



## TRANSCRIPT

### *Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa*

#### **Professor Joan Waugh Debunks the “Easy Stereotypes of History”**

The UCLA scholar tries to understand the past on its own terms, while interrogating how we memorialize it. She speaks with Fred about the memory wars that have outlived the Civil War, the politics of Reconstruction that gave us Confederate monuments, and what we can learn from Gettysburg by visiting the place.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at [hkelly@pbk.org](mailto:hkelly@pbk.org). Thanks for listening.

Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I’m Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society.

Since 2018, we’ve welcomed leading thinkers, visionaries and artists to our podcast. These individuals have shaped our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters, in addition to sharing stories with us about their scholarly and personal journeys.

Many of our guests are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who travel the country to our Phi Beta Kappa chapters, where they spend two days on campus and present free public lectures. We invite you to attend. For more information about Visiting Scholars’ lectures, please visit [pbk.org](http://pbk.org).

Today, I’m thrilled to welcome Dr. Joan Waugh, Professor of History at UCLA. Professor Waugh researches and writes about 19<sup>th</sup>-century America, specializing in the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Gilded Era. Her work helps us understand the legacy and consequences of these historical periods in the present day, especially their impact on political parties, social movements, race, class, and gender. She’s explored the different ways that generations of Americans have memorialized the Civil War throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, right up to our time. Dr. Waugh has been honored with four teaching

prizes, including UCLA's most prestigious teaching honor, the Distinguished Teaching Award.

Welcome, Professor Waugh.

Joan Waugh: Thank you very much, Fred. I'm delighted to be here.

Lawrence: William Faulkner famously said, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." And if that's true of anything, it's certainly true of the Civil War, isn't it, with the attention today to Civil War monuments that implicate the Civil War period itself, the time when they were erected, the late 19<sup>th</sup> and more often early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and of course our own 21<sup>st</sup> century moment of racial reckoning. You've been working in this area for a long, long time, so take us back to what lit the spark at the beginning. What got you interested in the Civil War and Reconstruction Era periods?

Waugh: Well, I thank you for bringing William Faulkner's quote to light. It's the quote that I use in my very first lecture to my UCLA students, and it can't be more true today that the past is never past. It's not even dead. I can honestly say there wasn't a time that I wasn't fascinated by 19<sup>th</sup> century U.S. history. I wouldn't have put it that way at age six, and eight, and ten. I was a voracious reader and one of my favorite ways of getting history is through biography, and I read all the biographies of Abraham Lincoln and the Founding Fathers. I also read a number of history books on the Civil War and I almost feel apologetic about saying this now, but I wasn't aware of all the resonance of *Gone With the Wind*, and that was one of my favorite novels I first dipped into when I was about 11 years old or 12 years old, and the most common comment to me when I was growing up is, "Why do you always have to have your nose in a book?" And, "Go out and play baseball or something."

Lawrence: Where did you grow up?

Waugh: I'm a third generation Los Angeles person and I am UCLA all the way. I always dreamed about going to UCLA. I got my BA, my MA, and my PhD at UCLA, and was very fortunate to get a job there.

Lawrence: A Bruin through and through.

Waugh: I am. You bet.

Lawrence: And yet you were not captured by California history as much as by a period that was, although there's a western part of the story of the Civil War, it's still overwhelmingly a story that takes place from the Mississippi River east, isn't it?

Waugh: It is. I can't deny that. And I can't deny that in my first research project that led to the biography of Josephine Shaw Lowell, I also... It was eastern, but it was a clever way for me to explore areas of this country that I wasn't as familiar with. So, I got to go to New York City, and Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C., and Boston, and I find that places are very important. That's why I went to the battlefields.

Lawrence: Yeah, so let's talk a little bit about that. So, you not only have led trips to Gettysburg, but you've developed whole study visit programs to Gettysburg. What's your approach to bringing students along? Also you've brought teachers there, haven't you?

Waugh: Yes, I have. I've led teachers and I've also led private groups. Battlefields and monuments are the best place to interpret history and give it the complexities. Gettysburg had everything that I wanted for my students. It was centrally located, because the trip would be three weeks. We looked at the battle, we looked at Lincoln at Gettysburg, we looked at the town history, and we were especially interested with memory. So, it has the whole package, and Gettysburg is just perfect for that. It really is a marvelous experience.

Lawrence: Can you tell us a particular story or two at Gettysburg? I mean, you've seen it many times, but the advantage of seeing it with a group of students is that you get to experience it afresh through their eyes. Are there a couple of times you recall where somebody said something that really struck you as an insight about that place?

Waugh: I think the most vivid for me at Gettysburg would come when we go to the site or near the site where Lincoln gave his Gettysburg address, and look at the monument, and talk about how that speech came about. So, getting to know both sides, the commanders, the officers, and the experience of the soldiers on the ground, when you can see how hard it was, when UCLA students who aren't used to humidity wonder how so many soldiers, Union and Confederate, came into Gettysburg without enough water to drink and didn't have enough water to drink during these three days of battle.

Lawrence: And that was July. That was a hot, humid time.

Waugh: It was indeed. And also, it gives you a visceral idea of the suffering of the places, that there were these immense casualties. Almost every single building has some kind of plaque on it. You see all the churches that were hospitals. You see on Baltimore Street where the troops, the Union troops, at the end of the first day of battle came running down because the Confederates essentially defeated them on the first day of battle, and then they came up and they got reorganized. So, it's about strategy, it's about politics, it's about where the war was in terms of African Americans, perhaps what these men were fighting for, the various motivations.

Lawrence: You know, the great Civil War historian James McPherson wrote an essay in 1999 or 2000, it was in a whole series of essays in the *New York Review of Books* of what if some moment had come out the other way, and he wrote a very powerful essay as of course he would about what would have happened if the South had won at Gettysburg. But more important to me was a brilliant insight he began the essay with, which is that business about what if it had come out the other way is not just a parlor game, he said. It's actually the best way for us to envision how it felt to them, because it is so difficult otherwise not to assume that history had to come out the way it had to come out. And they don't know how it's going to come out, and they had every reason to be very doubtful that it was going to go their way, and then somewhere in the back of their

minds, has to be... there's nothing between us and Harrisburg. There's nothing between us and Philadelphia. And the whole course of American history could be very different.

And they don't know that this story has a different ending, because it hasn't ended yet.

Waugh: They don't know. You're exactly right and I am also a huge admirer of James McPherson, and I would agree with his statement. It's the way I teach history. It's the way I research history and write history in that I want to respect the people of the past, even if I disagree with them. Even if they don't live up to my standards in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, which most people in the past fail to live up to our standards today.

But that's not what studying history should be about. It's really about trying to understand the past on its own terms before you can make any judgments, and I think that's a huge part of it, not reading back in history that the Civil War was inevitable, or that the Union would emerge as the inevitable victory as we tend to do these days.

Lawrence: So, we are so delighted at Phi Beta Kappa you'll be one of our Visiting Scholars this year, and I know that one of your proposed discussion topics is why study the Civil War. So, is that just self-evident, or what's to discuss about why study the Civil War?

Waugh: Well, perhaps it's self-evident to you, but it's not self-evident to many of my students. I talk about that this Civil War is a vital part of American history. I would argue it's the past, the present, and the future. And I talk about the fact that we're used to reading and seeing about wars in far off places these days, and we don't think of a war in our own country that tore the country apart in ways that we can't imagine. And then, of course, previewing for them the importance, the vital importance of resolving to some extent the issue of slavery in this democratic republic. For once and for all, it ended that debate. It started a lot of others, of course, as we know, but it was about sovereignty, that the United States had a sovereignty that it was willing to preserve. It wasn't going to let the Confederacy become an independent nation if it could help it.

And then, even though at the beginning of the war slavery was not a cause of the war, it was not the goal of the war, at least for most people, including President Abraham Lincoln, but it became that very quickly. It was truly the second American Revolution. And I do cover how the Civil War has been memorialized briefly but try to get them to understand that the war hasn't been over in terms of the memory. This is another kind of war, the memory wars.

Lawrence: Right. So, let's talk about those memory wars a little bit, because obviously one of the most dramatic aspects of the racial injustice reckoning that we're dealing with at this moment in American life has been focused on Confederate hero statues. Some of them, although very few of them, going all the way back to the Civil War era. More commonly in the early-20<sup>th</sup> century and from a time much more associated with Jim Crow. But they're not statues of governors from the nineteen teens and 1920s; they're overwhelmingly Confederate heroes. So, what do you make, first of all, of that continued power and vitality of that debate, and where are you as a historian on the issue of whether monuments should come down or monuments should stay up?

Waugh: This is a vexing topic, and I don't want to put the wrong foot forward on this. I will say that what I try and convey when students ask me why are there so many Confederate monuments, it's something that we talked about quite a bit. And I was trying to explain to them is that these Confederate monuments are actually part of reconciliation. In other words, the larger purpose was to save the Union and to bring the country back together again, and the goal for the United States Senate and the Congress, which was dominated by Republicans, was to bring some semblance of justice to the freed people, yes, but also to reconcile with the Southerners who were rapidly regaining their citizenship and their voting rights.

And because of that, that is why these monuments are so prevalent. I believe that it is vital to keep Confederate monuments on the battlefields, like Antietam, like Gettysburg, and Vicksburg, because it is a perfect opportunity for historians and interpreters to discuss memory traditions, and discuss the politics of the time that allowed this building of monuments, and I think they're very valuable to use as both explaining history, but also explaining memory and memory's controversies.

Lawrence: So, we could talk about the Civil War all day and well into tomorrow. There's so much to talk about there. But you've written about other areas that I want to spend just a little bit of time on that I know will be of interest to our listeners. You have written about the extraordinary figure of Ulysses S. Grant, and in fact one of your very well-received books called *U.S. Grant: American Hero, American Myth*. So, let's start with the title. How much of Ulysses S. Grant was hero and how much of Ulysses S. Grant as we know him today was myth?

Waugh: That's a great question, and I guess my answer and my purpose that animated my research and then writing this book is how much there was of both the hero and the myth in his reputation, and that could be taken in a positive and negative way. One of the things that fascinated me was simply how his reputation had fallen dramatically in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, really the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, into most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century I would say, and from the victor, the military hero who saved the Union, to the butcher, the drunk general, the incompetent and corrupt president, and that was a puzzle to me and I'm still working on that, and I think it's something that we relish as historians, looking at a prominent figure, or a famous event, or a period in history, and delving into those contradictions, but wanting people in the present to appreciate these contradictions and also appreciate the accomplishments.

Lawrence: Well, we talk about the second reconstruction in the 1960s and the influential civil rights legislation and voting rights legislation, but all of that built conceptually and in some cases literally on the foundation of that extraordinary explosion of legislation during the first reconstruction, and yes, that's coming from Congress to a large extent, but Grant plays a major role in executing on that and on providing federal support in the South pretty far into his term.

Waugh: He did. And he was very, very stalwart, especially in sending troops to, yes, interfere in Southern elections when those elections resulted in the killing of African Americans or

other ways to prevent them from voting. The thing about Grant is he didn't start out... He was not an abolitionist or even a strong anti-slavery figure before the war. He really didn't participate in that and he married into a slaveholding family.

Lawrence: Right. Well, he himself had a complicated relationship with his in-laws, and they with him, I suppose. He was not necessarily the prince they chose for their daughter, not realizing that she was marrying someone who would become one of the great figures of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the United States and really in American history.

Waugh: It's one of the great love stories, their story. They really had a very happy and fulfilling marriage. Grant was a wonderful family man and loved his children, but Julia, and this is a true fact, Julia said to people at all stages of Grant's early career and life, "My husband is going to be president one day." And of course, people thought she was nuts. His two administrations had its ups and downs, but there were great accomplishments and also problems. His Native American policy did not work out and the economy crashed in 1873.

There were all kinds of scandals, but here's what made it different in Grant's case, is that the proponents of the lost cause version of history, one of the most powerful memory traditions, as you know, *Gone With the Wind* is a primer on the lost cause.

Lawrence: Right.

Waugh: And the idea that Confederates fought for state rights, not for slavery, that the only reason they lost was because of the overwhelming numbers and resources that were thrown at them by butchers like U.S. Grant, and then when Grant became president and sought to create, to help create a biracial society, the first experiment of this vastness in world history, that was just perfect grist for their mill of hatred and resentment, and they really determined these lost cause partisans and then historians in the 20<sup>th</sup> century who agreed with them for reasons I can't understand. The easy stereotype of histories vexes me a lot. It bothers me that we're comfortable with the easy story of the corruption of Grant, but really when you go beyond the stereotypes is when you become fascinated by the real story.

Lawrence: So, this is Phi Beta Kappa. We do a lot of book lists. We find our lists of most recommended books to be among the most popular articles in the *Key Reporter* quarterly newsletter we put out, so let me give you a chance to contribute to our book list. With respect to each of the Civil War and Lincoln, those are two of the most written about topics in American history and in American letters. Have you got a favorite Lincoln biography, and have you got one Civil War book that everybody ought to read?

Waugh: It's Bruce Catton's *A Stillness at Appomattox*, and what is amazing to me is how deft he was. He was not a professional historian. Perhaps that's why he writes so beautifully. But he really understands the politics, the culture, as well as the military, and you're just dazzled by his ability and his insight.

As far as my favorite Lincoln book, boy, I'm going to get in trouble. I very much like Eric Foner's recent Pulitzer Prize-winning book on Lincoln, and I also like David Donald's

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biography of Lincoln earlier. There's so, I mean, oh my goodness. There's so many books that... But you've just popped this question at me and those are two that come to my mind.

Lawrence: Well, it's not a fair question. Those are two good answers. The Donald and the Foner ones are two wonderful places to start for people who have not read much about Lincoln, and even for people with some level of background. I think there's a lot more to get out of each of those wonderful books.

Waugh: Absolutely.

Lawrence: We think about Lincoln and the Gettysburg Address, of course, but in some ways, it's the second inaugural that practically moves me to tears every time I read it for its courage, its passion, its wisdom, and the ability at that moment, the one who's presided over this catastrophe that's costing more than a half-a-million American lives, and he says famously "with malice towards none and charity for all." It's just... It's almost beyond human conception how someone can articulate that, but he did, didn't he?

Waugh: He certainly did, and one of my favorite places to be in Washington, D.C., and I do this every time I go, and I've been many times, is I take a walk to the Lincoln Monument, and I read every word of the Gettysburg Address and the second inaugural address, and what is striking about the second inaugural address is follows, for example, Grant's belief. You wage a hard war, but you have a soft peace. And that is the dilemma and the challenge for that generation, and no one put it better than Lincoln.

Lawrence: Not just the dilemma and challenge for their generation, but for our generation as well to our very day.

Waugh: I agree with that. And as you began this interview with, the past isn't past. It's not even over. So, there you go.

Lawrence: It's not dead and it's not even past. It's with us every day and it's brought to life by our gifted historians like you. I'm so grateful to have you with us in the Phi Beta Kappa family and thank you for joining me today on Key Conversations.

Waugh: I enjoyed it thoroughly and thank you for having me.

Lawrence:

This podcast is produced by L-W-C. Cedric Wilson is lead producer. Paulina Velasco is managing producer. This episode was mixed by Kojin Tashiro. Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Perchuk. To learn

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more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar program, please visit [pbk.org](http://pbk.org). Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

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