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Interview of Blake McGready

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:00

[Intro music fades in] Historians and Their Histories is a podcast by the Massachusetts Historical Society. It introduces listeners to our community of researchers. We learn about the paths they took to become a student of the past and the projects they are working on at the MHS. Blake McGready is a PhD candidate at the Graduate Center-CUNY [Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York] and a recipient of the Mary B. Wright Environmental History Fellowship from the MHS. And I'm here with Blake McGready and Blake tell us about who you are, where you come to us from.

Blake McGready 00:35

I grew up about an hour north of the city [New York City] in a town just outside of West Point, perhaps, as I'll chat a little bit about today, I think that had a large part played a large part in shaping the types of questions I'm interested in and my path to becoming a historian.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:52

Were you always interested in history as a child?

Blake McGready 00:55

I think from an early age I recognized that it was my favorite subject, and through grade school, I had extraordinary teachers who sort of encouraged me to follow those interests and kindled my enthusiasm for the subject. I was never really the historic-site kid, though, and what I mean by that is a lot of my colleagues and people I get to know in this profession tell stories about how they were always trying to find the nearest old, you know, historic house, museum or park, and go to those constantly. And that didn't really interest me. But I think from an early age, I had an awareness and appreciation, again, thanks to teachers and people in my life about how landscapes were historic that, you know, I wasn't necessarily asking my parents to drive me to Washington's headquarters in Newburgh, New York, but when we would go down to the Hudson River or up in the forest and spend some time hiking or recreating outside, I always had a sense that the environments and the spaces that I was in were historic in their own right, that they sort of shaped the moments in history that I was learning about in school, including the Revolutionary War. So that connection between the past and the present really sort of spoke to me through non-human nature.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:16

Is the Revolutionary era, that's where you started with all this because of what were you were surrounded by?

Blake McGready 02:22

I think so. I remember in again, back in grade school, sort of really being drawn to the American Revolution and because it was sort of all around me, in a sense, based on where I grew up, in between a lot of sites that were important to that period. Again, from West Point to Newburgh to New Windsor, folks who've read about the American Revolution will know a lot of these names. So that was sort of the thing that piqued my interest. And when I went to undergrad, I followed a little here and there. I went to undergrad at a New York State School about 90 minutes north of the city, SUNY-New Paltz [State University of New York at New Paltz], and there again, I had extraordinary teachers who really kept me interested in the subject, people like Susan Lewis and Andy Evans, who really, again, were sort of entered my life in an important moment to say, 'Follow this interest. Follow your research questions, and so on and so forth.' I also think that when I went to undergrad, reading a lot, and you're reading in a variety of different topics and subjects, and you encounter different authors and different ideas at that time that, again, were sort of pushing me in direction, like the book I think about all the time and this is not, I guess, surprising from hear from an early Americanist, but Robert Gross' The Minutemen and Their World was the one of the first titles that really grabbed me and showed me how ordinary people were present and caught up in extraordinary events that they both did and did not understand, it seemed, and that the way he used sources in that book really, really struck me, and that was an important moment that sort of, again, deepened my interest in the Revolutionary era and got me thinking about it in a different way.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 04:13

So, what's fascinating here is that people sometimes come to history because they're interested in an individual or a specific time period. It seems like you discovered environmental history early on, like that, the landscape could be the source.

Blake McGready 04:29

Yeah, in a sense, although I didn't have a name for it. So, I went to SUNY-New Paltz, and I did my undergrad there, and then my went to graduate school at Villanova University outside Philadelphia. Again,

had extraordinary instructors there, Judy Giesberg, in particular, who I took a lot of classes with her on the Civil War era. And one of the books we read in her class was a book by well two really, that really deepened my awareness and knowledge about the field of environmental history. One was by historian Lisa Brady. Book called War upon the Land and the other was a book by Megan Kate Nelson called Ruin Nation and both of these books were speaking to each other, published in the same year, dealt with environmental themes and really, again, showed how the environment was not just being affected by war, but was an actor and present and had agency in determining how armies made war upon each other during that period. And that to your question like, did I understand that environmental history? Like, how did I come to environmental history? I had this past of growing up in different environments and landscapes that I felt were historic, and then when I got to graduate school, I had a name for it. I had historians and ideas that I could lean on that connected this long-standing interest of mine, and now I had a historic field that I could connect it with something within the scholarship. And I remember reading those books and devouring them. At the time I was working as a tour guide at Valley Forge, and one of my first reactions was, oh, I cannot wait to read what environmental historians of the American Revolution are doing, so I can bring them into my programs and so on and so forth. And I found that there wasn't that much that had been written about the environmental history of the Revolutionary era, comparatively. Now, having said that, there are certainly people who are do, have done, even at that time, who have done extraordinary work. Dave Zheng at Juniata College has been publishing about the environmental history of the American Revolution, and really trying to put nature at the center of that story for a while. Historians of environment and disease, Elizabeth Fenn and J. R. McNeill's books also speak to the disease dimensions, or the ways in which illness affected that conflict. So, there had been some stuff there, but in terms of the breadth of questions that I was interested in, I wasn't really seeing that represented quite in the same way in the Revolutionary era of historians working in that period compared to the Civil War era.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 07:03

So, you've worked in public history, and I'm curious to know if you think there is anything that folks who spend most of their careers in the classroom can learn from public historians and vice versa.

Blake McGready 07:15

Absolutely. I think one of the ways in which I reach audience is actually try to reach audiences and even in the classroom, when I, when I teach my students today, is to draw on a concept that actually comes out of improvisational comedy. You may have heard the concept of a 'yes and' and what that means in improv

terms is, if you, if you're if you've watched it in improv comedy before, is when you people, when partners are in a scene, right, you never want to shut down the scene, right? You always whatever your partner comes up with you want to say, 'yes and' essentially, so you can build off that idea, when you say no, you immediately shut down a conversation, and then you have to twist and turn in different directions to get out of it. It's always better for the scene to encourage what the people in front of you are saying. That really has been a lesson that stayed with me when I think about interpretation, I think about public history, something I've talked about in public history classes with other students who are in the field, and certainly when you are at these various places working with publics at large. You always want to encourage and try to reach people through that type of dialogue. So, when folks come to me, I try to get a little bit of I try to understand a little bit more what their interests are, and encourage them to follow up with, you know, reinforcement, right? Oh, yes and why don't you think about this, or why don't you consider this topic from this point of view, right? And that makes it a little bit not just friendlier, but I think, encourages people to learn a bit more about the topic.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 09:03

What brings you to us here at 1154 Boylston Street?

Blake McGready 09:08

So, I'm writing my dissertation, which is entitled, 'Making Nature's Nation: The Revolutionary War and Environmental Interdependence in New York.' This project, again, began years ago, when I read those books by Lisa Brady and Megan Kate Nelson, and I realized that there was an opportunity to write a little bit more about the environmental history of the American Revolution. So, when I applied to graduate school, my advisors encouraged me to ask a variety of related questions: how did the Revolutionary War affect the environment? How did non-human nature shape the War for Independence, and how did independence and civil warfare affect the way the Revolutionary generation used, described and even thought about the environment around them? So, I'm interested in how the American War for Independence affected the natural non-human world. Forests forage, terrain, tides much more determined how armies could move provision themselves make war on their enemies. The environment was both an arbiter and also, though at times, a victim. Some revolutionaries, for instance, claim that British Crown forces destroyed all of the trees on Manhattan Island during the British occupation or when the Continental Army invaded Iroquoia in 1779 they destroyed crop lands, orchards, hundreds of thousands of bushels of

corn. So, my project, I hope, reflects how the environment affected the Revolutionary generation and vice versa.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 10:45

And so, we have sources for this that'll help you answer some of these questions here at the MHS?

Blake McGready 10:49

Yeah, absolutely. I'm looking at a variety of wartime materials in the collections here at MHS. Soldier diaries have been particularly useful to my project. In their journals, soldiers recorded their impressions of lots of different environmental features, including waterfalls, birds, trees. They also include candid impressions and assessments of the lands and waters they traveled through, and similar opinions not just come through in their diaries, but also their correspondence when they're writing to their families back home, describing their military service. It's not uncommon to find soldiers talking about where they position, where they've been traveled through, and what they believe or what they how they judge or evaluate the environment about them. Soldiers, in fact, like to play up certain practices and behaviors that felt bizarre, sort of like travel literature at this time late, you know, 18th century travel writing and 19th century travel writing will sort of gravitate towards the things that are, were curiosities, right? And that could be everything from a unique species to a stunning and sublime landscape. So, curiosity is a really important idea to folks in the late 18th century. Anyway, soldiers will, you know, sort of describe those various engagements and behaviors that, again, were sort of bizarre when they get to the Hudson Highlands for instance. Many reported that necessity drove them to eating copperheads and rattle snakes, and that can be found in the correspondence of soldiers here at the MHS. Also tells us how common those reptiles were in those Hudson Highlands at that time. And I've also got a lot of use out of the MHS vast assortment of orderly books from the Revolutionary era. At first glance, these sources can appear a little dry. They list officers in command, soldiers' duties, court martial proceedings, information about enemy movements, and it seems to repeat like that time and time again. But with some regularity these documents also show how the army affected the environments around them. Soldiers are reprimanded for plundering farms, cutting down trees and hunting.

Blake McGready 13:00

One set of orders from the Eighth Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, for instance, admonishes soldiers for hunting deer out of season in the lands around West Point. Another problem officers were constantly trying to curb, and this really surprised me, was swimming and bathing and the soldiers would be doing that, it

seemed, for hours at a time down in the Hudson River again, when they were stationed at Peekskill, or the areas around West Point. When they violated orders, we as historians then can learn a little bit more about how revolutionaries were engaging with the environment around them. I think one of the really exciting things about coming to the MHS for my project is that these items showcase New Englanders views of New York. For a long time, historians have noted how the revolution heightened tensions between New England Puritans and Dutch descended New Yorkers. You know, the conflict between Boston and New York, the Red Sox and Yankees. It goes back. Has deep historic roots. It goes back a long way. These documents therefore show us how New Englanders and New Yorkers environmental expectations did, and at times, did not clash. And in fact, I believe that transforming the environment and using natural resources may have been something of a glue between these disparate and often rival colonists. At the beginning of the war, many New Englanders described the Hudson River Valley and the Hudson highlands in particular as a quote dreary region, or sometimes a quote inhospitable wilderness. But by the end of the Revolution and after they had built after they had built fortress West Point, these soldiers talked of the area as a quote garden that revealed American hardiness and ingenuity, so like battlefield victories or declaring independence, the Revolutionary generation consider this engineering and environmental transformation an important milestone that verified their nation making project.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 14:58

What have been some challenges or unexpected finds either with the project as a whole or with the MHS collections?

Blake McGready 14:57

One of the things that really grabbed me was an orderly book from the Second New Hampshire regiment, and it's one of the units that served in the continental army's invasion of Iroquoia in 1779. Even before the invasion launched from Easton, Pennsylvania, the orderly book reveals that unit discipline was notably deficient. Well, out here, I've read a lot of orderly books, and again, you'll find soldiers violating rules like the limits on bathing or plundering or the restrictions on bathing.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 15:36

One would think they would want to encourage soldiers to bathe.

Blake McGready 15:40

You would think. But one of the problems in the Revolutionary era is they thought that bathing was a way in which you too much excessive time in the water was a way you contracted disease, that water was refreshing but also unwholesome. And you see that in some of the language of disease and medicine in this time period. Officers were trying to stop soldiers from bathing. Another problem with bathing, though, is that soldiers were not necessarily that they were not Olympic swimmers, right? And they hadn't had experienced some of them in water. So, to come back to this orderly book, one of the things that you see is that soldiers are quite literally drowning in the Delaware River when they're at Easton. But in addition to soldiers violating those orders to stay out of the river, they're also fighting with the locals of Easton, Pennsylvania. They're stealing their livestock. And all this caught my eye because of what it says about the 1779 invasion of Iroquoia, which is a really important moment in my dissertation because of not just the environmental devastation that goes on during that campaign, but also the ways in which soldiers were sort of describing the lands around them and really paying close attention to scenery and esthetics in the midst of their devastation. As historians, like many historians recently, Wayne Lee and Maeve Kane and others have documented, American revolutionaries committed horrible acts of violence in the Haudenosaunee Heartlands, including the devastation of orchards, gardens and agriculture. But this document, and this orderly book, I believe, reveals that even before they crossed the Pocono Mountains into Iroquoia, Continental soldiers were behaving with abandon. Compared to the other orderly books, they are far less restrained and seem to be engaging in a variety of different behaviors that officers had to reprimand, admonish and try to restrain to the best of their ability.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 17:29

Just real quick, for our listeners who might not be familiar with this, where is Iroquoia?

Blake McGready 17:34

So Iroquoia is today, present day Central and Western New York. So, the Continental Army in 1779 launched an invasion from Easton up the Susquehanna River to what we would call today the Finger Lakes area. This had been ancestral homelands of the Haudenosaunee people or the Iroquois for centuries, and because the Continental Army wanted to, as they described it, eliminate the military threat of native peoples living in that area, also coveting their rich agricultural lands. In 1779 they launched this really devastating and carefully executed invasion of what would become Western New York.

Blake McGready 18:20

Another item I cannot stop thinking about that I found here at the MHS is the diary of a soldier named Henry Sewell, a Mainer who served as an aide to camp to General William Heath of Massachusetts. Now, Sewell's diary is full with environmental references. He noted the quality of the land around Fort Ticonderoga, recorded when he saw the Aurora Borealis, noted when the Hudson River froze with ice almost annually. Recorded the blooming of fruit trees. Thankfully for historians, Sewell was also very candid about the books he was reading while in the service, including some works on gardening and 18th century nature poetry. By 1782 Sewell composed his own verses about the environment, including a poem I was reading this week he wrote on Valentine's Day that was about the courtship between birds. In fact, decades before, poets and other Hudson River School artists helped refine American Romanticism, Sewell and other soldiers in the Continental Army appear to be engaging with non-human nature in a similar way. The poem looks at various different forms of courtship. Sewell talks about relationships between villagers around West Point. He talks about this courtship between birds. He goes on, then at the end of the poem to lament that he himself is uncoupled at the time. So, it's, it's sort of funny, but in a way, it gets me thinking about how the Revolution encouraged people to think about non-human nature, right? And because they're in different circumstances, because they're far from home, soldiers are constantly looking around the area and thinking, thinking about how their new nation would engage in and harness but also appreciate the natural, non-human world.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 20:04

So how do you think this research will help audiences, readers, students, better understand the past?

Blake McGready 20:10

I hope that I'll be able to show that the American Revolution and the War for Independence in particular, was an environmentally consequential event. Had the 13 Colonies remained a part of Great Britain, would the environmental history of North America have been the same? I don't believe so. Declaring independence from Great Britain was both a swift political event and a laborious process of cultural separation and nation building, and American revolutionaries changing environmental attitudes reflected that transformation. At the same time, Independence energized white settlement across the continent. Scholars like Rachel Herman and Susan Sleeper-Smith have recently demonstrated that American officials sought to control native people's relationships with the earth, to wrest control of the lands that they coveted. The Continental Army's 1779 invasion again of Iroquoia, where an American revolutionaries laid

waste to Haudenosaunee crop lands, established an important, destructive blueprint for how the American military would defeat their native enemies. In this capacity, the Revolutionary generation again established precedents for how future generations of Americans would engage with the environment. You know, sometimes the United States is described as, quote, nature's nation. And does that mean we're a country that honors or respects the environment or are we one that can harness natural resources, however, and whenever we see fit? Answering that question demands we reckon with the revolutionary generation's environmental legacy, and as we approach the 250th anniversary of American independence in 2026 I hope the environment will increasingly be a part of those conversations. This anniversary, moreover, is colliding with an ongoing environmental emergency, as we're talking in early 2024 just this week, the European Climate Agency reported that last year, Earth shattered global annual heat records. Climate Change is even bearing down on the nation's most beloved revolutionary historic sites at Yorktown, Valley Forge, Minuteman National Historical Park, not far from here in Concord. Historians and scientists have produced evidence of a warming climate, including more frequent floods, the loss of different plant and bird species and land erosion. So, my hope is that as people gather to contemplate and celebrate this national anniversary, historians of all kinds will be able to connect the revolutionary past to our environmental future, where Americans have learned separateness and superiority from the natural, non-human world. Our new declarations of environmental interdependence should urge revitalization, compassion and reciprocity. So again, I hope that we'll be talking a bit more about nature this time around.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 23:02

[Outro music fades in] Historians and Their Histories was produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. We would like to thank Blake McGready of the Graduate Center-CUNY and Sam Hurwitz, Podcast Producer at the MHS. Music in this episode is by Podington Bear. See our show notes for details and thank you for listening.