Intervju broja: Catherine Wendy Bracewell (in *Rostra* [Zadar] 10/8 (2017): 280-95)

Interviewers: Luka Knez, Natko Milatić

1. Dear Professor, first of all, thank you for agreeing to this interview.

It's a pleasure to do it. Interviews like these are a great prompt for the person being interviewed to reflect on the ways their professional practice and personal experiences have interacted. And reading other people's interviews has sometimes made me stop and reconsider some of my own ideas about what it means to be a historian and a member of the academic community.

2. You were born in Australia, grew up in California, and the last 30 years you have been living in London. Can you tell us how your experience, which you have collected all over the world, has influenced your work?

My peripatetic existence has had a very direct influence on my intellectual concerns. My status as a migrant – and my very weird hybrid accent in English – has meant that I've always been a bit of an outsider to the national contexts in which I've lived. This is true even when I go back to Sydney, even though I'm still an Australian citizen, or when I go back to California, because I'm out of touch with developments in those societies, with evolving cultural assumptions, even with the slang. This has meant that I've always been curious about questions of identity and belonging, and have been alert to the ways people define who they are and where they locate important differences with others. These questions have driven a lot of my research: what sorts of loyalties and concepts of difference shaped the world of the Uskoks? Were they immutable, or did they change over time and according to circumstance? How did people living on a frontier between states and faiths use the institution of *pobratimstvo* to negotiate their individual needs and desires? How have travellers from Croatia or other parts of the South and East of Europe defined themselves in relation to others, or located their societies with reference to concepts like Europe, or the Balkans?

But a life spent travelling has had other effects on my work, and shows how personal circumstances can shape professional choices. I'm married to another historian, Bob Shoemaker, who works at the University of Sheffield, some two hours north of London by train. Our son was raised in Sheffield, so I spent about 20 years commuting between the two cities. Spending part of the week on my own in London was crucial for my teaching and research – and was only possible because of my husband's commitment to an equal partnership. These personal circumstances had a real effect on my research practice. I started out very much focused on the archives, spending a lot of time rummaging through documents looking for new sources on the uskoks. When I finished that book, I had planned a more widely ranging study of society and culture on the Triplex Confinium (the article on frontier *pobratimstvo* that I just published in *History and Anthropology* is a holdover from that plan). But having a baby, as well as the war in the 1990s, made the extended periods of foreign travel needed for archival research much more difficult. Partly as a consequence, I became nterested in the interpretation of printed sources and popular culture. It helped that this was the direction of the 'new' cultural history as well. These personal factors, as well as

intellectual interests, helped determine my move into the study of travel writing, which has been very rewarding. My experience has been that even things that look like obstacles arising from personal circumstances can nonetheless offer unexpected opportunities: the thing is to be ready to recognize and follow them.

3. You are the professor at UCL School of Slavonic & East European Studies (SSEES). Tell us a bit more about the institution and how did you develop an interest in this particular field of study?

When I joined SSEES, it was a stand-alone institute in the federal University of London, focusing on the study of 'Eastern Europe' in a somewhat Cold-War framework, in the sense that 'knowing the other' was seen as important for the UK national interest. But only *somewhat*, since it was full of scholars, from across the region as well as from the UK, who were motivated by the problems of their disciplines (politics, sociology, economics and history, but also literature and philology) as well as by understanding specific countries, regions or societies. It was difficult to see SSEES as being obviously subservient to a political conception of national interest, as is often said of Area Studies institutions, since the people and their specialisms were so diverse and idiosyncratic. The decision to hire me, as an early modern historian whose field was as much Mediterranean as Balkan, is a good illustration of this. SSEES worked very well as an environment for interdisciplinary exchange, made possible by the fact that we shared a common focus on a region, despite our disciplinary differences. I've benefitted a lot from the chance to teach and research alongside colleagues trained in everything from economics and political science to anthropology and literary theory. It's shown me that the important thing in academic life is the questions that we are asking, and what useful tools can be brought to bear on these questions, rather than where the boundaries between our disciplines lie. While I came to SSEES as an anthropologically-influenced historian, my interests and expertise have been radically influenced (and I think sharpened) by SSEES's multi-disciplinary and regional mix.

With the break-up of the federal University of London in the 1990s, SSEES became a part of University College London (UCL). Being more closely integrated into a multi-faculty environment, with the opportunity of working with colleagues with very different profiles, has made SSEES much more conscious of its own specific characteristics. One of the results has been a newly self-reflexive interest in the advantages and limitations of Area Studies, not just with reference to European studies (eastern or otherwise) but also fields like Southeast Asian, African or American studies. What are the advantages and disadvantages of carving the world up into discrete regional units of research like this? What other frameworks might we use – comparative, transnational, global? I currently lead a Mellon postdoctoral programme that looks at issues like this, as well as co-editing a journal, *East European Politics & Societies and Cultures* (EEPS), that explores the possibilities of 'East European Studies' in this new intellectual (and political) environment. I don't think that I would have moved in this direction without the multi- and interdisciplinary exchanges that I experienced at SSEES.

4. What is today's perception of British historiography of the history of Southeast Europe; and can you tell us if there are any prejudices about the research of this territory?

Southeast European history is a very lively research field in the UK these days, as shown by the large number of young historians who are producing excellent scholarship on a huge range of topics and with very varied approaches. Look at Catherine Baker, at the University of Hull, a cultural historian who is currently working on discourses of race in the post-Yugoslav region (and whose wonderful book *Sounds of the Borderland: Popular Music, War and Nationalism in Croatia since 1991* has been translated as *Zvuci granice*); or at Rory Yeomans, who has been publishing on the cultural politics of the NDH while at the same time working as a civil servant; or at the very different work by Dejan Djokić, whose research has focused on party political debates in interwar Yugoslavia. Of course, I like to point to the successes of my own students, but there are many other excellent young scholars trained and working in the UK in Southeast European history. It's true that for the most part they write about twentieth- and twenty-first-century history. There are far fewer working on earlier periods, and this is a pity, given the archival resources – and open topics – for this sort of research. But the problem is not any sort of prejudice; rather it is lack of knowledge, especially of the necessary languages, among beginning scholars who might be tempted into the field. This is not helped by funding requirements for UK PhD research that require completion in three to four years. This simply isn't enough time to acquire the necessary linguistic skills. It's a real pity, because it drastically limits the pool of people who might contribute to the field.

5. In 1992 you have published a historical monograph *The Uskoks of Senj. Piracy, Banditry and Holy War in the Sixteenth-Century Adriatic*, which has been translated into Croatian in only five years from its publication. Ivo Banac in the preface to your work has written that your work has "opened entirely new areas of research to all the scientists and not only those belonging to the English-speaking world." You have taken truly demanding task, what prompted you to write these studies which are definitely unavoidable for the research of the history of Uskoks?

It's really nice to hear such a positive evaluation of *The Uskoks of Senj*, nearly 25 years after it was published. And it's difficult to remember now, more than 30 years since I started doing the research for it, just how odd it seemed to people that I wanted to pursue this topic. It didn't fit into the conventional Cold War 'Russian and East European History' framework of study at Stanford University where I did my PhD, both because it was an early modern topic, and because it crossed regional borders, drawing just as much on Mediterranean as Southeast European historiography. It puzzled colleagues in Croatia when I was doing my initial archival research, both because the diplomatic aspect of the story had been so thoroughly covered, and focusing on 'history from below' with respect to this small community seemed a bit trivial and unpromising. It struck some job search committees the same way! I remember being asked very aggressively in an interview for a post at UC Berkeley why I was studying 'a marginal topic in a peripheral field?'

But the answer that I gave then is also the answer to your question: a view from the margins is sometimes the best way to understand the wider picture. Looking at life on the frontier between three warring empires seemed to me to have the potential to tell us something new about how the immense changes brought about by the sixteenth-century Ottoman advances were played out, in ways that a focus on diplomatic and state history could not illuminate. I wanted to know how people experienced these changes, what cultural resources they could draw on, how they justified their actions – and whether these details corroborated narratives of clear-cut ideological difference on the frontiers of Christianity and Islam, Catholicism and Orthodoxy, the Habsburg, Venetian and Ottoman empires. And the Uskoks of Senj offered a perfect way into these questions, precisely because they had been the subject of such prolonged diplomatic tension: there were all sorts of records of their activities, including even their own testimony, scattered through the archives of many different state institutions.

I was lucky in that I had the necessary linguistic skills, more or less, having been interested in language-learning as an undergraduate. And I was also lucky in having the support of PhD supervisors, Wayne Vucinich and Judy Brown, who were intrigued by my approach, and of archivists who were also intrigued, if a bit puzzled. I'm glad that the book is seen as important for understanding the Uskoks, but I'm also pleased that it has been received as contributing to studies of border societies and religious warfare in Europe more generally, to maritime and pirate history, and even to gender studies. And, slowly, it has caught the imaginations even of non-academic readers. I was amused when it was recommended as holiday reading for tourists in the *Rough Guide to Croatia*, but really astonished when it became the inspiration for a historical fantasy by the Canadian novelist Guy Gavriel Kay, who has turned Senj into 'Senjan' in his new book *Children of Earth and Sky*, and has asked what happens if you explore the possibility of a young woman following the ethos of the Uskoks? When I asked, in an article in *Most* in 1988, how sixteenth-century representations of the women of Senj matched up with what we knew of them from the archival record, I hoped to expand the ways we might think about early modern women's histories. Kay, as a novelist, can go places that I can't go as a historian. But his book has something of the same effect: he stretches our imaginations by giving history what he describes as a 'quarter turn to the fantastic'. I wouldn't encourage historians to pursue the fantastic, but looking in a different way at what we think we know already can be very productive.

7. In the last decade, you have changed the direction of your research and now you work on the project *East Looks West*. Can you tell us more about this project?

East Looks West is a big collaborative project exploring the ways that people from the eastern half of Europe have used travel writing to locate themselves and their societies in the world, over a very long period, from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. In effect, we've used travel writing a means of understanding the construction and uses of symbolic geographies – concepts of Europe and Europeannness, the Balkans, East and West, and so on. I set up this project with a group of East Europeanist colleagues from different backgrounds: not just social and cultural history, but literature and literary theory. Travel writing had usually been

treated, in each of our disciplines, as something marginal: a second-hand source of information about daily life, perhaps, for historians; a not particularly prestigious genre for literary scholars. We thought that travel accounts could offer a terrific resource for tracing the generation and manipulation of boundaries, identities, belonging and otherness; and that the potential of the material would be even greater if it were to be treated comparatively. There wasn't a lot of research on travel writing in the various national traditions, so we thought it would be a relatively easy task to catalogue and analyze the whole body of travel accounts, but it turned out to be much more complicated – and much richer – than we thought. In the end, we published a bibliography of travel writing published in monograph form, an anthology of excerpts from across the East European literatures translated into English, a volume of essays on East European travel writing, and another one on travels from the Balkans, as well as a lot of individual studies. It's been a really fertile area of research, and has had an influence on the field of travel writing studies in the English-speaking world, where attention had been primarily focused on Anglophone travel writing and its role in imperial rule. Bringing in east European travel writing complicates discussions of 'Western' cultural hegemony very productively, and also helps to rethink postcolonialism from within Europe.

8. What prompted you to change the interest of your research?

Well, partly it was pragmatic: I mentioned the difficulty I found in pursuing archival research, and this project meant working with printed sources. But a much stronger prompt was a certain intellectual impatience with strands of scholarship that were very influential in the 1990s and 2000s, kicked off by Larry Wolff's *Inventing Eastern Europe* and Maria Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans*. These books were very productive in focusing attention on the ways Europe's limits and divisions were imagined, and the consequences of those imaginings, but they tended to be rather mono-directional (very like Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which was their initial inspiration). Everything seemed to come down to Western imaginings, projections, and power, as though the people of eastern Europe were silent in the matter, mere objects of representation. But this was demonstrably not the case, especially when you look at travel accounts, where it's possible to see writers from across the continent using (and abusing) notions of civilization, barbarism, backwardness or modernity for their own specific purposes. So the *East Looks West* project was a way of introducing more complexity into the subject, as well as recognizing the agency of these travellers and their societies. And, I have to admit, it was also fun to work collaboratively with people from different disciplinary and regional backgrounds. I learnt a lot.

9. As part of the project, *East Looks West*, you have published a short but very interesting anthology *Where To Go In Europe*. In which way it was created and what is its main topic? In which way do you build conclusions on cultural differences?

That was fun too! It's a collection of extracts from travel accounts that deal with a problem that all travellers have: where do you *go*? (That is, go to the toilet.) It started because I was curious about taboo subjects in travel writing, and initially I thought this sort of physical necessity might be one of them. I couldn't have been more wrong. Sometimes it seems that

everyone is writing about lavatorial practices, and certainly everyone I mention this to then wants to tell me about their experiences. Together with my colleague and co-editor on the *East Looks West* project, Alex Drace-Francis, we made an extensive collection of travel latrinalia and published it as a bit of a joke, and an advertisement for the project. It did make a bit of a splash – and the booklet can now be found in the best WCs worldwide (and not just because of the blank pages at the back). There's a serious point to the collection, though: although 'going' is a universal human necessity, travellers have made toilet practices into a key site for exploring cultural difference. We thought that by drawing attention to the ways this was done might prompt more reflection on what people have in common: after all, everybody does it. Recognizing what people share, as well as what divides them, is one of the aims of the *East Looks West* project as well.

10. Can you share with us any funny experience that happened during your extensive scientific work?

Thinking about *Where to Go in Europe* reminds me of the occasion when Alex Drace-Francis and I were both invited separately to a conference that was to be held in a village on the Black Sea coast: we agreed that we'd use some of our free time there to finalize the selection of toilet texts and the editorial stuff. Arriving by bus from the airport, we rounded a corner and saw the sign for the village: KRAPETS. It seemed like a great place to sign off the introduction, but nobody who read that believed that it actually existed.

11. Which projects are you currently doing and what are your future plans?

Right now I'm working on a book about how people read foreign travel accounts about their own societies – and what happens when they disagree and answer back. Whose version of the truth about a society ultimately prevails? In the eighteenth century there are many examples of 'travellees' doing this sort of writing back to a European Republic of Letters, and they often set off a whole series of further responses. So I'm interested in defining and understanding the phenomenon of the 'travel polemic', its characteristics, its consequences, its rise and decline. There are episodes of polemic of this sort right across Europe in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, including some wonderful and revealing Croatian examples. I've published some preliminary articles on these cases, including on Ivan Lovrić/Lovrich and his clashes with Alberto Fortis, particularly about Morlack over-the-shoulder breastfeeding. This research led me to track down and read Lovrić's second reply to Fortis, which claims to have carried off a terrific practical joke on Fortis – I can't believe that this has been ignored so long by Croatian historiography. I've also written about Đuro Ferić/Ferrich, and the discovery of a new letter from him that prompts a reading of his Latin travel account of the territory of Ragusa, and the response to it, as a travel polemic. But the book will range more widely than this – I want to show how such cases are part of a Europe-wide phenomenon, not specific to Southeast Europe or even Eastern Europe.

12. What is your opinion on Croatian historiography and have you noticed any differences in methodological approaches to research?

I've been very much inspired by work in Croatian historiography, right through my career. One thing that I really appreciate, as an outsider, is the sheer range of topics treated in historical research in Croatia; it sometimes seems that Anglophone historiography of the region is quite limited in what it sees as interesting or appropriate (or perhaps canonical) in terms of topics or periods: nationalism and nation building, the NDH, the political uses of the past... Croatian historiography is much richer than this, and should be an inspiration to those of us who work outside. I don't think that there are any substantive differences in methodology, given that methods, after all, depend on the given problem being explored. One thing that I do notice, as editor of EEPS, is that submissions from Croatian historians – and indeed from scholars across the region – tend to take the importance and the assumptions of their research a little bit for granted, without necessarily trying to make the case in a wider context or for a non-expert audience. This is a luxury that those of us who work in a specialized field in the US and UK environment have never had, and I think that we become accustomed very early to forestalling the question: 'so what?' It pushes us to think about the wider significance of our work and perhaps ultimately makes it more influential too. But this is a matter of presentation, not substance: I think that Croatian historiography has a lot to say to wider international audiences.

13. What are the possibilities regarding the employment of young historians in the UK after graduation (is there hyperproduction of staff)?

This is a real problem with regard to PhDs – and I think it will only get worse with Brexit, which is very worrying for academics. I currently urge people who want to study with me for a PhD to think in terms of preparation for alternate academic careers as well as for a conventional university career path. Alternatives might be in public history (museums, cultural institutions), in research positions that might make use of their linguistic and cultural knowledge, in other forms of cultural production. It sounds like a bitter joke, but positions in academic management are proliferating in UK universities: supporting research applications, setting research policy, monitoring research impact on non-academic audiences – and these offer career possibilities that might be more accessible and more *attractive* than academic life in our increasingly bureaucratized universities. On the other hand, a undergraduate degree in history is still a recognized and respected qualification for a wide range of professions, and it's still seen as an excellent preparation for personal development and civic participation.

14. Are there any important disagreements over some "controversial" topics in British historiography (as in Croatia we have about the arrival of the Croats, World War II and the postwar period), is the history often used for daily and political purposes?

Ideas about the past are always used for political purposes. Currently, when questions of the relationship to Europe and immigration are foremost in UK political discourse, there are disagreements about the interpretation of 'British values' and how they may or may not have been expressed or shared in the past; about the British reception of refugees (the Kindertransport, or Hungarians who fled after 1956); or about the role of immigration in shaping British society. Of course, the political relevance of these topics waxes and wanes depending on current events. Apart from perennial questions around the interpretation of the

effects of the British Empire (is the balance positive or negative?), it's hard for me to think of constant neuralgic points that compare to the list above – but then, I'm not a British historian.

15. For the end - an almost traditional question of our magazine - can you give any advice to students of history or those who are about to become, how to be better?

They may not work for everybody, but I can tell you the rules that have guided me: question authority, stay curious, and have fun!

16. Thank you very much for your participation!

The pleasure is entirely mine.