A Historian’s Path

An Interview with Professor Mary Lindemann, Former President of the American Historical Association and German Studies Association

Nash Christian
Central College

I had the honor of talking virtually with Professor Mary Lindemann in May 2021. Professor Lindemann is a Professor of Early Modern History, German History, and History of Medicine at the University of Miami as well as the former President of the American Historical Association (2020) and the German Studies Association (2019). We discussed a variety of topics, including how her passion for history has driven her studies and career and pandemics in history. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Nash
I'd love to start out by just hearing a bit more about yourself. What is your background? What got you interested in history in the first place?

Professor Lindemann
Well, I'll start with a little background, not that it's particularly interesting or exciting. I am the first person in my family to go to college and certainly the first person in my family to get a PhD or an academic job. I think that’s “historically” accurate, although I won't swear to this on a stack of anything. I am also, I believe, the first person in my family to graduate high school. People often ask me the question, “How did you first get interested in history?”

or “What motivated you to study history?” I've often thought about that question, and I feel that I don’t really have a good answer. Everybody says it was a good teacher or reading particular books. I had those good teachers and I certainly consumed a lot of books, especially novels. But I think that the basis for my interest in history goes even further back than that. And I think I have to blame my grandfather.

My grandfather used to read both history stories and mythology to me. I like them both equally. At one time, I actually thought of becoming a classicist and the *World Book Encyclopedia* played a central role in my early “education.” The *World Book Encyclopedia* was something like the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, although it was also more pedagogical in tone and content, and it was a bit more directed toward self-education and self-improvement. Besides the regular definitions of what crystalline substances were or who John I of England was, it also had stories. There were stories from Greek mythology. There were stories from Norse mythology. There were stories about the Napoleonic Wars. I don't mean just narratives but stories, like excerpts from *War and Peace* written at a level that made sense in the context of what the *World Book Encyclopedia* wanted to achieve. Our house was overrun with books. My mother and my grandmother were especially voracious readers of historical fiction, and I can remember my grandmother slowly wending her way several times through the entire multi-volume d’Artagnan histories of Alexander Dumas. So I was introduced to all of that world at a young age. Although professional historians often sneer at historical fiction, it's not a bad way to start. I can remember a medievalist friend of mine who just loved Tolkien and all mythologies. So, to some extent, the process of reading and the facility with which I very quickly learned to read made it rather easy for me to become a historian.

Nash
I read that you had originally planned on majoring in pre-med or something medical, and during your undergraduate time, you decided to switch. Why? Was it just you loved history that much, or was it something else?

Professor Lindemann
Again, it's one of those things that when you go back and you try to reconstruct it, you can't find that “aha” moment. I think a couple of things came into play. I had a terrible time learning calculus. I was just dreadful at it. Organic chemistry just bored me to tears, absolutely to tears. I had a pretty good organic chemistry teacher, I think, but it just was so painful. Of course, I had to take it if I wanted to get into med school. These were the days when you had distribution requirements. You had to take a certain history course and English course. My history teachers were good. Some of them were a little weird as we all tend to be, but many were excellent. The decision to pursue history was not sudden; I just decided that I really didn't want to do organic chemistry and then analytical chemistry and then biology and biochemistry and then whatever else was necessary to get into med school.

The other thing that happened was that, in college, I got very interested in the history of medicine. If you've seen my publications, you know that I've written quite extensively on history of medicine. The University of Cincinnati, which is my alma mater, had a very good

historian of medicine, who was quite famous with both a national and international reputation. He was weird, but he was interesting, so that allowed me to shift painlessly from medicine to the history of medicine. I think that a lot of people have very clear moments when everything changed. They experience something like a mental earthquake, and they decided, "I want to do this." I don't think that was what happened to me. I dabbled a lot, but dabbling a lot isn't a bad thing pedagogically. I took languages. I read a lot of English literature. I did some philosophy. I did some social psychology. I thought that I would use social psychology in studying history but decided that it was too reductionist. I can't even say in college that I was a particularly great student. I was a good student in many things and an okay student in other things. But the fact that I did read a lot of literature, I think, made an enormous difference in my life and in my career.

Nash
You originally were focusing more on pre-med, but then you decided to pursue medical history. What drove you to make a focus on history into your career?

Professor Lindemann
I wrote an honors thesis in my senior year, then went to graduate school, and I think that process, almost by osmosis, made me into a historian. I wish I could give you some really good intellectual reasons for my choices, but what I can say is that I was always curious about people and why they acted and thought as they did. History for me is about people, individuals not structures, decisions not trends. With the kind of broad basis, if also somewhat eclectic, liberal arts education I had, I could have done something else. I could probably have done literature. I maybe could have done philosophy. (I doubt it.) Becoming a historian also gave me opportunities that I never had when I was young. I was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, and I rarely had been out of Ohio until my late twenties. Graduate school gave me the opportunity to go to Germany, which was just wonderful. I spent a lot of years of my life in Germany. I love it! I love going back! My first real scholarly experience there was when I went to do my dissertation research; I almost didn't come back. I seriously considered staying in Germany and making my career there. Now I return to Germany as frequently as possible.

I'm not sure I'd always admit this, but I think there's a lifestyle involved in academia as well. I don't mean a lifestyle like you see in lifestyle magazines, but rather a sense of how you want to spend your time and how you want to do your work. In the life of a professional historian, there's a lot of time you spend alone, staring at a computer screen, or in an archive freezing to death because nobody's turned the heat on. If you're not good at that, if you're not good at self-correcting, it's probably not a good life-choice. However, I'm pretty good at all those things. I remember one of my early professors said, "I like to file." I thought "Oh god," what happened to this poor guy to make filing the light of his life. Then I suddenly discovered that I, too, actually like to file, or at least like doing the organization necessary to write a good book, for example. And, as weird as this sounds, I find it a creative not a mechanical activity. I like to move things around and rearrange them into new patterns. Of course, I do it now on a computer screen.

Nash

You mentioned studying and doing research in Germany. What drove you to Germany to do your research?

Professor Lindemann
That choice actually was an intellectual one. Thus far, I feel like I have sounded very little like a "real intellectual" or scholar. I became very interested in Germany when I was in graduate school in the 1970s. Social history was, of course, the end all and be all at that time. That's not so true anymore, but at the time (the late 60s and 70s), it dominated the discipline. There was a lot of interest in doing good and in writing history that would help change the world. I am less sure of any of that now; however, it did make a difference at the time. Thus, I became interested in the history of poverty and poor relief. I found out that one of the first great municipal poor reliefs was created in Hamburg. It started at the beginning of the eighteenth century and then crystallized towards the end of the century. I thought, "Ah, nobody's worked on this yet." Thus, I combined an interest in going somewhere like Hamburg, where I'd never been, with the thrill of looking at original sources that not that many people had worked on. That was my first book. That is one reason I went to Germany. Invariably, every German scholar, every German professor with a German name or family background is asked, "Did you want to study Germany because of your German roots?" No, not really. "Well, don't you want to look up your relatives?" No, not really.

Nash
I'd like to dig a bit deeper on the subject of archives and the physical manuscripts that they hold. Over the past few decades, we have seen a pretty steady transition to more digital databases, websites, collections, etc. Now, you can just look up sources on your computer screen and not have to go to a physical location. What do we lose with that transition? Do you think it's positive or negative?

Professor Lindemann
The Germans have a great word for this. It's called "jein." It's a combination of "ja" and "nein," yes and no. Look, there is no denying that in many respects, the digitization of sources has made research possible for people who could not do it before. It is particularly important and useful for people who are at small universities and colleges that do not have the resources and the superb library facilities of a Princeton, Harvard, Berkeley, or other premier institution. It makes it feasible for those people to do primary research. Even better, it makes it possible for students to do primary research in ways they never would have been able to do before these sources became so readily available. It also makes it very possible for people who have other obligations to do original research. People get married. They have children, buy a dog, acquire a house, or they don't have the money to go off for six months or a year to snuggle down in an archive. They can now do things in sources that they never could do before.

However, there are disadvantages, too. I think some of the disadvantages are inherent in the way things are digitized, while some are misperceptions by the people who use digital sources. Remember that somebody (or several somebodies) has to make the decision about what gets digitized and what doesn't. There are many, many things left out of digital

sources. For example, you might digitize all the parish records for a small town. That's great, convenient, and useful. Digitized serial records like notary records are wonderful because you can continually go back and check things. And then you have the complete archive (or a huge chunk of it) literally at the click of your mouse. For example, I've worked extensively in the notary archives in the Amsterdam archive, which are now digitized. It's very easy. I can just go back to those any time and play around with new ideas. Little is missing even though it is never "all there." However, for the vast majority of archives, when you consider the incredible volume of resources that we're talking about here, you can only digitize a certain amount, often a very small sliver. People pick and choose what they put into a digital archive. Now, let's not be silly about this. Archivists have always picked and chosen what is going to be preserved and not preserved. What's in the archive building or the archive collection is also a subsection and "someone's" choice.

However, people who work in archives go there and sit down and order up the documents and get the dust on their fingers. I think some students and graduate students make the mistake of thinking that digitized sources are "an archive." It's not the archive; it's part of an archive and a collection of *some* sources. It can be a very important, of course. The other thing that has happened, which I felt is also sometimes pernicious, is the business of using a camera to take digital pictures of documents. There's nothing essentially wrong with spending your archive time going "click, click, click," although it is crushingly boring. Taking a digital picture of a document that is very important allows you want to go back to it when you need to do so. Often, however, one of two things happen to graduate students who take lots of pictures in the archives. One, they don't have what they really need, but they lack the time and the money to return. Two, they don't use what they've acquired as pictures and have, therefore, wasted a great deal of time. I think that taking pictures works best for people who already know what they're doing and specifically what they need. When I left the archive in Potsdam in the summer of 2018, there were some sources I needed to look at. I knew it was a vast collection, but I knew what I needed because I'd already done a great deal of work in other critical holdings. I sat there for a week and scanned things that I knew I wanted to evaluate. It wasn't just scanning every document that I thought I *might* use; I was scanning what I knew I needed. And, in fact, I'm probably not going to use every one of those documents or maybe not even a quarter of them.

I also think it is very important for historians to go to archives. If you're working in someplace besides the United States, or even if you're working in the United States, it's important to be in the society in which these documents were created and preserved. I am working with some peculiar documents right now that are very fragmentary and that are written in the most horrible German imaginable. Terrible spelling. I don't think I would be able to do that now had I not gained, over many years, a facility with the language coming from speaking to people, not just reading documents. You thus learn a lot about the society and that's also important. The other reason is that you often read something in an archival document, and you think "That's interesting; I'd like to know more." If you're staring at a computer screen in Houston, Boise, Chapel Hill, Sacramento, or Iowa City, what are you going to do? You can't follow that idea up without going back to the sources, that is, back to the archive. But sitting there in the archives, I can go pull out the inventory and pursue the lead right then and there. This has happened to me many times and often totally reshaped

my project, and for the better. I stumble over something, then follow it up and the thread, the skinny little thread that I thought might just make for an interesting footnote, turns out to be a chapter or even an entire book. There's another advantage to "doing time" in the archives. To make your time in the archives productive, you have to understand how it's been put together. You acquire that knowledge being there. Digital screen is digital screen. It all looks alike. Not that I don't use digitized records. I use them all the time. I spend half my life on the internet. I just think there's pros and cons and there is no single right way.

The other thing all people who've worked in the archives have experienced is the first week of archival humiliation where you know nothing. I've worked in a lot of archives, so I sort of know how to "get around." Yet every time I go into one, I screw something up. I've ordered something incorrectly; I've sat in the wrong seat; or I've sneezed in the wrong direction. Each archive has its own rules and etiquette, even its own quirks and foibles. Some staff person invariably swoops down on me and says, "You can't do that," like I knew. Once you get past that, you kind of become an insider, and you enjoy having gained a little expertise. It's fun, if it is also at times frustrating, cold, and uncomfortable. If you are unlucky, you have somebody sitting at your table who needed the bath about a week ago. Archivists run the gamut from extremely helpful and extremely knowledgeable to being pains in the posterior portions.

Nash
This summer I'm interning at an archive in a museum in Wisconsin called the Hoard Dairyman Museum. It deals a lot with agriculture, specifically dairy farming, but it's also a historical society for our local region. I would love to ask, what do you recommend are some of the things I should try and take away from working at an archive?

Professor Lindemann
Well, you'll certainly learn a little bit about the ins and outs of how archives function. Now, a small specialized archive is not the same as a big national archive, but that's fine. That's what it's supposed be, and you will still learn how archivists think and think about how to organize materials. The other thing you'll learn to do is how to find things. Finding things in archives is not always easy. If you start at a little one, it becomes clearer more rapidly. The bigger ones work about the same way. German archives are still organized by the Prussian system, and once you've cracked that, you kind of get it. Get the people who work there to show you how things are organized and how they make choices about what to save and what not to save. That makes you a better researcher and will really give you a lot of insight that will be very valuable to you, if you ever go on to do this more professionally.

I'm interested that it's a dairyman/historical society and archive. Agricultural history is one of the most neglected and important histories that people just don't work on enough. It's tremendously important. Cows are important. Pigs are important. I don't just mean writing about how to feed pigs. For example, one of the best books I've read recently on medieval history and is titled *Legions of Pigs*, which demonstrates how absolutely critical swine were, not only to the food chain in the medieval world, but to the whole conception of how their world worked. It is fascinating. Who would ever think that someone could write a 400-page history of pigs that's absolutely riveting?

Nash
That is great advice and insight. I'd like to discuss your time as president of the AHA (American Historical Association). What has being the president of the AHA meant to you both personally and professionally?

Professor Lindemann
I remember when I was contacted by the nominating committee. I was in Germany at the time. They called me and they said, "We'd like to nominate you for president elect," and I said, "Do you have the wrong number?" Then it slowly sunk in. Being picked by a nominating committee of people who are not just German historians or historians of medicine was a great honor.

Being president of the AHA also gave me the chance to meet many people that I normally wouldn't meet. I have connections with a lot of Europeanists and German historians. I meet a lot of early modernists. However, I don't normally encounter a lot of non-Western historians. I don't interact with people who work on Native and Indigenous people. It's not because I'm dismissive of them. It's that our paths rarely cross. As president, you also become extremely aware of various intellectual currents as well as the various political currents within the profession.

It is a bit of an education at times; suddenly you think, "Whoops, I didn't understand that at all." But that's how you learn. You also see how the profession works. The AHA plays a great role in fostering scholarship and teaching, but it also is involved in advocacy. We have done a great deal of advocacy at both the national and international levels over the last two years. We worked to avoid history departments being closed and tenured faculty being fired. We also protested the harassment of historians and even imprisonment of historians throughout the world. We published a statement on Black Lives Matter, for example. That's the kind of advocacy work in which I, as a non-American historian, am normally less involved. I learned a lot about how the American government works. I was, of course, called upon for information on how the Polish government or the German government worked and how to address officials there. I got to know a lot of really wonderful people with incredible talents. That was another great benefit. The other thing is I met a lot of people whose ideas under normal circumstances I would think were really stupid, but who actually were not quite so stupid when you talked to them. I didn't necessarily agree with them in the end, but their positions were actually interesting and certainly worth thinking about. This came from both left and right.

I also appreciated the chance to help people throughout their careers in history. I like helping not only beginners but also people at all levels in their career and encouraging them to think of things that would work for them and would make their lives easier and enrich their intellectual experiences. I learned all about the difficulties that independent scholars faced and the equally great difficulties scholars who are marginally employed deal with daily. In short, I gained a much broader sense of historians and historical scholarship that I had before becoming President.

Nash
I would like to transition into talking about working with undergraduate students. In a world where academic subjects, such as STEM, have taken the forefront for a lot of schools, can you talk a bit about teaching the importance of history to the younger generations?

Professor Lindemann
I can start with what will seem a very ivory tower intellectual statement. A college education is not about acquiring skills; it's about getting an education. The sense of the value of a liberal education, in case you're unaware of this and I am sure you are not, has really shrunk. STEM is important. Science is important, math is important, engineering is important; all of those things are important as is, for that matter, acquiring skills. I'm not saying they're not, but they often impart a skill set, rather than a broad education. I'm a great advocate of a broad education. However, I can also make other arguments, and I'm sure you've heard some of these. One of the things we know is that people who come out of college with a BA in history get just as good jobs as people who come out with a degree in business. Critical thinking is something that the study of history teaches and that employers seek.

I'd like to point out another good argument to use, not against STEM, but in discussions with STEM advocates. STEM is seen by many as the way that we're going to save the world? Climate change, increased production of goods and services, artificial intelligence, medicine, you name it, STEM is going to do it, right? However, if you think about this, you realize that the world's problems are not going to be solved only by technical measures. They're going to be solved by convincing people to do certain things, and you're not going to do it just by science alone. Now, we just lived, and are still living, through COVID. There's a lot of science out there. I love Fauci. However, he is not standing up there with a diagram of a virus. He's appealing to people's social and human concerns. He's talking about how public health works. He's talking about how we all bear responsibility for others and not only for ourselves and our families. It's better to get vaccinated with any one of the vaccines out there than not to if you don't want to get COVID. To convince those who argue that it is their "right to choose" to get vaccinated or not, you have to make arguments that appeal to them as human beings. As we have seen over the past months, it is not enough to say, "Look, science says..." We need to make stronger arguments about what's good for the community, what's good for your elderly parents, and what's good for your kids. Forced vaccinations have never worked very well, but in the current pandemic situation, there may indeed be a good reason to use stronger measures to persuade people to get vaccinated, such as needing a vaccination to go to work, see a movie, eat in a restaurant, go to school. You have to convince people that this is what they want, that it's good for them, for their kids, for their families, and for the society of which they are apart. That's not STEM. That's a humanist's argument.

Nash
You mentioned "forced vaccinations" and how over history that has not been very successful. What other patterns or trends throughout history that can help us deal with COVID?

Professor Lindemann
I wrote a column in *Perspectives on History*, the AHA's magazine. I said, "Let's not write the history of COVID now." We don't know enough; we need more distance. I think that's very important. I think humanists know, or at least they should know, not to belittle other people's ideas. There's often a lot of misapprehensions of how people in the past behaved. If you understand how those misapprehensions of behavior in the past developed, you might have a little bit more sympathy and understanding of how to change things and how to move things in one direction or another.

I can give you a very good example. In the eighteenth century, instead of smallpox vaccination, smallpox inoculation was the method used to combat the disease. In inoculation, you give somebody a real case of smallpox. There was a lot of opposition to this, although it seemed very clear that people who are inoculated had a much better chance of survival than people who weren't inoculated. There's all sorts of biological reasons for why inoculation is less dangerous, but people who looked at this skeptically said, "Yes, but people who are inoculated with smallpox get a real case of smallpox, which means they can spread it." That argument was not illogical nor was it wrong. We hear about religious objections. Well, sometimes those objections are not religious at all but are based on knowledge and good thinking about a problem. Being a historian of medicine, I see this all the time. We look back at what people did in medicine before the mid-twentieth century and go, "Oh my god, the Dark Ages." The kind of agony, the kind of inability they had to do anything for anybody except provide simple nursing care was just horrible. People think those people were stupid. I mean, who could believe that leprosy was caused by eating raw meat? Who could believe something so stupid like that? But they weren't stupid. You need to understand why they believed these things. I think that's what history of medicine, well, history in general, can teach us.

Nash
This is a timely lesson. Most arguments that are going on around the world right now are worsened by hyper-partisanship and in-fighting. It's just the inability of people to understand that there are those who believe in different things, and it's for certain reasons.

Professor Lindemann
This is where history and humanistic study can make a real difference. You look at what kind of information you're getting and where it's coming from. Everybody can have their own opinion, but not everybody can have their own facts. There's so much information out there (and this is one of the real dangers of the internet), and too much of it is misleading or simply wrong. Wrong information is dangerous. That's where having a broad humanistic education helps people discern what is good information and what is not and how to separate one from the other. I'm not necessarily saying history allows you to say, "We've seen this before." Historians are terrible at prediction, but we can better understand how it works.

Nash

You had mentioned earlier the distance we should have before we start writing the history of COVID. When we begin to write that story/history, what do you think that might look like?

Professor Lindemann
There is a lot of histories of COVID out there now. Unfortunately, nobody knows enough yet to write a history of COVID because there's not enough distance from it to allow for a historical perspective. We're right inside the epidemic. It's a good thing to write something about COVID as a current event, but not a good time to write a history of it. The history of COVID needs to be anchored carefully set within a larger historical framework, and people need to refrain from making facile comparisons with other epidemics and other disasters. I heard a good historian say "COVID is like hurricanes hitting 100 American cities at once." I thought, "No, that's not right." It's a complete false comparison. When a hurricane hits a city, not many people die, but a lot of buildings fall down. There is huge and expensive damage to the infrastructure Then it goes away. We don't know what the life span of COVID is going to be. We know it's related to SARS, but even if you look over the period of the past year or so, there's been a lot of change in our understanding of COVID. Scientists know a lot more about the virus. We all know a lot more about how it spreads. For a long time, we were all told to wear masks outdoors, and people said, "Oh, it's so confusing. It's so confusing because they say wear a mask, then they say don't wear a mask," but the problem is that until you have enough information about it, you have to make decisions on the best knowledge you have at the time and that knowledge may be incomplete. That is what the public health authorities do. They make decisions and suggest ways of dealing with disease based on the best information they have. Mask wearing is a very interesting subject in light of the 1918-1919 Flu that killed 675,000 Americans. We have in the US now passed that number. If you look at pictures of cities during the flu of the early twentieth century, everybody's wearing a mask. We don't know what it looked like in rural communities, but what we have seen is that large numbers of people in cities anyway wore masks. They did it for a year and a half, so it is not so weird and bizarre, but rather prudent and useful.

Nash
COVID has really highlighted the role that disease really plays in history. Can talk a bit about role of disease in history, and how we should understand and teach that?

Professor Lindemann
The ways are so many ways and they are as complex as they are fascinating. It's hard to pull all of the strings together and select one thing that says, "This is the importance of disease in world history." We know that epidemic and infectious diseases were the greatest killers until the end of the nineteenth century, then mortality patterns changed. Now we're seeing a resurgence in such diseases, but infectious diseases, as a whole, still don't affect mortality as they did two centuries ago. COVID has killed nowhere near as many people as cancer, for example. There are a lot of books that have addressed just that issue. In the history of medicine, there is no subject that has generated more interest and nurtured more books than epidemics. None. The reason is twofold. One is because a lot of people die, and epidemics cause a great deal of social and cultural, as well as political, disruption. Two,

it's the perfect laboratory for the historian, and not only the medical historian. That moment of disruption shows how our society works or doesn't work.

For a long time, people looked at epidemics and said: “Epidemics disrupt society, society collapses, people don't do what they're supposed to do, people run away.” This was a very standard story in the history of medicine until fairly recently. Now, however, we're beginning to see that's not what actually happened or happens. Most societies pulled themselves together, continued to function, and created mechanisms for dealing with diseases; those mechanisms eventually became what we know as public health that is now considered a normal part of government. William McNeill, in his influential book on *Plagues and People*, talks about how important the thirteenth-century Mongol migration westward was for carrying plague out of its homeland somewhere in Wuhan, China. The plague transformed all sorts of societies that were impacted by it. Then there's John McNeill’s *Mosquito Empires* that analyzes how the empires in the Caribbean were transformed by epidemics. During wars of empire, epidemics were weaponized by non-infected or less susceptible people. They knew that almost all newcomers to the tropics died of yellow fever and malaria. Malaria is still a tremendous problem in the world today, but it's a social problem. It's a problem that is generated by changes in agriculture, cutting down forests, different forms of husbandry, and the presence of lots of animals, because cows and horses are also reservoirs for malaria and many malaria-transmitting mosquitoes. Many Anopheles mosquitoes prefer cows and horses and only bite humans when cows and horses die off. Such diseases present the historian and the epidemiologist with complex problems. I think the history of medicine and the history of epidemics go a long way to helping us understand the complexities of any given society. It's not simply that an epidemic killed a lot of people. Studying epidemics helps us understand how a society is put together and how society either continued to function or broke down. Climate changes, such as those we are experiencing now, also greatly affect how epidemics spread, and therefore environmental history and medical history often address many of the same issues. As it got colder in certain parts of the world with the advent of the Little Ice Age, malaria disappeared. I live in Florida, and with global warming, the mosquitoes are striking back. We have Zika in Florida and West Nile virus, which never bothered us before. Malaria is next. I think those are the ways in which the history of medicine has become an important part of the historical mainstream, especially for the early modern period. Early modernists cannot ignore the history of medicine. Modern historians, who are not principally medical or environmental historians, often still do, although I think COVID is going to have a real impact there. People are going to pay more attention to it.

Nash
Awesome! It has been super interesting and fun to talk with you. Thank you for your time!