Elizabeth Swedo Interview 2015

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Chloe Buzzard: Today is November 4, 2015. My name is Chloe Buzzard and the other interviewers here today are Joey Donohue, Daniel Correa and Luis Castro. And we’re here today with Dr. Elizabeth Swedo, we’re at Western Oregon University and we’ll be doing her Oral History today. Good Morning!

Elizabeth Swedo: Good morning!

CB: So okay, when did you start working here at Western?
ES: So I started in August of 2000—no 2013. So this will be my third year of teaching here at Western.

CB: What were the circumstances that brought you here?

ES: I finished my doctoral dissertation at the University of Minnesota, in the Twin Cities, and then I had a one-year visiting assistant professorship where I was basically subbing for a sabbatical professor in Medieval and Early Modern history and that was at the college of Wooster in Wooster, Ohio. Which is sort of halfway between Columbus and Cleveland, on the very edge of Amish Country. So a very interesting experience. And the year that I was teaching there, I was also on the job market for a permanent tenure track position and there’s not that many tenure track positions out there, especially for Early Modern and Medieval and even Ancient jobs that I was applying for. So about 30 in the country total, and so that meant that I applied from Maine to Miami, and Alaska to San Diego in terms of jobs. And I had one offer, Western, and then one offer from a school in Michigan and I decided to come to Western. So yeah, it’s been good.

CB: So have you had any other positions here?

ES: So I am the Assistant Professor of Medieval and Early Modern European History. So that’s been my only teaching position and then of course I wear different hats in different committees. So I am on currently the Honors Program Committee, which is a University-wide committee. I do the Social Science Division Curriculum Committee so any time there’s program changes to the catalogs or to specific courses, I get to chair that committee, it’s super fun. And then I also, with Mark Henkels, I am the co-chair of the Social Science Symposia so we bring in people in the Social Sciences both from Western and from other colleges. And last year, you know, we had an immigration lawyer coming in to talk about social issues and other fields of Social Science research. So those are the sorts of things that I’m doing most around campus right now.

Daniel Correa: Alright, I have question two.

ES: Okay.

DC: What is the basis of your job at Western? Guess we kind of covered that already.

ES: Yeah. No, in terms of what I actually teach and how I contribute to the department so, I do the first two courses in the World History Survey and so all the History faculty in the History Department are either contributing to the US history or the World. So I do World, so I do the first two classes, 104 and 105, in World and then, I was trying to count right before you came, how many classes do I actually, I teach about twelve other classes in Medieval and Early Modern
topics and there are still that two I want to add that I haven’t taught yet. But, so I do a Medieval survey of Early, High and Late Middle Ages. I do a British survey where we do Britain from Neolithic times all the way up to about the 1700s, in two courses. And then I do topical courses. I do Vikings, and Women and Family, and Medieval Church. So it’s really great that I pretty much get to do whatever interest me and my colleagues don’t object. So yeah, those are the classes I teach.

**DC:** Okay. And what is the typical workday like for you?

**ES:** [Laughter] Long. [Laughter]. I am not a morning person and yet I usually have an 8 a.m. class. For a typical 8 a.m. class, I am often up at 4 a.m. to do either grading or prep or other material, either for that class or for the other classes that are coming. I teach usually a, what we call a 3-3-3 load, which means I do three classes per term. And so there’s also, at this point, my book orders for winter have been due and the syllabus for winter and stuff are done. So yeah, I usually teach, I don’t like to teach back-to-back. I need some time to recharge, so I usually will have a class and then some office hours, maybe some more time for grading or for course prep. Because of course, everything you guys read, I have to read again as well. So, you know, I can produce discussion questions and things like that. So usually about two classes per day and then, go home and do more work, so [Laughter]. Grading takes a ridiculous amount of time, but I would say, so, my work day might not end till about 11 p.m. and then it’s rinse and repeat [Laughter] the next morning. Yeah, and then I’m, you know, on weekends I’m trying very much to get my own research done and so the other thing that I do, in addition to service to the Department and to the Division and to the College, is try to produce articles, books and things like that. So there’s a lot of juggling with time to try and get everything in.

**Luis Castro:** Alright, to question number three, what is the most interesting event or happening that you’ve experienced while working at Western?

**ES:** Well that’s like the hardest one, [Laughter]. I will say the first winter I was here in December like week nine or ten we had, like the barest amount of snow [Background Laughter] where the grass was still poking through and I was on campus already and they told me, I don’t know, about 10 a.m. that it was, classes were canceled and I honestly didn’t believe them because it seemed so ridiculous--you could see the grass it was not that much snow. And coming from Minnesota like no, we have twelve inches of snow and we still make it to 8 a.m. classes on time. So, that was a sort of a wake up in terms of you really don’t have winter here [Laughter] at all. But in terms of sort of campus events I think the most pleasant was for the history majors, my first year when we had, not so much for the senior showcase which was fine, and it was a long day but was really exciting the Saturday presentations with family and friends because everybody’s more relaxed when they’re presenting their research, everything is done at that point and their family really gets to see what they’ve accomplished in that time, so, in terms of thinking about student interactions, I love the senior--I mean I love and I hate the senior history
thesis process because it is, this is the part of teaching I like, it’s when individuals get to engage in history and make significant discoveries for themselves and that’s very exciting to watch. It can be very frustrating at other times but I love that that mentorship aspect of teaching so that part is great. And then for my own research, my second summer here I had the opportunity to go to Denmark for a week to meet with the best scholars in the field to learn how to read Medieval Danish manuscripts and that was awesome because it’s a wonderful program, it’s through the Arnamagnæan Institute in Copenhagen and they share their collection with the institute Árni Magnússon in Iceland there in Reykjavik so it is all the best scholars in the field donating their time. It’s practically a free program that you’re just paying like, I don’t know, like 60 bucks for books or something like that and you have to pay your own room and board. But that was just fantastic and then on top of that because I was already in Copenhagen I managed to squeeze in a trip to Oslo and get to go to some the best museums in the world for Viking stuff and I’ve been studying this stuff for 15 years and I’d never seen it with my own eyes before. So it was ridiculously exciting and I would be, like, walking into a room in a museum and like jumping up and down and thinking, “Why is nobody else jumping up and down?” It was wonderful, nerdy joy. So it was a great opportunity and then I took, I don’t know, three thousand, four thousand pictures and I have been able to include that stuff in my teaching and some of the manuscripts that I look at, we look at in my Medieval Church class so it’s just it’s wonderful to integrate my own research and to have wonderful experiences going on trips, that’s always fun. But that’s a part of why to be a Medievalist right? You get to go to Europe all the time, you don’t have to go to D.C. or something like that. So, yeah I would say that those three sort of things I think were the most memorable at Western so far. So I’ve only been here three years, maybe good things are still to come. But... [Laughter].

Joey Donohue: Which leads us perfectly into question four. What are your plans and goals for Western?

ES: Yeah, so for my own work I have a couple of articles on my plate right now that I’m trying to finish up. One is looking at how volcanoes and volcanic eruptions affect religious devotion and we get new saints that are created just to deal with things like mudslides and earthquakes and how those are kind of uniquely Icelandic and yet fit the larger pattern of what’s going on in medieval Europe, even though, like, nobody else has to deal with these natural disasters it fits the larger pattern. So that’s at the top of my to-do list in terms of my own research. And working on transforming my doctoral dissertation into a book. So that will be in the next two years, I hope to get that out to publishers so that’s a big ambitious project. For Western and for teaching, I have just about two more classes that I want to add to the curriculum, but one of the things in sort of, a little bit more the long run, that I would really like to do is develop a study abroad program that will take us either to Iceland or Denmark. Kind of leaning towards Denmark, even though my research is in Iceland, because it’s so accessible to people who don’t speak Danish [Laughter]. In a way that Iceland is, is a much smaller country, so you don’t have the same kinds of public transit and stuff that you get that makes it so easy to get around in Denmark, so yeah, so that’s
sort of a goal for what I want Western to become and yeah I don’t know what else to say just more of the same, I guess.