand what is an appropriate scale at which to try and do this inquiry, so students are trying to write the history of a topic that's a lifetime's work in a few thousand words. Calibrating what we want, and what they should be looking to do, is quite tricky for many of them. Also, identifying a source base or an archive that you're going to look at can be quite tricky. I think that, in a way, it can be easier for all concerned if you just direct them to a particular source base, and say, right, that's all we're going to look at. And they can really get into that in some depth. Whereas if it's too open, then they just take this kind of pick-and-mix approach of finding a bunch of stuff that's sort of relevant to this rough topic I'm kind of interested in. Which is never going to go anywhere or get really good marks. So it's the scale, the scope, and also thinking up questions that are actually relevant. Questions that are actually historical questions. You know, with medieval history, there's often a certain kind of Dan Brown mindset, like, we're gonna discover some secret that nobody's ever found before. Well, you're not, there wasn't a conspiracy, because everybody was super disorganized. So it's figuring out what an appropriate question is, and then how you answer it, understanding what research is and what historical research should look like. I'm not sure we're very good at explaining to the students what it is, and then how they get there, because I think it's something we've just intrinsically got in our heads, but they obviously haven't learnt that yet. It's quite tricky to put across to them, and for them to then grasp it and then put it into practice in the time that we have available to teach them.

TL: *It's that learning by doing, isn't it? By the time a student's done an undergraduate dissertation, they know exactly how they could have done it better.*

JW: Yes, absolutely. So, in my undergraduate degree, in the first year and the second year, we had to write long essays, which I'm sure were absolutely terrible. But it meant I'd written something that was 6,000, then 8,000 words, or something like that. I'd written two long pieces of work, so I'd started to get my head around, well, how

do you even produce that much text? I think a lot of students spend a lot of time worrying about, well, how do I write that much? So there's something to do with teaching the craft of writing stuff that's a bit longer than a two or three thousand word essay, or, you know, most assignments are even shorter than that. How do you hold that longer word count together into something that's coherent? I mean, many of them are really good at it, and do really well, but some students end up rehashing things that they did at A-level, and that is a bit worrying. You just think, what have we been doing for three years, that you've gone back to the thing that clearly really stuck with you, and that you feel comfortable with?

TL: *I wonder if students have got more risk-averse over the past decade or so?*

JW: Yeah, I think that's right. Numbers on our undergraduate medieval modules, or even history students who do a bit of ancient history are pretty healthy, and they're interested in those topics, so they do them in the modules up to third year. But the number of those students who then decide to do a dissertation in, for example, medieval topics, even though that's what they know best, and they're actually really good at it, is much lower. Lots of them won't really have done any modern modules, but they'll still have done a modern dissertation, because they feel it's somehow safer, or they feel like it's easier to access the sources or something, so I think that speaks to that idea of risk aversion. And it's totally understandable that that has happened, given the amount of money they're spending, the other pressures that are exerted on them, how crap the last five or six years have been in general, I understand it.

TL: *It's understandable, but it's such a shame. That probably leads on quite well to the next question though, which is, what do you think has changed most about the student experience since you were an undergraduate?*

JW: It's a lot more structured. This is a good thing and also a bad thing, I think. It's good that there's a lot more support available, and I think the teaching is quite a lot better. There were some great teachers when I was an undergraduate but, in general, teaching is more professionalized now. There's more structure and support available. But at the same time, I think that the sector often infantilizes them. The expectations of the students and of how we interact with the students are much more an extension of school, rather than a point at which they're becoming independent learners, human beings, or whatever, and that's preparing them for the world of work, or for further independent study. But I also realize that that's a reflection of bigger pressures that are placed upon universities, and the increase in student fees and all that sort of stuff. But I'm not sure that it always serves the students particularly well, in terms of preparing them when

they come to do things like their dissertation, or when they come to be thinking about, what am I going to do afterwards? So, that's one of the things that has changed a lot. In terms of history specifically, and how that's changed since I was a student, like I said, I think the teaching is probably a bit better, a bit more structured. And there are more, you know, things like just having resources available, more accessible, including online, is good.

TL: *That's pretty comprehensive. And what is your top tip for students today on getting the most out of studying history at university?*

JW: The top tip for students, I think, is to have an open mind about the topics that you might study, because you might find new things that you're interested in. Being open in general. Contributing and putting yourself out there might feel risky or scary, but being open and just throwing yourself into it, would be my tip. And make use of the resources that you have available – the staff, the library, your fellow history students. And, also, just that history is relevant. You know, the number of people that I went to school with who spent so much of their time taking the piss out of me for doing history, are now like, oh, history's so interesting. I'm like, well, yes it is. People come back to it, and at different points in their lives, they get into it, but doing that as a student and getting that depth of engagement is really a valuable thing to do. That is useful. So, again, that's throwing yourself into it and not apologizing for it, because it's as valuable, and more valuable in many ways than lots of other things that you might do.

TL: *That's a good note to end on!*