

# Writing in the Disciplines

## History Interview: Prof. John Belshaw

**W.F. Garrett-Petts:** What are the issues when you move into a history class? What are the differences that you see when you move from sociology to history, or English to history? What are the demands of a history course in terms of writing, that are different or distinct in some way?

**English 303 Student:** Everyone always wonders, 'what about footnoting?' Especially if we're going to discuss and focus on what first year students expect and what the upper-level students expect, you know 'footnoting', what are the guidelines?

**Prof. John Belshaw:** Well, there are a lot of good, published ones for starters on that. And there are a number of cheap guides you can buy. We have one that we stock in the bookstore that is by? Doles, and so that's very handy. The key thing to keep on, historians really annoy all the other disciplines because we've stuck to the rather older style. There is a very high bound element, a conservative element to the discipline. We aren't really receptive to a lot of change in terms of what we do to writing. What's interesting is that we do a lot of different things in terms of research, and we're very adaptable and fluid, but when it comes to the actual process of writing, historians are fairly conservative. Footnoting is the area where we've been lambasted basically by students and by publishers. History books have got this great long string of notes at the back, or endnotes, typically now.

**Garrett-Petts:** Well, I can tell this discussion is going to be confessional in nature and you're going to be apologizing for history, but it seems that we've already started our session so let me welcome you to the third in our series on "Writing in the Disciplines." Today we're joined by John Belshaw, professor of history at UCC (Thompson Rivers University) and you're talking about footnotes, and if it is dead you know. It died in 1985 according to the MLA, so what's it doing showing up in your history essay?

**Belshaw:** Saving a lot of ink basically.

**Garrett-Petts:** Don't historians use computers?

**Belshaw:** Yes, they do. And that's just an easy "paste" command. You can just put ibids all through. Its opposite actually survives too and if you look hard, you can see small herds of items working their way through end note pages. Walksits are all but extinct. What historians are focused on about the footnotes, the standard rule has to be 'you have to be able to find the source if the person citing.' If they haven't given you enough clues, haven't given you enough indication that it doesn't work. Whereas a sociologist will draw on a set of secondary material, something by Vabe or something by Dirckheim, whatever, and they can parenthetically do that in the text. Because of the nature of historians' resources, the manuscripts we use, photographs, web page stuff, whatever, they tend to require a lot more detail. And how are you going to find a specific letter between a schoolteacher in the Nicola Valley to a mother in Nova Scotia that's contained within a set of papers dealing with the establishment of a private school in the Nicola Valley. It's held in the private papers of a certain collection that's all been herded together under the provincial secretary's papers. Unless you've got a footnote that is fairly elaborate and detailed, anyone reading your stuff isn't going to be able to find it. And the rule of thumb here is, I think a really altruistic and generous one, that is, I do research that I want to share with you. So that even if this is a minor part in my argument, it's evidence for your paper. So, you should be able to chase that up. I want to share with you what I have found so that it can be made useful for others.

**Garrett-Petts:** On the basis of what you're saying then, is it a reasonable assumption that a student coming in in first or second year into a history course better pay attention to such things as documentation style and footnoting?

**Belshaw:** Very much so. There are two reasons for doing that. One is that it's a big part of the discipline. The generosity aspect is important. Sharing your research is important. Secondly, you want to identify who you're borrowing idea is from, that's academic honesty. Going through that process I think is a way in which students find out when they've actually had their own idea, when they've reached their own conclusions: 'hey, this is may idea.' It's one which is shared by Donald Creighton or Harold Innis, or whatever. But 'that's my idea.' And I can also identify in footnotes who agrees with me.

**Garrett-Petts:** This is something that, this seems to me, we've been addressing in the last couple of interviews as well. First with English and then especially with sociology. This notion of 'my idea' or 'my topic.' Many students, many of my students, and I think it's a general impression I'm getting from our discussions here, questions whether they can have their idea or their topic when they are writing for an audience that extensively knows more than they do in the subject area. That they kind of mime or mimic what goes on in the field, but they don't feel an ownership of those ideas. Is it possible for a student in first through fourth year to come up with something that they can call 'my idea' or 'my topic'?

**Belshaw:** Well, I think in history, one of the things you are trying to do in an essay is present a case. This is a fairly well-established practice amongst historians, to approach the problem from this angle, to say 'imagine yourself as the prosecuting attorney.' You are trying to convince the jury that this person is guilty, or this indeed has happened, or events happen in this order, and these were the important elements in these events. What I try to do when I am phrasing essay questions is to posit the question in such a way, so the student has to come up with their own particular case. So, account for the failure of the Northwest Rebellion or something like that. Well, what you have to do at that point is sift through the material and decide 'what do you think are the important elements.' And if you read only one book, then yes, you will have the same important elements that that one author had. But if you check two or three, you will find that of course, there is quite a bit of discussion about this. And at the end of the day, you have to decide. And that is your idea. Your first idea goes down on the very first page. It is my perception that these are the important events. These were the elements that really mattered, and please convict on this basis. So, you come in with your own ideas. It's important to see the student in the essay not just the sources.

**Garrett-Petts:** You're asking students to move easy within the harness of an assigned question. And it's your working assumption that a novice historian can find some particular detail to examine within that broader question that you've assigned?

**Belshaw:** I think so, because we don't make them so narrow that they can't find, I hope anyway, three or four students might disagree with this, 'it's so damn narrow I couldn't work'. There are always a couple of different avenues one can pursue and if one wants to look at, with history, the advantage of dealing with a large temporal period generally is that you can compare changes over decades. You can compare changes, historical changes,

as they pertain to a single individual. Individuals change over time. That's why biographies are worth having. We'd be very old-fashioned, but that's what's really interesting about it; its personality and character changes. But what are the important changes there? Ideas develop change. So, within that I think it's possible for even a first-year student to find that defining moment, that turning point in an event and set along that. Well, what was the turning point in World War I? What was the turning point in the fortunes of the liberal party in the 1970s and 80s?'

**Garrett-Petts:** Let's turn over here and find out if you're convinced. Do you have enough freedom to take ownership of ideas within a course like a history course?

**Student:** I think it depends on the freedom you mean. You mentioned this is what I'm presenting as a first or second-year course because I know we're not exactly at too much liberty to put the personal into it.

**Belshaw:** The personal pronoun?

**Student:** The personal pronoun, yeah.

**Belshaw:** Well, the use of the personal pronoun is something we talk about a fair bit. Whether or not I should have "I" or if this is my idea. Historians, again being fairly conservative animals, tend to say, 'well it's your paper'. I know it's "I feel". So, you don't need this; it's redundant so don't do it. But having said that there are times when that can be a useful tool. It's not a rigid rule but I think it's a useful one, particularly for undergraduates, to try and objectify the question. Try and approach it within something like laboratory conditions.

**Garrett-Petts:** There's a distinction though to made isn't there between using the first-person pronoun and having a personal investment in the topic that you're writing on.

**Belshaw:** I think you can, in the assembly of your evidence. You've got your personal, your personal involvement. That can come through directly in the writing. One does see from time to time, 'what I have found to be the most important thing in this list of important factors is this.' But ultimately, it's the way you assemble the information. There are a number of nice lines in E.H. Carr's book, *What is History?*, that I like to cite. The line, well there are a number of lines, but one or two that come to mind, the line from Pirandello: "A fact is like a sack, it won't stand up until you put something in it." Well, what did you put into that fact? That's your investment. You've put something into that. Let's let the facts speak for themselves. But we have to have a speaker's list, don't we? We can't just let them all crowd to the front of the stage. We give them the speaker's list. We say, 'well these are the facts I'm going to let speak on behalf of this question.' That's your personal involvement. You've made that choice.

**Garrett-Petts:** Well, here you are spouting literature, quoting Pirandello. How close is History to English studies. I know that you believe, from our previous conversations, that history is a narrative form.

**Belshaw:** Yes, it is.

**Garrett-Petts:** That's something that we didn't hear from the sociologists we were talking to last day. What do you mean by a narrative art form?

**Belshaw:** Well history is the only discipline that really staddles Humanities and Social Sciences – almost perfectly. If you look at the, as you know the UCC (TRU) general B.A. Program, you've got to have so many social sciences and so many humanities courses. At least I think that used to be the case. I think that's still in place. And in the history department there are, at UBC in their calendar, they're almost half-and- half. And we went through this one year and we said, 'well the twentieth century history courses, they had one in Germany, the U.S., Britain and Canada, two were humanities, two were social science courses. What it really came down to was the personality of the person, the individual teaching the course. Straddling the two means that historians focus very heavily on what can be described very cautiously as 'objective evidence'. But also presenting the story in a coherent fashion. And historians do use novels, they do use literature a fair bit, as resources. So we're very aware of the demands of language and the implications of

language. So we want to tell a good story. It's about telling stories at the end of the day. You assemble your facts from the social science perspective. Bring them over, trying to...

**Garrett-Petts:** It must be difficult, for again a novice coming in, to sort out then the social science component and the humanities component. Because they do seem to dovetail. Even in your own writing, Dr. Belshaw, which I have a sample of.

**Belshaw:** Here's one I cooked earlier.

**Garrett-Petts:** I noticed, for example, this is entitled *Cradle to Grave: An examination of Demographic Behavior on Two British Columbian Frontiers*, by John Douglas Belshaw. The resume?

**Belshaw:** Abstract.

**Garrett-Petts:** ...the abstract begins. This paper begins an exploration of British Columbia's historical demography. It assesses rates of nuptiality? The findings indicate a greater role for non-native women. Fertility rates are described well. It's all in the passive voice. It sounds very much like a social science report. But we only have to go one page over and we get some very fine writing that somebody in an English department would recognize as being, indeed, poetic here. Listen to these lines: "No factor, so fully fashioned nor so ably mirrored frontier life, as did population change. Influxes of immigrants, however, are only part of the equation and a preliminary part at that." There's a nice kind of informal sense there. Very conversational. And then, one page over, you begin to tell a story, of the pair, looking at Nanaimo and Kamloops as these two regions: "Of the pair Nanaimo is far better known to historians than Kamloops. Its colorful history of violent and protracted industrial disputes, larger-than-life characters, like the mine owning Dunsmuir clan, and the town's success as a settlement by the 1870s, have attracted both historians and playwrights." And so, you go on. Is there a kind of a split personality to writing history papers that reveals itself? As you play off narrative, because that's clearly narrative but I'm getting wrapped up now in a story in a way I wasn't from the abstract which sounded quite dull.

**Belshaw:** The abstract is meant to sound dull.

**Garrett-Petts:** And you've succeeded.

**Belshaw:** I've succeeded. Yes. On all front, a dull abstract and an interesting text. Now there you are. For historians it doesn't seem to us like a split personality. The research part, I suppose, is the point at which you become very much the social scientist. Now I'm at the moment, in the midst of going through material on population history between Kamloops at the turn of the century. Trying to determine different household formation patterns. It's fairly arid stuff. We've got it all on dBase IV, we've translated it into SPSS and knocked the numbers back and forth. We get out the pencil and add it all up.

**Garrett-Petts:** You don't sound enthusiastic about it.

**Belshaw:** At this stage I'm not. Think again what this is. Work on that. But once I've got all that data together then I get into the fun stuff which is the writing of. That's much more pleasurable, much more enjoyable. It's the artistic part of it. And I think one the attractive things about history, for me, is that you get to do that great detective work which is really interesting; I find exciting. But you also get to write. You get to use language in an interesting way.

**Garrett-Petts:** So, this is this narrative art that you're referring to. It is generally true, then, that writing is important to historians. The way that you phrase things, the way you present your ideas?

**Belshaw:** Absolutely. If you look at the leading historians, the people everybody admires, people like Eric Hobsbawm, the late E.P. Thompson, Fernand Braudel, what distinguishes their work, I think as much as anything else, it isn't just the thought processes, the absolute razor-sharp analysis, it's also their use of language. It's the way in which they draw on literature, the way in which they create images, use fresh metaphors. Do you want me to read an example?

**Garrett-Petts:** Sure.

**Belshaw:** I have some I brought with me. A Canadian, French and British sample here. First from Working Families, this is by Patrina Bradbury. It's about life and industrializing Montreal. And what she's describing here is the way in which people managed on stretched wages: "In downtown Montreal, pigs and fowl were cheaper to purchase and to keep than a cow. They cost virtually nothing to raise as they scavenge for themselves in the courtyards and at the roadside. And they require little space being kept in yards, basements or even inside houses. Unlike gardening, keeping animals is not limited to families with plenty of space. In some fairly densely populated streets families in rear houses, duplexes and row houses were keeping both pigs and cows. A walk along George or Catherine Street in St. Anne Ward, one of the densest areas of pig-keeping was as likely to involve skirting pigs or cows and their droppings as it was to encounter the unruly playing children of the neighborhood." For me this conjures up a wonderful image, a wonderful, very smelly image actually of this particular neighborhood. It's not simply a concentration of numbers. We're looking at history from below. The mass of the population. Those people who don't leave behind their diaries, journals, a lot of correspondence, we have to go into the social sciences avenue. You're looking at census returns, government reports and the rest. And what she's done with the material is created an image of a place. They're scavenging for themselves in the courtyards and at the roadsides. The image is there.

**Garrett-Petts:** It sounds like a passage from D.H. Lawrence.

**Belshaw:** Yes, it does.

**Garrett-Petts:** It reads like literature.

**Belshaw:** Just wait. This is a passage from Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie. A monumental piece on *Montaillou*, which is a little parish in the Pyrenees in the Middle Ages. Ladurie's interest in the Spanish inquisition, sorry, the inquisition generally. And the inquisitors left behind



tremendous records of life in these little communities. They were very remote and like most of the Annales school in France, he's concerned to describe how human behavior fits within larger environmental factors. People moving up and down the valleys and the hillsides as the seasons change. Following the flock, the herds and the rest. I was saying to Will earlier, I picked this off the shelf because I really like this book, and I go back to it regularly and it's flipped opened, and it came to this page. It's always something to quote: "But it was not really illness that mattered in upper Aréage, that was only an epiphenomenon. What mattered was death." It's a nice forward sentence: "What mattered was death." "Death unadorned without fine phrases. Falling like an executioner's knife without warning or at least without any warning recorded by our witnesses." This is great: "What mattered was death." It's a good, great point.

**Garrett-Petts:** You guys are setting high standards.

**Belshaw:** We are you know. Very demanding. Even more literate, I think, is Eric Hobsbawm, who is, if you don't know, God. He would reject the title of course. Hobsbawm is probably one of the best know writer in history in the English language right now. He came out with a book about a year and a half ago called *Age of Extremes*, which looks at the twentieth century as a whole. And if you only buy one history book, if you only ever read one history book from front to back, this is it. This is the one you have got to read. It's your century and it's brilliant. He's a left-wing historian, a socialist, who has managed to retain that dedication to the left throughout all the liberal stuff, the witch hunts, the 1956, the hunger and invasion. This kind of stuff. He's writing a piece... here's an article that came out in 1958 called, *History in the Dark Satanic Mills*. It deals with the debate with what he calls the "optimist " or the "cheerful" school of the standard living debate which said that basically things were getting better and better throughout the industrial revolution and the "pessimists" or the "glums" who believed that, in fact, things were getting pretty damn bad for the masses. Let us sum up. In Thomas Peacock's novel, *Crochet Castle* published in 1831: There is a moment when the discussions of the upper-class characters assembled in Chain Mill Hall are interrupted by a crowd at the door. Captain Swing has come. A revenge of the working classes. And the miserable farm laborers have risen. The Reverend Doctor Foliote, an intelligent Tory says, "here is proof of the March of Mind. The progress about which the capitalists are always bragging: the peasant war." Mr. McQuiddy, the Scots economist, who stands for the pure ideology of capitalism says, "This is impossible. How can the peasant war and the March of Mind be brought together?" Mr. Chain Mill, the

romantic reactionary says, "The cause is the same in the dark ages as in the present: poverty and despair." And Dr. Foliate sums it up: "It is the natural result, Mr. McQuiddy, of that system of state seamanship, which your science of bourgeois political economy upholds. Putting the crew on short allowances and doubling the rations of the officers in a sure way of making a mutiny on board a ship in distress." Mr. Quiddy: "That is how England looked to intelligent members of the ruling classes in the period which is now ineffectually 'whitewashed'". The scription is correct, though you may quarrel with the analysis. Nothing the cheerful school has done has invalidated it. But in case we are tempted by these quotations by ruling class sources to get mistaken ideas about those who have made them, it is just worth quoting the continuation of the dialogue: "We have not time to discuss cause and effect now," said Dr. Foliate, "let us get rid of the enemy." And the assembled members of the ruling class dropped their analyses, take up arms and rush out of Chain Mill Hall to scatter the miserable laborers into the night.

**Garrett-Petts:** You're obviously in love with this stuff, aren't you.

**Belshaw:** I love it.

**Garrett-Petts:** We can't stop you from reading it

**Belshaw:** I'll stop now.

**Garrett-Petts:** But you've moved from D.H. Lawrence to Henry Fielding here, it sounds like, in terms of the presentation.

**Belshaw:** And most historians tend to go on to novelists.

**Garrett-Petts:** A novelistic style?

**Belshaw:** Well, an individual novelist who is generally influential on historian style, you see them being quoted repeatedly. Sometimes bad novelists, sometimes good novelists. And most historians model themselves on another senior historian. Most of us try to be Eric Hobsbawm but we'll settle for something a little more modest.

**Garrett-Petts:** Something slightly below God.

**Belshaw:** Something below God, yes that's right.

**Garrett-Petts:** We've only got another few minutes left.

**Belshaw:** Sorry, I used up a lot.

**Garrett-Petts:** Yes, you certainly have. We've only got a few minutes left here and maybe this is a good point to turn it back to the classroom setting and begin asking how these issues that you've mapped out and the field that you've mapped out, which is attractive but probably intimidating at the same time, how does one gain entry into that? Maybe a good way to ask it is a question that we've been floating before in here, and that is, what's the difference between expectations of a first-year student as opposed to expectations of a fourth-year student. So maybe that will give us some sense of the escalating demands of history.

**Belshaw:** Okay. I think one of the disadvantages histories suffers under, labors under, is that while in school, in high schools and from elementary school, students are exposed to novels quite a bit. They're very seldom exposed to history. And so, first-years do come into the class and think, 'Oh I've got to read a history book. I haven't had to do this before. We had a social studies book which had a chapter on history and that's as close as we came to it.' And so, in the first instance, the main thing we will accomplish in the first-year course is to introduce students to history, introduce them to critical thinking, and in the writing of papers, to introduce them to the idea of organizing thoughts in this analytical way to present a case but also to...

**Garrett-Petts:** Analysis plus description.

**Belshaw:** ...analysis plus description. It would have to tell the story too. For the fourth-years, we're looking for, I think on the whole, certainly in my classes, we're looking for a more varied use of resources, a more critical approach to primary sources and secondary sources. That's really what makes up the difference. I expect first year students to say, 'but look, it says here in this book that Louis Riel was mad.' Yeah, but it says in this one that he wasn't. That's fine, if they've cited their sources: 'Louis Riel was crazy; here's my source.' Fine. By the fourth, I expect students to take those documents to task a bit.

**Garrett-Petts:** This has become a familiar theme in the three interviews that we've done. The notion of negotiating your own perspective among competing views and competing perspectives. Where would that go in the paper? In the introduction?

**Belshaw:** It depends. A good paper begins with a, in history, begins with a very straightforward statement. Can I read one thing?

**Garrett-Petts:** Sure.

**Belshaw:** I brought a sample with me. Purely anonymous. "The story of the Tranquille Sanitarium is the story of the fight against Tuberculosis." Bang. You know what the story is about. This is the story of the Tranquille Sanitarium and it's about TB. "Spans half a century in British Columbia. Often the history and the eventual success of the institution has been written with a focus on the latter half of its lifetime when modern procedures for treating TB became so advanced that it ceased to be feared and eventually lead to the institutions demise. Was Tranquille the success the narratives portray?" It's about the Tranquille Sanitarium and the question is was it that successful. Great.

**Garrett-Petts:** So you have a clear sense of direction.

**Belshaw:** You know exactly where you're going to go. The question that will be asked and then the student lays out how they're going to approach that. Looking at organizing it in terms of different administrative structures and different time periods.

**Garrett-Petts:** Where are these competing viewpoints though.

**Belshaw:** Well, there's the competing viewpoint right there, at the start. The more contemporary the tail end of the story of Tranquille is one that says it was a great success. If we look at the early period what we see is a horrific death rate from TB. Probably not the right place to put the Sanitarium in the first place. The more presentist view is it was a great thing; we were lucky to have it. Now let's take the historical perspective. Throughout the history of something like Tranquille Sanitarium or UCC (TRU) or any other big institution, there are always going to be people saying we're doing a great job, we're doing a great job, we're doing a great job. Part of the historian's job when analyzing institutions is to get under that and see if there were competing viewpoints, and of course there were.

**Garrett-Petts:** Writing a history paper then, you must indeed yourself in competing viewpoints. You have to be to be comfortable amidst possible confusion, initially, as you're sorting out your topic.

**Belshaw:** Yeah, very much so. And if it something to do with, well, the area which has seen the most growth in the last while, discourse analysis, the competing views very often come right down to just the words we use to describe a particular event. Was it a rebellion, was it an uprising? Are we talking about a sovereignty association referendum or a separatism referendum. Those kinds of issues weighing which language is used quite apart from the degenerative racial aspect of language. Those represent competing views in and of themselves. I did a paper at a conference in October where I was looking at the language that was used in population discourses in B.C. And what came up more often than not was when people said they were doing population history basically they were just talking about "populating" history. It was just a question of the accumulation of numbers. They were standing at this end of history and saying, 'look at all the people, what a great successful population history we've got.' Turn the telescope around. So you start with those conflicting views that are already embedded in the language.

**Garrett-Petts:** Well, I hope this has sorted out some conflicting views about writing history papers. Is that too bad a segway?

**Belshaw:** That's a good segway.

**Garrett-Petts:** Thank you very much, John, for joining us. Thank you, the panel.