

Using Primary Sources

Annotated Bibliography

Tracey Loughran

Introduction

The range of potential primary sources that historians can draw on is dizzyingly diverse. There are some general guidelines that historians can apply to working with all kinds of primary sources, such as asking the crucial ‘who, what, when, why and how’ questions. However, there is also much variation between different sorts of primary sources; a medieval charter is very different to a Hollywood film. Moreover, specimens of the same *type* of primary source may demonstrate similarities and dissimilarities depending on the period of creation. An early modern broadsheet, for example, has some features in common with a modern newspaper, but there are also some important differences between the two forms. This means that really effective analysis of any primary source demands knowledge of the best questions to ask of that type of source. This is particularly important when you start to work in more depth with a body of primary source material, as in an independent research project. This annotated bibliography comprises scholarship on working with sources for different periods, different subfields of history, and different source materials.

Working with primary sources from different periods

Joel T. Rosenthal, *Understanding Medieval Primary Sources: Using Historical Sources to Discover Medieval Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011).

If your interest lies in a particular period, start by consulting a guide to the primary sources that historians of that period might encounter. This will help you to think more broadly about the types of sources you might use in your own research, as well as how to analyse sources that tutors set for classes or assessments. Rosenthal's *Understanding Medieval Primary Sources* is the best one-volume work that deals with sources for this period. It focuses on medieval Europe, which means it is potentially less useful for students interested in other parts of the world, but many of the forms discussed (such as biography, wills and letters) are also found in other geographical contexts. The volume combines chapters on different types of sources with chapters on the range of sources that can be used to approach different subfields of medieval history (such as urban history, women's history and military history).

Laura Sangha and Jonathan Willis (eds), *Understanding Early Modern Primary Sources* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

This volume is divided into sections on 'Sources' and 'Histories'. The first section includes chapters on sources ranging from state papers and legal sources to literary sources and personal documents. The second section explores how different sources have been used to explore different areas of history, including popular culture, economic life and science. The introductory essay by Laura Sangha and Jonathan Willis is exceptionally helpful in providing a (relatively) brief and accessible overview of some important conceptual, practical, and historical issues such as what is meant by 'early modern' and how and why different sorts of source materials have come to be used to write histories of particular topics, and different ways of working with sources.

Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann (eds), *Reading Primary Sources: The Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth and Twentieth Century History*, 2nd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2020).

This volume has a more historiographical emphasis than some guides to primary source materials. Ziemann and Dobson's introductory essay situates changing approaches to source analysis in the context of recent historical debates and provides a helpful 'checklist' of questions to consider when working with modern textual sources. Students who want to understand the history of different approaches to source criticism will also welcome the chapters by Philipp Müller (which deals substantially with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century approaches) and Christoph Reinfandt (on reading texts as primary sources after the linguistic turn). However, the majority of the volume is devoted to chapters on different sorts of source materials, including some that students may not previously have encountered or considered using in their own research, such as surveillance reports and social surveys. The chapters draw on examples from diverse contexts, including nineteenth-century Britain, 1940s Australia, Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia.

Working with primary sources for different historical subfields

Katie Barclay, Sharon Crozier-De Rosa and Peter N. Stearns (eds), *Sources for the History of Emotions: A Guide* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020).

The history of emotions is a cutting-edge field of historical inquiry, and one that fascinates many undergraduates. However, it is not the easiest field for less experienced researchers to navigate. How do you narrow down a primary source base for a subfield that deals with fundamental aspects of human experience, and so could potentially draw on almost any type of source? This book, edited by three eminent historians of emotion, combines overviews of sources, theories and practices in the history of emotions with chapters on emergent themes in the field and overviews of how historians have exploited different source materials (such as rituals, prescriptive literature, institutional records and fiction) to interrogate histories of emotion. This broad scope means it is useful for students seeking an introduction to the wider field of the history of emotions as well as those looking directly for information on relevant primary source materials.

Anna Clark and Elizabeth W. Williams (eds), *Sources and Methods in the History of Sexuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2025).

Investigating the history of sexualities raises certain challenges. On the one hand, sexual experience is often highly private and so does not always leave many traces in the historical record. On the other hand, sexuality has been heavily regulated in many past and present societies, meaning that much available evidence deals with the repression of non-normative sexual identities and behaviours. This book is partly structured around dealing with those challenges, including sections on 'Reading against the state' and 'Secret selves' that respectively explore techniques for dealing with evidence of oppression and sources for identity. The introduction and opening chapters on different contested lineages deftly tackle the relationship between complex theoretical and conceptual issues in the history of sexuality and how historians negotiate these issues through the use of different sorts of evidence. The book also has extremely wide chronological and geographical scope, ranging from ancient Greece to contemporary Mexico, with pitstops at many other times and places besides.

Working with different types of primary source material

Bloomsbury History: Theory and Method (Bloomsbury, digital subscription-only database).

The ‘Using Primary Sources’ section of this database contains specially commissioned chapters on diverse types of source materials. Each essay is structured around an explanation of the source type and its distinctive features, an account of when and how historians are likely to encounter this source type, and key aspects of working with the source type, often including a step-by-step guide on how to go about analysing this source type. A particularly notable feature of this resource is that it includes essays on sources that you are likely to encounter quite often during your undergraduate courses, but for which students are rarely given much guidance on how to interpret, such as folklore, maps and statistics.

Ludmilla Jordanova, *The Look of the Past: Visual and Material Evidence in Historical Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

This book is a wide-ranging exploration of different aspects of visual and material evidence, and how historians can and might use these types of source material. The introduction provides an excellent account of some key terms and concepts that are often found in works on visual and material culture, including the idea of ‘reading’ such sources for the ‘messages’ they contain. The chapters address issues including how images and objects become historical evidence, how the making of objects can assist historical analysis, periodization, audiences, and comparative analysis. These chapters are interspersed with short essays that illustrate key themes from the preceding chapter through discussion of a specific example, such as Renoir’s 1908 painting of Ambroise Vollard. This unusual structure means that readers will benefit from reading the whole book, but also that there is always a practical working-out of concepts and ideas that can feel quite abstract in other scholarly discussions.

Leonie Hannan and Sarah Longair, *History Through Material Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

In dealing with material culture, this book covers some of the same ground as Jordanova’s volume, discussed above, but the approach is quite different. Hannan and Longair explicitly aim to provide a step-by-step guide to using objects as historical sources, and the book is structured according to the various stages of developing a research project – planning the project, deciding on methods, finding sources, analysing the sources, and writing up findings. Along the way, there is a rich discussion of trends within historical material culture studies, but the practical orientation makes this an ideal guide for any students simultaneously fascinated and puzzled by the possibility of using objects in their own research projects.

Penny Summerfield, *Histories of the Self: Personal Narratives and Historical Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019).

Strictly speaking, this is not a guide to primary sources as such, but it is an indispensable work for any students who are primarily interested in how past peoples thought and felt about their lives, and how they understood

their identity and experience – in other words, for students interested in selfhood and subjectivity. As with the history of emotions, this is a cutting-edge area of historical inquiry, but one that can intimidate less experienced researchers. The introduction explores how and why historians have turned to the personal, while a final chapter considers the vexed question of ‘representativeness’ in relation to sources that deal with individual experience. In the other chapters, Summerfield discusses four types of primary sources (letters, diaries, autobiographies and memoirs, and oral history), drawing on wide-ranging examples of historical scholarship that has made use of each source type. While readers will have to extrapolate from these discussions how they might use such sources in their own research, this volume will certainly help to generate many ideas.

Valerie Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3rd edn (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

Oral history is unlike other kinds of primary sources in that researchers have the option not only to consult existing oral history collections, but also to generate their own interviews. The title of this work suggests that it is a practical guide to conducting your own interviews, and it does provide abundant useful information on that process, including chapters on preparation for the interviewing project, interviewing techniques and strategies, and analysis and interpretation. However, it also provides excellent overviews of important conceptual issues such as the relationship between oral history and memory and ethical issues in oral history. The chapter on analysing interviews is also relevant whether you are working with existing collections, or with interviews that you have undertaken yourself.

Conclusion

I said at the outset that there is a huge and staggeringly varied range of potential primary sources for you to draw on. This means that a short annotated bibliography can only scratch the surface of these possibilities. However, there is one genre of book on primary sources that is not represented here, and that is the ‘source reader’ – a work that brings together extracts from different primary source materials. This is because while these works can be very useful resources, especially for introducing some primary source material into your essays, the primary sources in these readers have been preselected by someone else. If you are undertaking an independent research project, then it is important that you engage in an in-depth way with a body of source material rather than with extracts, and that *you* decide what are the important aspects of these sources for *your* project. This annotated bibliography has therefore focused on works that will help you to think more broadly about what types of primary sources could be used to research the topics or areas you are interested in, and that also provide some guidance on how to effectively analyse these sources. This is the starting point – enjoy going off and finding your own research path!