L I M I N A

'Continuing the Historical Conversation': An Interview with Judith M. Bennett

Judith M. Bennett *is Professor of History at the University of Chapel Hill at North Carolina. She has written numerous books and articles on many aspects of women's experiences and status in medieval England, and has been integral to current debates about the future direction of feminist history. In July 1998, she visited The University of Western Australia as the 1998 Fred Alexander Fellow where she spoke to* Susan Broomhall.

First of all, welcome to UWA. Perhaps firstly, could you describe how you came to be an historian and what attracted you to your particular research interests?

I became a historian because I read novels as an adolescent – in order to escape adolescence. I mostly read historical novels, and I read so many that my parents worried about me. This escape into fiction had two results. First, I absorbed a lot of incidental information about the Middle Ages. When I later began to study the Middle Ages, I found that I knew lots of things from my reading – I remember particularly one incident involving the word 'scutage' – that other students had yet to learn. Second and rather more embarrassingly, this reading led to my first research in history. When I was 15 or 16, I read two novels that each had Richard III as the protagonist. He was wonderful in one of them and wicked in the other. I was first confused and then intrigued. The next year, I undertook a project that ended up arguing that Richard III had not killed the princes in the tower. At the time, I felt very passionately about this issue.

So in your novel reading, the medieval period was the one that interested you most historically?

Oh yes, absolutely. Once I got interested in the Middle Ages, I read nothing else. That's not true any more.

Perhaps because you pick up all the historical inaccuracies?

Exactly. It drives me crazy. This is true for movies too. In a sense, being a professional historian has ruined my ability to enjoy fictional accounts of

the Middle Ages. But I do pass them on to my students. At the end of my women's history classes, I usually give students a list of historical novels to read.

Students often seem to have very little concept of what the Middle Ages might have been like.

I think that's one of the challenges of teaching pre–modern history. Obviously, there were no contemporary novels produced in the Middle Ages, and I haven't even found any modern novels about medieval people that I feel comfortable using in class. This is true of films too. There are good images that can be used in slides, but that's a fairly limiting medium. Students respond so much more readily to literature or images than they do to documentary texts, and that makes it very different to talk about ordinary, illiterate people. So I really envy those who teach about elites or who can mine the much richer sources of more modern eras.

I understand that your appointment was actually in women's history, not in medieval history.

In 1981 my department at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) searched for someone in European women's history. That was the appointment for which I applied and the position I was given. The terms of that appointment freed me to do things I hadn't done before. When I went to graduate school in 1973 I thought: 'Thank God, I will *never* have to study anything after 1500 again.' I hated all modern history (the last American history course I took was in high school – and it was truly terrible). I was a very fervent medievalist, and as a graduate student, I escaped to the Middle Ages. Then, I got a position that encouraged me to branch out into other eras. It was clear, for example, that my department expected me to teach the history of women in modern Europe. Fortunately, I was ready – after many years of seclusion in medieval matters – to venture out. It's been very good for me to teach modern women's history, as well as courses in comparative women's history and feminist theory for historians. Now, I look back with amusement on my earlier self who wanted so much to hide behind the year 1500.

Was your graduate research on women in the Middle Ages, or something more general?

No, when I was hired as a historian of women, I really was not one. My dissertation was called 'Gender, Family and Community', and it had just one chapter on women.

... Well, you had 'Gender' in the title, you see.

That's right. I don't think I even knew what gender meant when I was titling the dissertation. It just seemed a vaguely better word than 'women'.

I got interested in women's history when I went to graduate school in Toronto in the 1970s. At that time, two things happened. First, as I said, I thought I was never going to have to study the world after 1500 again. And second, a few months before I arrived in Toronto I began my first sexual relationship with a woman, so I was in the process of coming to terms with that during my first year of graduate school. Eventually, I decided that, in the terms of the 1970s, I must be a lesbian. As part of this change in my life, I got quite involved in lesbian politics in Toronto. So I lived a double life. For part of the time, I was going off to the Pontifical Institute for Mediaeval Studies, working in the library, reading Latin texts, and thinking about the world before 1500. And for the rest of the time, I was involved in quite radical activities in Toronto (which had a very lively political scene at the time). Interestingly enough, I lived comfortably this double existence for more than a year. When I began to get uncomfortable, I realised I should try to put the two together. I went to my supervisor, Ambrose Raftis, and told him that I'd like to write a dissertation on peasants (which was what both he and his students worked on), but that I'd like to write it on peasant *women*. To his credit, he immediately agreed. So I was able to mesh my intellectual life with my political life.

Still, while in graduate school, I had only one course connected to women's history, a course on medieval marriage taught by Michael Sheehan. In some of my graduate courses, I did research papers on, predictably enough, Margery Kempe and Margaret Paston. But I had virtually no formal training in the field of women's history. I also, for what it is worth, had no female teachers or feminist teachers in graduate school.

Have you experienced discrimination as a result of being a lesbian?

American academia is a fairly accommodating place, and I have not faced in my professional life a lot of outright discrimination. I've faced some subtle discrimination and some social awkwardness, but I don't feel that I have a lot of cause for professional complaint. In fact, since my partner is also a historian, the opportunity to share intellectual matters with her has much enriched my professional life. Of course, that's about being an academic couple, not about being lesbians.

What has been your experience of being an academic couple?

Having a partner who is also an academic is wonderful in many ways. My partner, Cynthia Herrup, reads most of what I write and gives me very honest criticism. Having a partner reading similar scholarship, bringing home interesting people, and sharing ideas is great. The number of conversations we have over breakfast about how to organise syllabi or manage a discussion ... we do that all the time. It's very, very useful. Also, since Cynthia is, like me, an English historian (we met as graduate students in London), we can travel together easily. We spend most summers in London.

But there are also challenges to being an academic couple. There can be issues of competition. Once, we both applied for the same fellowship, and only one of us succeeded; that sort of thing can be tough. There are also issues about commuting. Cynthia and I commuted for three years and then she was able to move to Duke University, which is only 10 miles from UNC–CH. We were *very* lucky. Others are not so lucky; we have friends who have commuted for 20 years. And there are issues of stress. When your partner is another academic, both of you are in high gear from September to May (in the northern hemisphere, that is). As a result, the insanities of the academic year attack everyone in the household, not just one person.

Is it difficult working on medieval England, when as an American historian, you are isolated from much of the primary source material?

Microfilm has helped an enormous amount. E–mail helps too. Still, in my ideal world, I go to England every summer. Working from a distance is not necessarily bad. I've often envied my British colleagues who, I imagine, can sit in their flats, work on an essay, come up with a problem, and just pop down to the Guildhall Library or Public Record Office to examine a document. Now, that ease of access is something to envy! But I think that distance has its virtues. First, it gives you a continuity with the sources that my British colleagues often don't get; they are so close to the archives that they often just grab a day here or there for research. Second, it encourages you to mull over your notes with care and to plan your research carefully. So I think that living a distance from archives can have advantages as well as disadvantages.

Is it difficult to find women in the extant medieval sources? Patricia Crawford and Sara Mendelson argue that feminist historians have to be particularly creative in viewing sources and 'read against the grain' to find the evidence of women.[1] *Is this a technique you use?*

In many cases, I think it's remarkably easy to find women in the sources, once people begin to look for them. Women were everywhere. They're not nearly as well documented as men are, and women's own *voices* are much harder and rarer to find anywhere than *mentions* of women in the sources, but there's a lot of information about women in documentary and literary records.

Reading against the grain? I think all historians have to do that. Perhaps women's historians do it more. If you read the document at face value you're often not being a good historian. It's one of the things, it seems to me, that we're taught very early in history courses. So certainly women's history encourages reading against the grain but all history is better for doing it.

Much women's history seems to be 'non–linear'. Women's life–cycles don't revolve around specific ages, but rather around life stages such as marriage, and external events such as the death of a husband. How do you think we can overcome the

difficulties in trying to relate women's history back to 'mainstream' historical concepts that, by and large, are conceived with the more linear male life–cycle pattern in mind?

I think that that problem is actually a great advantage. The linear image of a male life – with boyhood, adolescence, apprenticeship, becoming a master, old age – provides a false cleanliness to our view of the past. That neat sequence was not necessarily the common sequence for men and it certainly wasn't the common sequence for women. The perspective of women introduces complications that need to be introduced into *all* history. It provides a useful corrective to an overly neat and tidy historical perspective.

A particular feature of your historical contribution has been public debate and discussion with other historians. I suspect that a great deal of dialogue goes on in private between historians, reading and commenting on each other's work, before they present a 'finished' piece for publication. Does your public expression of the historical dialogue stem from a belief that we need constantly to review and re–assess the nature of our historical enquiry in public?

Some of the dialogues I've been involved in have been purely accidental. I did not enter freely into any of them, but instead responded to debates that other people generated. But certainly I think polite discussion among colleagues is a very important part of the historical process. In fact, I see all history–writing as a conversation, even though many of our conversations occur in print.

I am a very frank person, and I think one of the reasons I've gotten involved in so many debates is that my writing is so blunt, there can be no doubt what I think. Because I'm direct, it is easier for people to respond directly. I have been advised to be less straightforward, but I think that clarity of writing is a great virtue.

I also have come to care a lot about how history is done and, particularly, how women's history is done. Still, sometimes I worry that I'm at risk of becoming more active as a critic than as a participant. I just published last fall what I hope will be my last gasp on the issue of continuity in women's history. I still feel very strongly about this issue, and I still think that people haven't heard what needs to be heard about it. But there comes a point at which useful conversation becomes nagging.

You mentioned the people who privately read my work. Private readings are very different from public debates. I value both, but I especially value my private critics. I have three people in particular on whom I can always rely to read my work critically and help me improve it: my partner, Cynthia Herrup; my good friend from graduate school, Maryanne Kowaleski; and Sandy Bardsley, who is just now finishing a dissertation with me.

There has been a lot of debate in recent years about the purposes, aims and future of feminist and women's history. I'm thinking particularly of the reactions to Joan

Scott's work.[2] *What do you think has prompted this self–reflective historical trend?*
There's always been debate in women's history. Scott's work took the field by such a storm that it has generated a lot of useful conversation. But academic generations are very short, and the changing of generations also sparks debate. Women's history in its current incarnation has been around now for about three decades, and so of course it's time to stand back, take stock, and talk about what we're doing. In the US, women's history is also fairly institutionalised. After all, I'm a full professor at a major research university, holding a position in women's history. That gives me – and other women's historians like me – a lot of institutional advantage and power. It is good to have that power challenged.

How common is your position?

There are certainly a lot of women in the US who are full professors in history, and who teach women's history. They might be appointed in American history, or European history, or Asian history, but they are women's historians. Positions *defined* as women's history positions are less common than women's historians in geographically or chronologically defined positions. Still, there are a lot of women's historians in their 40s – and a good number older too – who hold secure positions at good universities. Given the power this entails, it's a good thing that women and men younger than us critique the work we've done and move forward in their own ways. This sort of debate and dialogue is good, useful, and helpful.

Joan Scott, Louise A. Tilly and yourself have all drawn attention to the current state of women's history and studies within the US.[3] *Are there still improvements to be made in the discipline as it becomes institutionalised?*

In my ideal world, there would not be 'women's history' because all history would be attuned to issues of gender. But that ideal is a *very long way away*, so in my next–to–ideal world all historians would feel very comfortable with women's history. Even this is not now the case. Almost every history department includes people who are threatened by and resentful towards women's history.

I'd certainly like to see women's history more readily accepted by our colleagues. I'd also like to see women's history making stronger connections with feminist issues and speaking to issues that concern non–academic feminists. This happens, but not as much as it should.

I'd also like to see women's history in all classrooms. This is a really tendentious problem in the US. Students can take classes with certain professors and get a lot of women's history, but then they take classes with other professors and learn nothing about women or gender at all. It is amazing that this is still happening, and sometimes it happens with people who are quite sympathetic to women's history but nevertheless don't integrate it into their teaching. This is partly a problem of teachers, but it's

also partly a problem of women's historians. We need to do a better job of reaching out to our colleagues so that they have better and more sophisticated ways of integrating women into their courses.

Can you see similarities in the way women's history and studies have been accepted into universities across the world?

In Britain, women's history is still relatively embattled, and there seem to be relatively few people who are encouraged to devote their careers to women's history. Also British curricula are structured in ways that seem to make it very difficult to introduce courses in women's history. Things seem to be even worse in France and Germany, and I cannot yet get a real sense of the situation in Australia. All in all, though, I feel very privileged to work in a university system that has been able to accommodate women's history fairly easily. The US system of higher education has a lot of problems, but one of its great advantages is that it is highly flexible and accommodating to change.

Changing directions somewhat, can we talk about your thesis of the continuity of patriarchy in history?[4] *In some ways, it seems that historians' focus on the more positive aspects of women's lives in the past, the emphasis on their agency in patriarchal society, is a way of proving to ourselves that we can change the social rules, that patriarchy can be overcome. By taking as a historical focus the question of why the subordination of women has endured for so long and in so many historical settings, how can we avoid making the continuity of patriarchy seem inevitable?*

I think that there's a good politics behind the argument for the continuity of patriarchy as well as behind an argument that emphasises women's agency. I face this in my classrooms and I talk to my students about it at the end of the semester. I could teach women's history that says, 'women are great, women can do anything', but I don't feel comfortable with that message – in terms of its depiction of the past and also in terms of its political meaning in the present. I think that sort of history does not prepare young women and men for what they're going to face in life. I'd like to think that when one of my students finds herself in trouble at 30 – say, insufficiently trained for a professional career with a husband who's left her with two children – she can understand that her situation is *not her fault* but is a result, at least in part, of long and enduring structural inequalities. I would rather that my students react the challenges they will face – as women and men in the modern world – with anger rather than self–recrimination.

In terms of politics, if I'm right that patriarchy is a very deeply embedded structural force, then most feminist politics are not going to solve the problem. Feminists can have agency in a whole variety of different ways – for example, setting up shelters for battered women, changing laws about equal pay, and getting more women on the faculty at universities. All of these are good projects, but they are not going to change the deep structures of patriarchy. If I'm right, all such projects will do is jiggle the patriarchal

equilibrium a little bit and make women feel good whilst nevertheless keeping women in our place. So if I'm right, we really have to take a deep breath, look at the way we live, and think about really profound changes. I don't think patriarchy is inevitable but I think its elimination requires a very deep level of change.

Do you have thoughts about how these deep structural changes could be made?

Well, I'm a historian not a strategist. My role is to talk about the past the way I see it and to make as clear as I can the political implications of the way I see the past. But I will say that these deep structural changes will likely involve painful changes, such as changing the nature of the family and changing the nature of the way we organise our private lives. I'm not sure how we bring these sorts of changes into effect. I don't want to shirk my responsibility to strategize, but I feel that's not my area of competence.

Do you advocate the focus on patriarchy as the main focus within feminist history or as a way of connecting to other historical approaches and questions? ... Perhaps it's not an 'either/or' question.

It's an interesting question. I advocate focussing on issues having to do with patriarchy mostly because I think it's a profound feminist issue. It turns women's history back to its feminist audience, but it also provides women's history with a central question that can give the field integrity and form. There are other issues that also do this, and it is not as if women's history – or any historical field – should have only one focus. But fields do need to focus on a few issues, because these central issues help a field develop and take shape. In the end, they also help a field interact with other fields of history. So I think that a focus on the issue of patriarchy both helps shape women's history and also helps historians of women speak to other fields such as economic or legal history.

Is there a place for both feminist history and women's history; that is, studies about women in the past not necessarily with a feminist perspective? Are they complementary disciplines?

I think most people see them as the same, both people who are friendly towards women's history and people who aren't. In so far as you can discriminate between them, and I certainly have in my own writing, I do see them as complementary, rather than opposed. I wish for more of what you've called – and what I call – feminist history, but I'm certainly grateful for the women's history that's done. It brings a lot of very useful information to light.

Do you think there's a danger that because women's history can assimilate more easily into 'mainstream' history, this may marginalise feminist histories which challenge the nature and focuses of history itself as too difficult to integrate?

Yes. There are a variety of forces that can work to marginalise feminist historians – *explicitly* feminist historians–in the discipline, and one of them is a readier acceptance of women's historians as somehow non–polemical and therefore, not problematic. The same thing happens in the US with historians who are of the female sex but who do not study women. Female historians who are not women's historians are often assumed to know about women's history and be competent to teach it. (This is as if I went to one of my male colleagues and assumed he knew a lot about the history of masculinity. It's just ludicrous.) Some colleagues look for 'good' women to teach women's history, even if they do not actually work in women's history. And others, if forced to restrict their search to genuine historians of women, look for 'good' women who work in women's history but don't do it in a feminist way.

Tilly has argued that a more analytical approach to women's history is essential in order to demonstrate how women's experiences can make a difference to other historians' studies.[5] *How much do you see connecting back to 'mainstream' history as the aim of feminist historical research?*

I did not agree with Tilly's use of 'analytical' in that article. It was an unfortunate choice of terms, because so much of history that she labelled non–analytical is in fact analytical. Certainly, connecting back with other histories is absolutely essential, but as I said in my response to Tilly's article, you have to connect back from a position of strength. The field of women's history can't constantly be thinking about what labour history is thinking – or social history, or economic history, or legal history. Women's history, in order to connect back, has to have its own internal coherence and integrity. In other words, women's historians face a dual project: building the field with debates that are internal to women's history, and also connecting back with other historians. Women's historians already do this all the time, and that's good. I think that someone like Trish Crawford just naturally does both: thinking about issues that are internal to women's history and also thinking about how to connect with social or economic historians.

Where would you like to see feminist history in 20 years time? What would you like to see as our primary concerns?

I would like to see feminist history much more connected with the feminist community, providing the sort of history that ordinary feminists will read in their evenings, providing the sort of history that is used in policy–making, and also providing the sort of history that contributes to the development of feminist theory at the academic level. But frankly where I want to see feminist history in 20 years time is wherever the women who are 25 or 30 years old now want to take it. I can't say where that's going to be. It's theirs to do and it's mine to support. Mind you, I intend to keep

writing and talking, but I don't want my generation of women's historians dominating the field for 40 years.

What research projects are you currently working on?

At the moment I'm juggling lots of things. I've just finished a book called *A Medieval Life* that is my first attempt to reach out beyond an academic audience. It's an introduction to medieval rural society built around the life of one woman, Cecilia Penifader. It is the most satisfying project I've ever done. I wrote it very quickly, and I enjoyed every minute of it. I hope the book will reach a lot of students and, in a very subtle way, give them a different view of peasant society. Most books about the medieval peasantry focus on males in an implicit and invidious way, as if 'the peasant' is inherently 'male'. You see this, for example, in phrases such, 'when the peasant takes a wife'. I hope that *A Medieval Life* will redirect and reconceptualise this hitherto male–focused history. Moreover, since Cecilia Penifader never married, the book also redirects students away from the popular notion that peasants had to marry in order to survive. The idea that the only viable economy was the economy of a husband and wife is very old–fashioned, and although it has the virtue of tidiness, it doesn't adequately describe the peasant economy. I don't know what students will think of this book, but I have high hopes for it.

My other big research project at the moment has to do with singlewomen, with never–married women in medieval England. As part of that, I'm co–editing with Amy Froide a volume that will be out this fall from the University of Pennsylvania Press. (Amy just finished a few years ago a dissertation on singlewomen in Southampton, and now she has a job at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.) Our book looks at singlewomen in Europe between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries. There were so many singlewomen in Europe in these centuries that Amy and I have had to develop jargon to describe them. We call some 'lifelong singlewomen' because they died without ever marrying, and others 'lifecycle singlewomen' because they lived single for 10, 15, or 20 years before they married. In England, in 1377, one third of women were never–married (this figure does not include widows), and in Zurich, a hundred years later, almost one half of all women had never taken husbands. These numbers mean that, again, the way we've conceptualised pre–industrial European society in terms of conjugal households of husbands, wives and children is neat and tidy but not at all accurate. If you consider never–married women, bachelors, widowers, and widows, the majority of adults in many parts of Europe – especially northern Europe – were not married at any given moment.

My own research on singlewomen right now is heading in two directions. First, I'm looking at how singlewomen were represented in songs. Second, I'm looking at the challenge of constructing a lesbian history for

the Middle Ages. I'm not actually doing research on lesbians, but I'm trying to think about new approaches to get at what's a very difficult problem. In strict terms, there were only a handful of women – maybe a dozen – who were noted in medieval records as involved in same–sex sexual relations. How can we write a history from such numbers?

Mendelson and Crawford have done some fascinating work on two women in the seventeenth century, Amy and Arabella.

Yes, that's a wonderful case. The cases of women actually having same–sex relationships are very few but, even worse, they usually play out according to the script used by Amy and Arabella. That is, one of the partners asserts innocence and accuses the other of being a man–like woman or even a hermaphrodite. How can we build a productive history out of cases like that? These cases are certainly important, but we have to find ways to break out of the obsession with being sure about the fact of same–sex genital contact. So I've developed a term 'lesbian–like', and I'm trying to elaborate on how that term might be useful for us in approaching the past.

With so much research, how do you balance this with teaching? Do you see a conflict between teaching and research?

When I'm on leave I miss teaching. Of course, there are things about teaching that I don't miss: having to work up syllabi and having to grade. But I love being in the classroom, and I've learnt from my students. In fact, in the introduction to my book on brewing, I tell about how a question from a student shaped that project. Up until that moment in the classroom – it was about the time I got tenure – I *did* see a conflict between teaching and research. In those early years, I had to get my first book out, and I had enormous teaching responsibilities. When that student posed her question, I realised that even contexts very removed from my research could feed back into my research. Having people come at the same things from different perspectives – either because they're younger, or not as clearly exposed, or exposed to the material in different ways – is very refreshing. So I really enjoy teaching. I think one of the reasons I so much enjoyed writing the book about Cecilia Penifader was that it was a form of teaching, albeit on paper – that is, it was the same sort of process of trying to think about how best to get certain ideas across. That's always a challenge, and when I succeed at it, it is always a pleasure.

And finally, what would you like to be doing in 20 years time, in or outside of the historical profession?

Well, in 20 years time, I hope to be retired. I hope Cynthia and I will spend half the year in a flat in London and half the year somewhere in the US. I assume we'll be doing research as well but we'll be retired from teaching – which means retired from committee work, administrative work,

and all the paperwork that drags down academic life. I'll miss teaching, but I'll not miss the rest!

Notes

[1]Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998.
[2]Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1989.
[3]Ibid., also Louise A. Tilly, Gay Gulickson and Judith M. Bennett's discussion in *Social Science History*, vol.13, no.4, 1989, pp. 438–480.
[4]See, for example, Judith M. Bennett, '"History that Stands Still": Women's Work in the European Past', *Feminist Studies*, vol.14, no.2, 1988, pp.269–283.
[5]Louise A. Tilly, 'Gender, Women's History, and Soial History', *Social Science History*, vol.13, no.4, 1989, p.458.