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Interview of Christopher Willoughby Interview

Christopher Willoughby 00:00

First, and foremost, a project that I really kind of fore fronted in my proposal was a history of a skull collection that [John] Warren assembled. So, back to this trading skulls, where I first met Warren was as J.C. Warren, a guy who's trading Peruvian skulls, which are sometimes actually from Peru, and these are skulls that have been compressed to have quote unquote flatheads. Several different indigenous peoples of the Americas did similar things, and they fascinated Warren a great deal. He even said to [William Thomas Green] Morton, when they were trading of the Peruvian skulls, "I can't give them up."

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:37

[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. My name is Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai, and I am an historian working at the MHS. Today we are sitting down with Professor Christopher Willoughby, Assistant Professor of African American and African Diaspora Studies at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Professor Willoughby is a recipient of the Elizabeth Woodman Wright Fellowship from the MHS.

Christopher Willoughby 01:15

Thanks for having me. It's really great to be here talking on this podcast about all the fun and, I guess disturbing research I did at the Massachusetts Historical Society, so.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:25

Well, we look forward to hearing about that, but maybe we should start with your origin story to see why you are drawn to disturbing stories in our collections. Why are you an historian?

Christopher Willoughby 01:37

That's a really fascinating question. I grew up in the suburbs of a historic city, I mean, I say all are, but Birmingham, Alabama, and I do think that kind of hits on some of the origins of my work as a scholar of racism. Grew up in school trips, going to the Civil Rights Institute. I visited the 16th Street Baptist Church, where those four little girls were killed in a white supremacist bombing in the 1960s. I'm not a 20th century historian, though, but I think as a young white guy from the, we'll say, the upper middle-class side of the tracks, that divide already was kind of in the back of my mind. That ongoing racial divide that exists in Birmingham today, and the

segregation, the de facto segregation that exists today was in the back of my mind, and I was also, though, had a much more kind of, we'll say, normal historian awakening in high school. I was on constitutional debate team. It's also kind of like AP government called, 'We the People,' and we got to sit around and like read the Constitution and some other historical texts. This was right when Ron Chernow published the Alexander Hamilton biography. It's like 800 pages. I read that my senior year of high school, and I became obsessed with Alexander Hamilton, which is not very indicative of my development. I wrote like six papers at the College of Charleston. There's an independent study, the comparative history of the founding of the Bank of England, the founding of the Bank of the United States because I liked Alexander Hamilton so much. I had this notion that even going into college that I wanted to be a history professor. I didn't know what that was. I wasn't particularly good at writing, as my grades in English evidenced. I was pretty good at thinking about history, though, and so I didn't think it was really possible, but I wanted to be a history professor. And so when I got there, I early on in when they still taught Western Civ, intro to Western Civ, part two, I had Peter McCandless, who ended up becoming my undergraduate mentor, Peter was - he's now retired, but was a historian of the British Empire by training, but had become a historian of medicine in the South once he got there, and he was always a historian of medicine also by training, but I worked very closely with him. I did research for him, actually in the mortality records in the city of Charleston, when he wrote his, his second book, that did pretty well, Slavery, Disease, and Suffering in the Southern Low Country, I think is the title, but there I was exposed by him to kind of a very different kind of history, and my, my other professors at the College of Charleston have one about kind of inequality, slavery, African American history. So, while I was writing my six papers on Alexander Hamilton, in the back of my head I was starting to think about other actors in US history, other people, and in my senior year of college I wrote a bachelor's thesis on the coming of the Civil War and the secession movement and the proslavery movement. I would say that's in a lot of ways where, as my kind of adult historian, my origin story emerges from. I was very flummoxed by pro slavery ideology, by the kind of full-throated arguments for slavery as a positive good, which emerged in the antebellum period. This is kind of usually associated with John C. Calhoun, who there was a huge towering statue, I believe it's still in Charleston in Marion Square Park, but John C. Calhoun said that slavery was a positive good for both black and white southerners, and that to me was a hard circle to square, hard to understand, and I, I started to read all the different kind of, we'll say, pro-slavery academics at that time. It's a famous book by a pro-slavery thinker whose name I'm blanking on, but he argued that slavery was both a positive good, but also that that positive good should be extended to poor whites as well under a system he called the warranty system, this guy, whose name I cannot, for the life of me, think of. He was a kind of another book called Sociology of the South, and so I started looking at those folks, and I also started looking at the racial science. In particular, at this time I first looked at a book that I've looked at many times since Types of Mankind by Josiah Nott from Mobile, Alabama. He was a very prominent physician and was one of the most prominent kind of proponents of the theory of polygenesis, which has kind of directed my work ever since. This notion that

each human group, and there aren't really human groups, but each different race people we call different races today were not only kind of by a lot in the biological sense different races, as in subgroups who had developed over generations into kind of distinct groups, but not necessarily different species, but Josiah Nott and the polygenists argue that they were different species, and that this is a pre-Darwinian period, so everything had to be created by God. This meant that there were five, according to most polygenists, although the numbers could be different, five different human creations in five different parts of the world. Usually, the groups would be Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, Africans, Europeans, and you know what they would have at the time would have called, well, we'll just say East Asians, generally speaking, where these kind of lines fit, that obviously doesn't actually include everybody in the world, but that's the five groups. Roughly speaking, those continents and those regions where they would have been created by God. What really blew me away, and what brings me not to the kind of Alabama Historical Society, but the Massachusetts Historical Society, was there a lot of different contributors to types of mankind, and many of them were professors at Ivy League institutions, and so that started a set of questions I took up in grad school about first are they teaching this racial science in Ivy League medical schools, and what does that say about the kind of nature of racial thinking and racial science, and that became the kind of subject of my first book, Masters of Health: Racial Science and Slavery in US Medical Schools, where early on it became apparent to me through a load of primary sources at the University of Pennsylvania, and some I found also at Harvard Medical School, and later on at the Massachusetts Historical Society, and the kind of project I've continued working on there, that yes, indeed these northern medical schools, like Harvard Medical School, like the University of Pennsylvania, are teaching racial science. They're teaching a very similar pedagogy to southern medical schools, and so what that kind of developed into that initial set of questions is that we can't really confine the history of racial thinking to a group of pro-slavery white supremacist stereotypes, but rather that the problems with white supremacy and racist ideas are deeper and more diffuse in American society and in American medical culture, in particular. So that's how I, that's how I ended up going from someone really obsessed with first Alexander Hamilton, then the Southern pro-slavery movement into probably my first field, might be a historian of medicine, also a historian of slavery, most definitely, and then also weirdly a historian of Massachusetts in the 19th century to some extent.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 09:16

All right, so it seems like you followed a thread back in time. You started with the 20th century history that was around you when you were growing up, and you went back to the 19th century, and from the south you followed that intellectual thread into the north as well. Talk about how graduate school shaped your thinking.

Christopher Willoughby 09:42

In some ways, a place where I departed from, where I was doing research, but also a place that profoundly shaped me. So, I went to Tulane University, did my PhD in history there. I worked with a really excellent scholar of Atlantic slavery, but who also was a scholar trained in really trained in southern history, who ended up becoming someone who has written probably as much about the history of West Africa as he has about the South. This is Randy J. Sparks, very prominent professor, wrote one of my favorite books, The Two Princes of Calabar: An Eighteenth-Century Atlantic Odyssey. But I was still very much trained in a place where there were two really strong programs. I was in Latin American history, and in US Southern history. So, I was always thinking in those seminars in a transnational and comparative sense. I was never thinking about the South as a place that's unique, where slavery only happened here, but rather slavery, white supremacy, these things existed in broader emerging colonial systems in British North America and in the United States. I very early on continued working on these racial scientists. I found out about a new one when I was in Louisiana. He wasn't new to other people, but he was new to me when I was in graduate school Samuel Cartwright. Samuel Cartwright wrote, or came up with the theory, or the disease called Drapetomania, and just say Dryptomaniacs have a lazy southern pronunciation. Dyssochythia Ethiopica and Dyssochythia Aegyptica, I believe is the other one, but these are basically slave diseases, one that causes slaves to run away, that's Drapetomania. Another one that he called rascality, that causes slaves to kind of commit petty offenses, like stealing food, maybe they're actually hungry, not mentally ill. And then the other one was a kind of extreme form of depression, and he said all of these are diseases because they exist outside of Africans' kind of normal psychiatry. He wouldn't have necessarily used those terms, but that people of African descent were built by God to work on southern plantations, and that white men were born with an excess of will, also by God, to, of course, rule over these plantations, but Cartwright, I started working on at my master's thesis. I followed him to the north, where I thought I was following him to the north. This was what actually initially brought me to Pennsylvania, to Philadelphia, as he had supposedly, according to all these histories of him, studied at the University of Pennsylvania. I thought I should go learn about what he studied. Why did he think this? He probably didn't come out of nowhere. Did he gain any ideas from them? Why? And Josiah Nott had gone to the University of Pennsylvania, who wrote Types of Mankind. So, I thought maybe there's something there. There's a connection. Turns out he never went to the University of Pennsylvania. All the histories are basically wrong on these little facts, but I did start finding when I kept looking for him in the North positive reviews of his books. So, in my master's thesis, I wrote about that, about he was both an outlier to this northern medical pedagogy, which I was beginning to uncover, that taught that these racial differences were anatomical, that they were a part of anatomical education in medical schools, in particularly at that time I was looking more at the University of Pennsylvania, and after I finished my dissertation, I'd spend more time in Boston, but that where he was an outlier was in those slave diseases. Where he was very normal was in ideas of anatomical racial difference, and so I, so I was able to follow that thread early on in coursework. I studied the

eugenics movement as well. I studied the history of kind of pro-slavery movement. I also learned a lot more about the kind of everyday work life of an enslaved person, and what this racial science was covering up in masking, in my opinion, and that started with me off on writing a dissertation about medical pedagogy, race, and medical pedagogy in the antebellum United States, really thinking about unpacking a systemic and structured and diffuse racialized pedagogy that particularly, but not exclusively, was taking place in anatomical instruction, and at this time it's worth noting that now, as I was learning in grad school, that anatomy was to medicine in the mid-19th century, like genetics or mRNA vaccines are today, that was the cutting edge, was the hot, and at times socially controversial we'll also say kind of new medicine, new way of approaching the body, compared to, and this is the beginning of departure from what we might still think of as a humoral-based medicine. What I was seeing is this new, broader emphasis on anatomy, on dissection, on human remains, dovetailed really nicely, I guess, in a disturbing way, but from a kind of historian's perspective, of it makes a lot of sense with the emphasis on anatomy and racial science. The emphasis on anatomy and skull collecting, which I talk a great deal about in my book, and the kind of premier science of race in this time period, or the premier set of evidence was what was called craniometry, and this was measuring the internal capacity of skulls, and basically how they would do that is they would fill it up with lead shot. They'd fill up the skull. They'd drill in the kind of bottom of the skull into the cranium. They might drill a hole, and then they fill it up to the top essentially. What I found was that this racial science that had been talked about a lot in the context of pro-slavery politics, and where I had first engaged with it, where I first learned about it in books like George Frederickson's The Black Image in the White Mind, Winthrop Jordan's White Over Black. These real classics in the field of history of racial thought and racial science, was that it had a different life in the medical school, and when we start thinking about this being taught to one of the being taught to 1000s of medical school students every year, we might have to reckon with a different lifespan for racial science because one of the other central transformations in this period that I'm not necessarily first person to write about, I'm definitely not, but the connections that I'm making, or were making, was how in 1765 there's no medical school in colonial British colonial North America. Well, there's one. It's just being founded, the university of what will become the University of Pennsylvania's Medical School. Two years later, Columbia, or King's College, now Columbia University's Medical School will be founded 16 years after that, kind of at the end of the Revolution. Harvard Medical School will be founded, and a few other medical schools in the 18th century. Only a few more than 200 graduates receive MDs in the United States in the 18th century, or in colonial British North America, we should say, but from 1840 to 1859 roughly 30,000 people get MDs in the United States. So, you go from a period of the 18th century, medical schools are ancillary small institutions once they even come into existence. People are generally speaking learning something akin to humoral medicine. Views on race as a biological kind of idea are fairly nascent and tend towards racial differences are short and transitory, and then by the time period of the end of my study, roughly speaking, the Civil War, you go to a society with about 50 medical schools graduating on average 1500 or so students a year learning a very hardened

version of racial science, who they then go out into small towns, cities across the country and practice where they're probably the most scientifically trained person in their community, or amongst a handful, and so they are the foremost authority on racial difference in their communities, and that's the kind of picture that I think emerged from my dissertation.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 18:19

These are very heavy and difficult subjects to explore and read about day in and day out. I mean, one of the questions we ask is, what challenges you have faced in this as an historian, and I'm wondering if dealing with such subjects was one of those challenges, and what others might be.

Christopher Willoughby 18:39

Yeah, there are several, and some of them, so early on, I think a challenge for me was, especially in the dissertation phase, was how to be, for lack of a better word, fair to the people I'm criticizing, without also, you know, because they're I'm a white man, they're white men, I'm came from a kind of white relative, relatively speaking, white enclave in the South, they were not necessarily white enclaves, but lived in a very kind of intimately intimate but also segregated society as slave owners themselves. Finding a balance between not depicting them as cartoonish villains, complex individuals, but also not having so much empathy with them as to not really emphasize the grotesque harm they've caused in society in a clear way, is that we can, when we over empathize with historical subjects of any sort, we can end up, yeah, not necessarily being objective about them. So, first and foremost, I found that of either finding a balance between at times hating these people and at times kind of understanding them as people coming up in an emerging academic world, and as myself, as someone trying to strive in a kind of competitive academic atmosphere and environment, I definitely, to some degree, in a weird way, saw myself in them, but then also found myself as a real opponent to them. I don't think it be any surprise that my book is very deeply critical of the kind of institutions they built, and how we can and should fix them. So that was an initial issue for me. Another kind of difficult thing is, you know, people who I didn't necessarily find much empathy for, but you just come across when you do this research, horror, true, you know, true horror, that's hard to talk about, that I don't like even presenting on that I've written about. I found some experiments on enslaved people done by medical students that were never published, or I don't think have ever come to light outside of my book in particular. When I was transitioning to the book, the dissertation is very much about white medical students. The book, I wanted to break up that story, and I wanted to include people, and in a more human, human way, not just as victims, but as like fully formed humans, people who were subjected to this regime, we might say, and a difficulty of that was writing stories or histories from a perspective of colonized or people, colonized black people, Africans, enslaved people, and wondering whether or not I should, or it was okay for me to do that as a white scholar, and I was really lucky in this point. When I was writing this chapter, I was a

fellow. I had finished my PhD. I was a fellow at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City, which was an amazing opportunity, one of my favorite fellowships I've ever had, and also a unique opportunity as a white scholar in academia to be in an institution that's really kind of top down, a black majority institution, and those workshops with those colleagues was very difficult for me in a lot of ways, and very vulnerable, but also was a really amazing experience in that the amount of support I had to kind of work on bringing in these stories, and that I wasn't taking somebody else's history, but rather trying to complicate what I was writing, and that we're all, of course, humans, and we can all, with the appropriate sensitivity, awareness, perspective, what some people might call positionality, can write different, different histories. That's not only something we can do, but we should do. So, that was a real, like, emotional, really difficult thing for me to do, but also a transformative thing for me as a scholar. And I've since become a professor of African American studies, which I didn't necessarily expect, and I would say that that was made me kind of feel comfortable to be able to teach these histories on a day-to-day basis, and that are not centered around white people.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 23:05

Of course, this is a very big topic that you've tackled, and you've listed some of the places you've gone for sources. One of them, of course, is 1154 Boylston Street here in Boston, the Massachusetts Historical Society. So, let's talk a little bit about what brought you to the MHS. What sources were you looking for? What did you find?

Christopher Willoughby 23:27

So, and that's it's a very, it's a long history that predates my recent fellowship. So, for this first, for my first book, I was following John Collins Warren, and I'm still working on John Collins Warren. I'll be working on John Collins Warren for a long time. I've kind of jokingly referred to him as my, my most recent muse. So, John Collins Warren is has an extensive, extensive collection of papers at the Massachusetts Historical Society. He is a really interesting, unique figure in history of medicine in the United States, a singular influence. He was the son of the founder of Harvard Medical School, John Warren. Becomes kind of succeeds his father as the anatomy professor at Harvard Medical School. He's the third president of the American Medical Association, the first from New England, and best known for being the first surgeon to perform a surgery publicly on a patient under anesthesia, ether in particular. So, he's very well known as probably the doctor who performed the most important surgery in antebellum US history. He's also a figure who's so fascinating because he was a very committed racial theorist and very committed to the study of race, which people don't really know much about. He wrote a few things, and so for me, I came to see him as the initially as the professor of anatomy at Harvard Medical School and as the other end of some letters that I had read his letters to Samuel Wharton, the most famous polygenist of his era at the American Philosophical Society, and I wanted to read the other, the other side of those letters, which are held at the Massachusetts Historical Society, where they were trading human skulls, no other way to describe

it. Samuel Morton even sent an artist, commissioned an artist to come and draw some of John Collins Warren's skulls, and so that is what brought me initially to the Massachusetts Historical Society. When I was a fellow close about eight years ago at the Harvard Medical School, I would come to the MHS on the weekends and look at John Collins Warren's papers because the MHS is open on Saturdays, really great for very, I guess, dedicated young historians who don't have anything to do on Saturday, and so I was very fascinated by him. I came back four years later, had drawn us to the fact that Warren was kind of the linchpin for understanding slavery, racial science at Harvard Medical School. He was a central figure to this, and then since then, and I used some of that in my first book, Warren plays a reasonable but secondary role in it, but he's the center of everything I'm working on right now. First and foremost, a project that I really kind of fore fronted in my proposal was a history of a skull collection that Warren assembled. So, back to this trading skulls, where I first met Warren was as J.C. Warren, a guy who's trading Peruvian skulls, which are sometimes actually from Peru, and these are skulls that have been compressed to have quote unquote flatheads. Several different indigenous peoples of the Americas did similar things, and they fascinated Warren a great deal. He even said to Morton, when they were trading of the proven skulls, 'I can't give them up. They're too precious.' He says, literally, like sounding like Gollum in Lord of the Rings, something like, you know, they're too precious. So that was my entry into him. I didn't even know he had been the ether guy at that point, ironically, because I was, as is very obvious, I'm a historian of slavery who became a historian of medicine, and this project that I've been working on, 'Collected without Consent,' starts from something I did in one chapter of my first book, was looking at and telling those stories of people whose skulls were collected in very short, short histories of them, and this project I'm hoping or planning to write five short histories of five different people from around the world who Warren collected. He didn't necessarily know who is collecting, always sometimes he bought them in much larger collections, and so what I was first doing with Warren was trying to learn his correspondence networks. Trying to learn how he found out about and collected human remains. What we see a lot of is that Warren's immense influence, his immense kind of fame was key to his collecting. Like at one point he hosts a console, Spanish console to Mexico, is in Boston, and he hosts him to look at his skull collection. Then he gets that guy to help him try and get Aztec skulls from Mexico. Warren was building these networks with physicians in the internal parts of the United States. People who were traveling abroad, but he also was collecting from sub-Saharan Africa, from the Indian Ocean world. The goal of that, of that project is to really take a different vantage point at American medical schools than I did in my first book, and look at them from the outside in, of people who are a part of making medical schools what they were, these sites of racial thinking, these sites of kind of white masculinity and white in the cultivation of white masculinity in this, in this period, at least not forever, obviously, medical schools, thankfully, have integrated both gender and racial standards, but in this period of these white men holding human remains, and rather than looking at from their perspective, but telling the life stories of people, even if it's through kind of composite biography, through context about what happened to them, about how they got to the medical school, about what their journey

was, and what the kind of exploitation and oppression that undergird these institutions was, and I think one of the interesting dynamics of a guy like Warren is he both was probably the best surgeon of his era. I think something I've read after reading hundreds of 1000s of pages of his diaries, 1000s of pages of his notes, an incredibly organized, acute, detail-oriented mind, like someone who, as an intellect, I admire greatly, but also someone who didn't necessarily see working-class people, or didn't see working-class people and poor people as his equals, much less people, enslaved people, black people. So, he would facilitate racial science in the medical school. That's something I'm going to get into in other chapters.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 30:14

I mean, I think you've answered several questions all at once there, including the significance of this and what you want the audience to take away from it, but it's definitely complicating our understanding of not just slavery, pro-slavery thinking, but also the medical profession of the complicity of scientists and doctors in the North, as in the South in the antebellum period.

Christopher Willoughby 30:38

Yeah, I mean, that I think you know the biggest takeaway that I would say is, you can't extricate medicine and science. This is such a simple lesson from the history of science, but you cannot extricate medicine and science from the society in which it was created. Objectivity in science, in a lot of ways, means more reckoning with our biases rather than assuming we can escape them and be more conscientious and thinking about and challenging our own biases and that also though yeah the way that we treat people we shouldn't be surprised if physicians are going to see poverty in a way that's not so different from the rest of society and the government and politics, and they're going to influence the institutions they create, and those institutions will have a corresponding influence on the broader society and politics. So, untangling this mess is very complicated, but very important. I mean, I think, and an essential part of what I think we're been trying to academics, universities, at least in their own houses, clean up for the last decade, although you know, hindsight, it's looking like it might have been a thankless task, at least just to some. It's not about indoctrination; it's not about it's not even about necessarily canceling or destroying John Collins Warren. I would like, my hope in writing about someone like him is that we learn how a brilliant person can become a vector for really bad ideas and can be institutionally critical to spreading really bad ideas, while also doing things that are profoundly helpful, brilliant, the exact right things that we would want, I think, a physician to be figuring out how to do in the 1840s and 1850s.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 32:44

[Outro music fades in] Historians and Their Histories is produced by the Research Department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. We would like to thank Professor Christopher Willoughby, Assistant Professor

of African American and African Diaspora Studies at University of Nevada Las Vegas, and Sam Hurwitz, our podcast producer here at the MHS. Music in this episode is by Podington Bear. Please see our show notes for details. Thank you for listening, and please rate, review, and subscribe to both the MHS-produced shows wherever you listen to podcasts.