



An Interview with Professor Bernard Wasserstein

Professor Bernard Wasserstein, the Harriet & Ulrich E. Meyer Professor of Modern Jewish History, has been teaching and writing history for more than forty-three years now. The author of eleven books, he is one of the most distinguished and well-regarded scholars in the field of Jewish history. As he prepares to retire next year in January, he sat down with the *Chicago Journal of History* to discuss how he became a historian and recount some of the most fascinating tales and encounters from the days when he was a student at Oxford.

Chicago Journal of History: Why did you choose to study history?

Bernard Wasserstein: Initially, I chose to study history in high school because I was pretty rotten at other subjects. I got very good marks in Greek and Latin. But I don't think I really knew them very well. In the case of Greek, my father had really stuffed me in the course of about six weeks. In Latin, I did well. But I hated it. I especially hated the *Aeneid* which we had to read. So, I certainly didn't want to study Greek and Latin at an advanced level. And I was no good at science. So, in high

school, I chose history, French and English. There wasn't much else available.

When it comes to why I chose to study history at college, I would say that I had to specify a subject. So it had to be history or French or English. My French wasn't particularly hot. So it really was a choice between history and English. I seemed to be getting good marks in both. But, in the end, when it came to the actual examinations, I did badly in all three. I did worst in English and History. But I had the best teachers in history and I suppose that's what led me to study history at the undergraduate level at Oxford.

As for the graduate level, I collapsed into doing a Ph.D. because I wasn't particularly good for anything else. Initially, I wasn't very keen on doing a Ph.D. I would rather have done something more interesting and lucrative. When I say interesting, I mean something more active rather than contemplative. But once I finished my Ph.D., I really wanted to get out. I'd had enough. So, I decided that I wanted to be a banker. I wrote to over a hundred banks. These were mainly merchant banks.

But out of a hundred, only one of them interviewed me. When the interviewer asked me why I wanted to be a banker, I, of course, didn't tell him that I had nothing else to do. That would have been fatal. So, I gave him an incorrect answer. He, obviously, saw through that. "Look at me", he said, "Do you want to be like me when you are 65?". I said, "Of course, yes!". He said, "No, you don't. It's misery". We then took a break and, after half an hour, he again asked me, "Do you still want to be a banker". I again said, "yes, yes!". And he said, "You'll be hearing from me". He never got back to me. So, there was nothing left but to carry on and I will be carrying on till Jan. 21st, when after 43 years of research of teaching, I shall be free, free at last.

CJH: So, it was a process of elimination that led you towards history?

BW: Well, I would like to give you some high-minded reasons for why I chose to study history. One could call it intellectual curiosity. But, in my case, it wasn't intellectual curiosity exactly. It was a delight in reading people's letters, which is a large part of what my kind of modern historian does. And I really do enjoy getting into people's private lives, their private thoughts and their archives. But not for any great intellectual or noble reasons. I just find it to be a kind of higher gossip. I enjoy that.

Of course, as time went on, I tried to rationalize my view of why I wanted to be a historian. Again, I had inspiring teachers, both as an undergraduate and a graduate student. And they really persuaded me that history was indeed a worthwhile endeavor. Two in particular were very influential. One was Richard Cobb, the great historian of the French Revolution. Brilliant man but drunk most of the time. And quite disorganized. Often didn't turn up to class and tutorials. But when he did turn up, he kept us talking for about 4 hours. Wrong! He himself kept on talking for four hours, with a glass or perhaps even a bottle of whisky in his left hand. He made history seem like a lot of fun. He was a social historian trained in France and a historian who believed in entering the life of poor people and giving them a voice, particularly the poor during the French revolution. He was also somebody who immersed himself very deeply in another culture. He loved French slang in particular. Getting underneath the skin of another culture, another society excited me.

Then, there was a second teacher. This was Albert Hourani who was also my graduate supervisor. He was of Lebanese origin but was born in Manchester. He was a historian of the modern Arab World. Hourani was very different from Cobb. Cobb was a rascal; Hourani was a saint. Cobb was an irreligious man; Hourani was a practicing Catholic. He was a very high-minded man and a great expert on the late Ottoman Empire and the early thinkers of Arab nationalism. He was a man of a moderate outlook and balanced in his approach to life. Cobb, of course, was unbalanced in every possible way. Cobb was a great companion in a pub. I wouldn't say that about Hourani.

But he was the second great influence.

There was a third influence. He never taught me but I attended his lectures and got to know him well. And that was the political philosopher Isaiah Berlin who was really a historian of ideas. He was a liberal in his political outlook when it wasn't particularly fashionable to be one. He was an inspiring lecturer and gave a very influential series of lectures, jokingly called, "From Plato to NATO".

These three made me believe that being a historian could be a life-enhancing thing. Their influence marks me to the present. I taught a seminar on Isaiah Berlin last quarter and still have a copy of Hourani's book on my desk.

CJH: Why did you choose Jewish history in particular?

BW: Well, it all began in the college bar. Britain, you see, is not like this benighted country. The legal age for drinking is 18 but people really start drinking at fourteen or fifteen. I was in the College bar one day talking to Professor Jack Gallagher, the author of "Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism" which had redirected the history of imperialism in the 1960s. At that time, I had little idea of what I wanted to do. I was about to graduate and was thinking of applying to do graduate work. I had applied for a Commonwealth Scholarship that I eventually got. I was all set to go the Muslim University of Aligarh in India and very nearly became a historian of India. Gallagher was mildly encouraging of this. But he wasn't altogether approving. He had recently visited India and there he got dysentery. When he came back, he had become a shadow of himself. And, in fact, he eventually died due to complications arising from this. But still he agreed to write me a letter of recommendation. But before leaving for India, I thought it good to read up a bit about the place. So, I went to the bookstore and picked up V.S. Naipaul's "An Area of Darkness" describing India. It was non-fiction. This book gave such a black picture of the country in every way that eventually I decided not to go to India.

In the meantime, I had also been admitted to Harvard and Oxford. But Harvard didn't give me a scholarship. Oxford did. In that conversation though, Gallagher asked me what I had done so far. I, of course, had done nothing but I had spent six months in Israel before I came back to college. In that case, he said, you should write a dissertation on the British Mandate in Palestine because the British government had loosened access to the archives. I thought it was particularly interesting because my parents had lived in Palestine during the Second World War. And that's what I did. And that's why Albert Hourani became adviser.

I didn't start out as a Jewish historian. I thought of myself as a colonial historian. But then I moved into Jewish history after I finished my dissertation that became my first book. I was commissioned to write another book, arising from a further

opening of the archives. It was to be about the British policies towards Jews during the Second World War. And that's how got involved in Jewish history. But I have also written on other topics.

CJH: Do you see any common threads running through your work?

BW: Well I think one can divide historians into two types: there is the historian who sees one big problem and grapples with it from different sides; and then there is another sort of historian who butterfly-like goes from one thing to another. Now, I don't see myself as a butterfly of any kind but I don't like to think of myself as writing the same thing all over again. I do like to proceed from one thing to another. There was an obvious logical progression from my first book to editing the letters of the Chaim Weizmann, since he was a Zionist leader at the beginning of the Palestine Mandate, which I was writing about in my first book. And then there was an obvious progression from writing about that to writing about British policy during World War II in relation to the Jews and there was an obvious progression from that to writing a biography of Herbert Samuel, because he had been the British High Commissioner in Palestine.

CJH: What are your thoughts on the "postmodern" turn?

BW: I'm not a great theorist and I'm not a great believer in the application of theory to history. I'm not saying that history is simply one thing after another. Of course, theory has its place and of course one must have certain conceptual frameworks, in the plural, when one is writing history, but it is fatal when one becomes a prisoner of these. Too often, I think, people do. It's more important to get underneath the skin of people in the past and people in the past, with rare exceptions, such as Marxists, were not prisoners of theory, they had other, more important ways of looking at their worlds. Of course, some of those ways were theoretical constructs, not only Marxism, but religion, and one must be aware of these.

CJH: What does the University of Chicago mean to you? Do you see a way in which the University has influenced your work?

BW: No, thank God, because in Britain, for example, universities do tend, sometimes, to influence people's work, I don't mean in a sinister way, but in Britain now there is great pressure on faculty members to produce, to publish. It used to be the case in Britain that people were not under the gun to publish, and that means people took their time... At the University of Chicago, once people have tenure and once they are full professors, they're under no particular pressure to publish this year or next year. Some books can be published in 6 months, others take longer... one of my books took 20 years, that's *Barbarism and Civilization, A History of Europe in the 20th Century*, but I've never felt any pressure to publish. I value that lack of pres-

sure here, being able to do my own thing at my own pace, and then being able to produce a book that is the result of mature reflection and, I hope, exhaustive research.

CJH: What advice do you have for students of history today?

BW: I think, don't be copycats, I see a lot of copy-cattling in history today. I have to admit, I've been a copycat too... but I try to be my own person, I try to plough my own furrow. One thing I dislike about the whole American system of training is the way people attach themselves to their advisors and sometimes become almost clones of their advisors, or want to, and I think that's a big mistake. So I would encourage them to do their own thing and get into the archives – archives in the broadest sense – and let the past speak: don't try to impose patterns on the past before the past itself gets a chance to speak.