# Transcript

Dr Anna McKay (AM)

The most interesting thing is having research expenses and being able to go to fabulous locations and trace prisoners of war, because someone someone's got to go to Antigua and check it out.

Nick Jones (NJ)

And you know you are prepared to make that sacrifice. Thank you so much.

AM

What can I say?

NJ

Welcome everybody to this month's Researcher and Focus podcast from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences here at the University of Liverpool. My name's Nick Jones. I'm part of the research and impact team at the faculty. And today I'm very pleased to be joined by Doctor Anna Mckay, Leverhulme Trust early career fellow in the Department of History. Today Anna will be talking to us about her work researching the lives and deaths of prisoners across the British Empire, as well as the fascinating and still very relevant use of prison hulks and the long, often unexpected afterlives of Navy warships so. First of all, thank you very much for joining us Anna, lovely to meet you.

AM

Oh, thank you for having me.

NJ

It's a pleasure. It's a pleasure at all. So first of all, a first question, why this subject? How did you get interested in history and specifically this area?

AM

Oh. Well, I did my MA in 18th century studies and and I remember at the time doing a little module that looked at debtors prisons and that was kind of exciting. And after after I finished my MA, I wasn't really sure what to do with myself and I ended up sort of scouring jobs.ac.uk for any sort of available PHD's because someone gave me some great advice and said, you know, go check out collaborative studentships. And there was one that came up on prison ships, and I just thought it sounded so interesting, and it was with the University of Leicester and the National Maritime Museum. And it just looked like a great opportunity to sort of get this sense of working across academia and with the National Museum that that part of it really interested me and I just, yeah, ended up writing this really interesting PhD on prison ships and kind of uncovering like the the sort of above and below perspective. So looking at you know why they came about but also what was that experience like for the prisoners? So it was. It was a great, great sort of academic journey for me.

NJ

And on that, what was your journey before you got to the University of Liverpool? Was it those places or have you worked anywhere else? How did you come to be where you are?

AM

Well, I did. I started my undergrad at at University of York and I did English literature and I always say to people that I kind of I liked history at school. I I got the history trophy, you know, so I I was good at. It. But I just loved English lit and I loved stories and narrative, and so I did that for my undergrad, but I realised during that every single essay I wrote, I used to call it an essay on context. And it was because I was really interested in the bits that happened around the books. Like, why did a novel come to, like, at this time, why was it written? You know, like this then, and basically they were history essays. So, you know, I I was sort of encouraged by the people in, in the department there to to do an 18th century studies MA at York. So I did that. And but in between MA and PhD I did. You know, I went to Leeds City College. I did a patisserie course. I thought I'll open a bakery and then then I thought, Oh no, I'll be a script writer. I love narrative. And so I I ended up writing a small play about the patisserie course and kind of like the Bake Off but with baking fat and not butter. As Bake Off on a budget. Because that was how it was. And then I ended up going to Freedom Studios in Bradford, which is a a local theatre company, and they they had some Arts Council funding and and they had this amazing initiative called St Voices and I ended up being selected as one of the the writers on that and we we all wrote a short play and from there I ended up getting some working TV. And even got shortlisted for news and writers awards to write for Hollyoaks, so there was a Liverpool connection. But yeah, and then from the from the PhD. So it was a slightly odd journey, but one that was definitely focused on storytelling and narrative. And then, yeah, post PhD ended up doing a few fellowships that were on prisoners of war because my PhD compared prisoners of war on board prison ships and convicts. So there's always these two types of prisons I tend to focus on.

NJ

A fascinating yes, and it's nice to have a bit of a a rambling journey, I think to get to academia it gives people a much more rounded background, I think.

AM

I think so too, yeah.

NJ

So you mentioned that briefly there, your PhD, that you wrote about prison hulks. So these are the kind of ex warships used to hold convicts as well as how they compared to how war prisoners of the same period were looked at. Well, could you tell us about that and perhaps how the conditions for both groups were different or what they would have experienced?

AM

Absolutely. So yeah, let's have a look at like, say, convict ships. So they they start in 1776 prior to the say, American Revolutionary War, you know, American independence, they used to British government used to send its convict population. So men, women and children to say the plantations in America, that's they like the war breaks out. They they're basically facing a huge prison housing crisis, you know, where do we send all of our convicts? So they start putting them on board, ex like naval warships, just as like a temporary solution to this prison. Crowding and uh, they end up, you know, running in England for 80 years. So, you know, really big part of the prison system across the 19th century, but kind of at the same time. So during the warfare period, so 1775 to 1815, you also have prisons of war being held on board, similar ships. Sometimes they're even in the same dockyard, so in Portsmouth. There you know, there's convicts working in the dockyards, labouring to sort of help. You know, do Imperial projects, but then you have prisoners of war who are basically just sitting around waiting to be exchanged and sent home so they could be, you know, French, you know, sailors or Spanish military prisoners. Anyone that got caught up in warfare. So yeah, my PhD compared both prisoner of war experience and convict experience. And I kind of I wasn't really sure what I'd find when I was doing this comparison, but what actually it turned out to be was that prisoners of war were kind of seen as this almost like objects of fascination. You know, the British public used to actually go on day trips and roll up to the boats to listen to all the sounds of all the different people talking because they. You know, it was just exciting to hear, you know, the enemy Frenchman. And people would buy little trinkets like bonework guillotines and model ships and things like that from the prisoners. So they had quite a racket going on and but then you compared them to convicts and they're, you know, they have a very different experience. And they're seen by the public as something to be feared. You know, like the sort of taint of criminality. That if a convict escapes, you could almost become a convict yourself because of the sort of this association with criminality and you know, we see the beginning of Great Expectations by Charles Dickens and you have the escapee convict Magwitch sort of running through the the marshes and it's really atmospheric and scary. So, you know, the British public used to fear the convicts, but then they'd were fascinated by prisoners of war. So it was very interesting. And obviously then, prisoners of war all go home after the the war ends, all the wars end. And and convicts just stay on and and. Slowly you see the British public's attitudes changing towards convicts, and they've become almost an object of sympathy because they begin to criticise the system. This so this has been going for 80 years and it doesn't work. And these convicts are being really. Time of it. So you do finally towards the end of the sort of 1840s C context being, you know, objects of pity and sympathy.

NJ

And would there be a difference in the kind of material situations in which these two groups were kept with the prisoners of war treated better? Do they have better food, better bunks? Or was it particularly bad for both.

AM

Well for both actually, you know, like I again, I used to think ohh. You know military prisoners, you know, like Geneva Convention. But obviously that didn't exist in the 18th century. Variance of it did you know you could see that there was definitely you know we don't kill prisoners we just detain them you know. So there are sort of global rules of conduct that are being applied and. The British Government, did you know, feed and clothe its presence of war, but. Yeah, they were both kept on these sort of decommission ships. A lot of the time, the French say French prisoners of war. They were held on on board like a ship that might have been captured at sea. Now that ship could be a bit battered from warfare, you know, could have had some cannon fire, you know, and and and basically the ships are all sort of broken down and and not in very good condition. That presence of oil just kind of waiting to be released, so they don't really they basically you find it quite boring, but there's still lots of disease spread through the decks and things like that. So there's still high mortality rates and it's not a good, it's still a good time to be a prisoner if you're on a ship.

NJ

Yeah, doesn't sound it. Not at all. You also wrote about how prisoners were treated at the end of their lives and also immediately after in terms of you explored, like post mortem examinations and practises towards their corpses. What did you find about that?

AM

Well, I found umm, I was really interested in this one inquiry that came about in 1847 and it was called the, You know, inquiry into general treatment of convicts that. Which this inquiry came about because one convict wrote to an MP and said, look, there's been some medical abuses on board the hulks. I think you need to come and check them out so, you know, in Parliament this MP stands up. And he said, I really think you should, you know, go down there and, you know, check out the hulks. So they sent someone from the prison inspectorate to do. An investigation and it turned out, one of the bodies of the convicts had been they they thought, had been illegally dissected. So you're supposed to wait. The conditions of the Anatomy Act at that time where you had to wait at least 48 hours before you like anatomically. You know, dissect the corpse and they said, the convict said they did not wait 48 hours. This was done immediately and you know, furthermore, they said that, you know, buckets of blood were poured over the side of the the decks. All the convicts could see, you know, they said there were bits of entrails and and things like that, should have had a content warning. But people there. And they they just said that, you know, this is incredibly traumatising and, you know, it's incredibly disrespectful the way that you're treating that the bodies of the dead. So they they do this big investigation and they find out that the medical officer on board, you know, the sort of chief surgeon, it's guy called Peter Bossy. He's basically using at that point the prison hoax. As like a sort of pseudo teaching hospital. So he has a surgery in Woolwich of his own. He runs with his brother and he but they basically bring all of their medical students on board and go around the hulks and they're using it as like a freebie, you know, opportunity to go around and you know, just kind of learn. But you know, obviously some some malpractice is happening too. So they they find out, you know, the the sort of conclusion of the inquiry is that they, you know, they they did not. It was it that it was a legal dissect. But that it was still, you know, sort of reprehensible behaviour. And they also said that a lot of the sort of bodies of the convicts when they're being sent to the anatomy schools were actually arriving in a really bad state. So they said, like, broken bones. I think they said something was mashed, you know, like organs were like unable to be, like, retrieved from the bodies. So people were doing stuff to the bodies and yeah, it was kind of like this huge public outcry. So what happens basically at the end of it is that they obviously removed the surgeon, Peter Bossy. And they say, right, you're. Good. But then they also start to sort of shift the hulks into more public public control. So the prison inspectorate is this sort of body that was set up to, you know, manage all the prisons in England. But until that time, prison hulks weren't under that jurisdiction, despite the fact that, you know, so it's kind of lucky, did whether you end up on the hulks or whether you end up in a. Prison, like in Millbank or Newgate, you know, one of the big ones we know in London. So they finally bring the hulks under more sort of control of, you know, basically central authority. And because of that, they finally begin to stop the system. It's a slow, winding down from that point where they say hooks really aren't working for us, are they?

NJ

OK. Interesting. So as we still see today, sometimes it takes a scandal to shift the dial, maybe on how things are are treated.

AM

Absolutely. And also a bit of public condemnation never goes amiss.

NJ

Yeah, yeah. Now just a quick question about that. That 48 hour rule between death and dissection. Was that because in those days it was harder to actually determine point of death and there was a worry that people weren't dead, because I know the Victorians had all those, you know, those like, bells in the graves and things like that to to to worry about people coming back alive, was it to do with that?

AM

Well, that's an interesting question. I I can't quite remember. It's been a while since I looked at it, but yeah, there's there's so many interesting attitudes, like Victorian attitudes towards death at the time.

There's some, you know, there's there's obviously, you know, like this sense of it being like a a legal thing, but then also like, a moral thing about when you can start to dissect someone, you know, once say, like, an inquest has taken place, a lot of the time, one of the big findings was, you know, if you go back to, like, the, say Anatomy Inspector reports that I found at the National Archives in queue. And you look at those, you see all these returns of how many prisoners from the hulks, you know, their bodies were actually sent to anatomy schools. It was far less in comparison to the bodies of people sent from the workhouse. This so actually the conclusion my findings were actually that although there was this public outcry, it's actually the the bodies of the poor are being mistreated far more, and it's almost this sort of punitive measure that if you enter the workhouse, your body becomes the body of the state and you're basically equated with criminality. Because your body is going to be treated the same way as a a dirty prisoner on the Hawks. So yeah, very interesting. Sort of say Victorian values and morals are all kind of swirling around at the same time.

NJ

Well, some would say that being poor is still seen as a crime by some members of society even today, isn't it in? In how punitive measures are put across people so. So plus ca change again there. Maybe now your current research is looking at prisoners of war, who included not just combatants but also women, children displaced or enslaved people and you're finding some parallels with the world today. Could you tell us a little bit about what you have been finding.

AM

So this project kind of stems from the fact that. So look, my PhD was on prisoners of war on on, on prison ships, right? But then we. We kind of say, OK, that's actually limited to England. So my study was kind of, yeah, a little bit of Bermuda, a bit of Gibraltar. But mainly it was English experiences. So I was really interested in looking a bit. More globally, so I had a look at these prisoner war registers that are held at queue. And what was really interesting about them is that they had 99 registers. You know, there's like hundreds of them, but 99 of them were some imperial holding locations. So I looked at all the different places where prisoners of war were being held over, say, 1793 to 1815, which is like French, you know, Napoleonic War era. And they're they're in Jamaica. They're in Cape Town. They're in the East Indies, in Malta. They're they're just. All over the world. And I just thought that was so interesting that we don't really think about like the journeys that prisoners made because so many times that a prisoner of war would get captured in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean and they would be sent safe to Jamaica and then they would get entered in a register. And then after that, they get moved to England. And then they get moved back again and they get moved somewhere else. And it's all these, like, hopping across the ocean. So I was really interested in, like, the mobility of what we would assume was basically something fixed. So think about a prisoner you think about them like languishing in a cell somewhere. You don't think about them being moved endlessly so. I go to look at these registers and they're so interesting because they're basically, you know, an 18th century spreadsheet. So what they are is, you know, they'll say the name of the prisoner. So that's brilliant because we already have someone's name. And I lost that. And then they say which ship they were on. And then they say which ship captured them. And then it would say, well, will they sent and then it will say. You know, what was their status? So I'm really interested in status because a lot of the time, yes. OK. Sometimes they say sailor. Sometimes they say naval seamen or they say, you know, someone from the military. But other times they say literally they say slave and it's like, hang on a minute. You know, how is that a prisoner of war? And so you look into the lives of these people and for a start, it's difficult. It's very difficult to find the names of, say, enslaved sailors, but they're there. And it's difficult to find the names of, say, just people who cross the ocean like passengers or, you know, clergymen or anything. But they're being mentioned in these registers. Because the ships that they were travelling. Got captured and then you know they have to go through the process of, you know, noting their names down. So what I'm finding is that, yeah, this kind of category of a prisoner of war in the 18th century is far broader than we would ever normally have expected. That you're seeing people who, you know, weren't compounds. They weren't fighting. They were just. Crossing the ocean, but they get caught up in warfare, so it's this kind of like social history story of, you know, these sort of almost like the wider impacts of of who is being affected by warfare. And so, you know, we talk about historical parallels than I just. Of you know, you look at displacement during warfare. You look at people moving and it's, you know, it happens and it happens now.

NJ

You also looked a little bit in in the blog that you sent through a little bit on the the ship currently being used to house asylum seekers here, the Bibby Stockholm. Is there a how does that resonate with with your work?

AM

This is Bibby Stockholm,, so this you know, news broken, you know, you see every now every now and then a a government, a government will turn to ships as a sort of means to sort of a temporarily solve a housing crisis. So like a a problem group is what you know people tend to label them it could be asylum seekers it could be prisoners it's just. You know something that basically causes a government about. The trouble? So yeah, the Bibby Stockholm is this asylum bardge that's in Dorset in Portland. And it's housing asylum seekers. Currently, they've been there nearly a year now and when the news broke, I just obviously I couldn't not make those historical connections. And so for me, you know, I I looked at. I I basically applied my knowledge of prison hoax to the present day situation and said look this was a temporary solution. In history it didn't work. You know it it. It was supposed to. It's supposed to be costing less money than, say, deportation in history. That didn't work, you know, and it's just like making all of these connections. And so, yeah, I wrote a few articles for, you know, international press. And then I also wrote it was really interesting. I got to write a policy. Reports or history and policy, which is a really interesting like online journal and. There is one of those things where it's like I outlined, you know, all of these different parallels that I wanted people to be aware of. And that's a really great forum for people who have any kind of connection between policy and their research to to get something out there. And and policymakers do access that website a lot. So it's it's a great space to to have something on this.

NJ

Great. Thank you very much. Segueing nicely into other publications and things that you're working on, you have got a book proposal out at the moment about how ships often go on to have lives beyond their initial designations, especially military ships, but also different types. Could you tell us a bit about that.

AM

Yeah, of course. Yeah. This is very exciting. So those are thing called the Ideas Prize that's set up by a publisher in London called Profile. Because they have a yearly competition for anyone, so it doesn't have to be an early career research. It could be anyone in academia or even a policymaker who is has not yet published their first trade book to pitch a proposal. And it's basically it's kind of around an idea. So it's like it's not just, you know, a book on this, it has to. Be like a sort of germ or something. Kind of quirky, so across science sort of academic career. I've always been like, collecting all these examples of the ways that we've used ships in kind of weird and interesting ways. So like a naval warship, it's odd that that then becomes roughly converted into a prison ship, but other ships. Especially like, say, let's just say for example like ships from Nelson's fleet. So these are like famous ships, they all got transformed. You know, some of them got shot to pieces and they just broke them up and used the word to scrub. But other ones, you know, they were still floating. So they were still used. So they became hospitals and they became. Prisons and you know, they became borstals, you know, children's schools. And and just like training ships. And there's all these different weird uses of ships over time. So I called my proposal ship shapes because it's this way that we transform ships in their afterlives, and they don't often associate. Lips as having afterlives. We just think that's the HMS Temeraire. You know, famous painting Turner. You know, we all seen the the image of of that ship being towed out. But that ship became, you know, it house convict boys, you know it became, you know, a Colt depot at one point. And it's like, we always seem to focus on the sort of moment of glory with the ship rather than what happened next. So that's what this proposal sort of teasing out and I'm I'm hoping that not necessarily to win at all, but I'm certainly hoping to to keep working on that book and get out. Monday.

NJ

You absolutely should. It sounds fascinating. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I was going to mention the Fighting Temeraire such a famous painting of such a famous ship. And yes, it's a a craft that has come to the end of. Its life. But it went beyond just that Trafalgar battle didn't like, say, it had quite a long it's it's life after Trafalgar was probably longer than its life before, I think.

AM

Exactly. Exactly. Yeah. You know, sometimes, you know, you have, like, you know, these moments of glory or something, but then, you know, the ship's just sort of rotting in the, you know, in the yard for for years. But also they have such significance for the public as well. You know, the way that. That, you know, the Temeraire was sort of commemorated by Turner. People went to, you know, the documents to see it being broken up. People sort of sort sort pieces of it, you know, so even one of my chapters is called, like, Pub and home because, you know, even bits of ships become tables in pubs or beans or, you know, anything. And it's always this sort of. It's like this national pride that we have. It's all wound up in ships, but sometimes they have weird meanings and they take on different meanings at different times, like how you know a prison ship is like symbol of like all that's rotten with the state. But that ship might have been, you know, fighting in the back of Trafalgar, where we would have loved it.

NJ

Yeah. Yeah. Like I say, absolutely fascinating. Yes, yes, publish that book, yes. And we need to read it.

AM

I promise to.

NJ

I mean, of the many things that you found, what do you think been the most interesting thing that you've discovered in your research? The thing that stopped you in your tracks?

AM

Oh, there's lots of doubts. There's lots of moments where I sort of get a bit excited, but you know, I I never used to. I I I think I feel like I had a bit of a cavalier attitude towards research, you know. The I think. Maybe that was, you know, so my PhD was collaborative and I always kind of didn't feel a sense of ownership over it. Almost because, you know, my supervisors almost pitched it. And I. He was just turned up to do the job. That's how I used to feel about it. But as the years have gone on, I'm I'm really like, no, I am an expert in this. You know, I do. I do know my stuff and and sort of having that personal realisation has been very, you know good for me but I. Just I feel like recently after basically after the Bibby Stockholm news broke last year, I've had a real sort of surge of interest in in looking into sort of historical connections with things and narratives and connecting those two together. And so I'm really interesting and interested in the way that. You know, we we see the way that prisoners were treated in the 18th and 19th century and how they're being treated today and they. It's it's not really a good answer, but it's like there's these germs of ideas that are sort of circulating at the moment that I'm, like, excited about a future where I might be able to connect with them more and keep going with these ideas and say, well, where can that fit? What can we do with this idea? You know, how can we say prison overcrowding in the 18th century? Is is still happening today and how can I kind of apply one framework to something else and start making new connections and meeting new people and and going forward? So yeah, there's there's lots of things going on at the moment it feels like.

NJ

Yes, yes. And kind of again leading on from that. And my final question, which I'm duty bound to ask being from the impact team is, what would you like to see is the biggest real world real world change to come from your research? Do you think you know, the impact that it has on people's lives?

AM

I think I think for me like taking one step back from prison ships, that's actually a problem with prison overcrowding that happened in the 18th century. So it's like looking at prison overcrowding today and saying it happened, then it's happen. Now, and how can we apply that knowledge that we have from the past into the present day and make it useful? So yeah, they these these ships were temporary they, but they lasted for 80 years. They were supposed to be cheap and effective. They weren't either. And, you know, they were sort of just like a quick fix that ended up going on not only for 80 years. Like the the public outcry around them over the years. Just. Grew and grew, and we see those parallels today and I just, I hope that at some point like obviously the biggest danger I'd like to see is that the Bibby Stockholm just stops, but it would also be very nice if if if governments could could see that, you know, detaining people, however temporarily, on on ships is not the answer. But also because we are aware, you know most of us. Of of at least a prison ship, even through able mag, which we have that association with criminality, we think that people who are held on ships and detained on ships are criminals and that is not the case. So more understanding is and a bit a bit more empathy and respect is what I'd like. To see in the future.

NJ

And could you really ask for anything more? I think I mean. And well, you know, reach for the stars and all and all that, but absolutely. So really, really interesting and such a great topic with so much going on in it. Doctor Anna Mackay, thank you so much for joining me today. It's been a real pleasure to talk to you and learn more about your work.

AM

Thank you so much.

NJ

Fabulous and thank you all again for listening. And please join us next time for our next edition of the Research in Focus Podcast from the Humanities and Social Sciences. Thank you and goodbye.