



AHRC International Placement Scheme: Library of Congress Podcast

Transcript

VO: It's certainly true to say that travel broadens the mind, and for anyone undertaking research, the opportunity to explore internationally renowned archives is one not to be missed. The AHRC's International Placement Scheme offers Early Career Researchers, Research Assistants and AHRC and ESRC funded PhD students the chance to undertake a research fellowship at the John W Kluge Center, based within the Library of Congress in Washington DC. With over 151 million items and 10,000 new resources added daily, the Library of Congress gives researchers from all disciplines the opportunity to enhance their studies, while at the same time meeting new people, sharing ideas and broadening their academic careers. To find out just what such placements are like, Dario Sarlo (*DS*), a Kluge Centre Post Doctoral Fellow and former AHRC IPS Fellow, along with AHRC research fellows Lydia Morgan (*LM*), Kirsty Day (*KD*), and Rebecca Wright (*RW*) have been sharing their own experiences of working at the biggest library in the world.

RW: In my first year it didn't seem like it was a very realistic opportunity actually because I hadn't got far enough into my project to know what I was doing and to actually identify which resources I needed from the Library of Congress and then when it came to my second year it felt natural because I now know what my project was and I could target various archives and I realised there was a lot more in the library that was relevant.

DS: I think for some people and I was one of them, even before I had received the initial AHRC funding for the doctorate I had already knew my archive was here at the Library of Congress so I had actually put that into my original proposal not knowing there was this Library of Congress award and so when the email came one day it was like a godsend.

KD: I went along to the open day and was pretty much sold by the idea of being in one library and having everything I needed in one place, and also the scholarly networking experience.

LM: I always had a regret that my entire project is UK focused and that would restrict me in terms of being able to go and do something - because I always find going off somewhere else is such a great way to reinvigorate your research and to get your mind into different ways of thinking - so distance is a useful thing.

RW: Going to the open day, it was kind of like, well, why wouldn't you? It was such a good opportunity and then the other was there were archives that I was interested in the library, because my project spans Anglo-American stuff it was a really good time to come and actively engage with the American side.

KD: My background wasn't in American studies and so I wasn't really sure whether it would be the best place for me to go and take three months out of my degree but then I went to the open day and did some of my own research about the Library of Congress collections and found out it was actually going to be a really great resource because I work on Eastern Europe they have a lot of material in various Eastern European languages and medieval languages like Latin so yep, it was perfect for me and don't be put off if your topic isn't in American studies.

VO: After considering the timing of their application and overcoming any problems regarding their teaching commitments, the group found they had complete support from their supervisors.

LM: Once I'd explained to them about what the scheme was and why it would be useful for me to go my supervisors were very supportive. I mean they're rigorous but that's just the nature of them and I prefer them to be that than anything else. There's no way that any supervisor could say it would be a detriment to your studies to come and do this scheme.

DS: One of the easiest things that we can do now is to keep in contact with each other. Me and my supervisor, we email and Skype call so it's very easy to maintain a focus on what ever work we are planning to do, and so even though there are three thousand miles between us, it's as if I'm down the road, so there is no problem with distance.

VO: With those distances in mind, of course, it can still feel like a long way from home. However, the welcome the researchers received - and the subsequent

support given to them - meant they were able to settle in quickly and start their research without delay. Mary Lou Reker oversees the Fellowships Programme at the Library of Congress Kluge Center...

MLR: Ordinarily we've sent them to a class that's held every Monday by the folks in the main reading room and they provide this for all researchers who come to the Library. Recently we've got one particular person who gives an exceptionally good class to come directly to the Kluge Center and do that class at the beginning of each month for every new group that comes to the Kluge Center. So Tom Mann, who's written *The Oxford Guide to Research* comes to the Kluge Center and gives a guided tour of the Library's resources and walks people through the opportunities that are available for them in light of the particular subject they're studying.

KD: The Tom Mann talk was fantastic; I found I had... before I came I made up a bibliography of all the things I that needed to find and it was quite rigid and circumscribed but I tried out a few of the tips he gave us and found a load of things I hadn't looked at or thought about before that have been really useful, so it's definitely a really good talk.

VO: Once introduced to the Library and its workings, new arrivals at the Kluge Center can expect continued support as they pursue their research, with facilities close to hand, including the internet and their own Library of Congress email address, a space to work from and, of course, access to millions of research items.

MLR: The Kluge Center is located in one of three buildings on Capitol Hill which pertain to the Library of Congress and when you come there in the morning you go upstairs and you go to your cubicle and the cubicle has a computer and a telephone and lots of desk space, drawers you can lock and keep your personal items in and then it's got bookshelves around there too which can hold literally hundreds of books and you're allowed to take at any one time somewhere in the range of about 250 books that you can actually have in your cubicle.

DS: One of the benefits is of course access to the special collections which for obvious reasons cannot be brought to the cubicles but you can go down one of the many corridors and find your way to the reading rooms which are dotted around the many buildings and which out too much effort you can order

whichever manuscript or book you're searching for and it can be delivered within 15, 20 minutes. It's absolutely wonderful. One day I was in the performing arts room looking through something and I overheard a person behind me who had ordered a Mozart manuscript which arrived and I, of course, got up and had a look at that just for the sake of it, it was there. And as you leave the Library of Congress in the evenings you walk past the display cabinets in the hallway and there's a Gutenberg Bible just sitting there waiting to be observed and that really sums up the atmosphere and the depths of materials that are present at the Library of Congress.

VO: As well as this remarkable wealth of archival resources, the interdisciplinary nature of the Centre means there's a chance to network with researchers from other fields of interest, providing an opportunity to share thinking and ideas beyond departments back in the UK.

RW: My programme back in England is a cultural studies programme and it has a very strong focus on interdisciplinarity but saying that it's really nice for me actually to come and see people in really specific disciplines and to different historical fields and it's really nice to speak to people in political science or find out how other people are doing their Phd and how that's different from your experience.

VO: Amongst this atmosphere of networking there are also benefits to having expert staff close by, from giving practical advice on where to find items, to helping get those items to your work station in good time.

RW: One of the things I've found really great is having a space to work in and having the opportunity to take a large amount of library books and have them in one place, for example, to have the chance to order all the books of one person and have them on a shelf has changed my life because rather than having to carry them around different libraries, or... from the British Library you can only take eight books, six books out at a time, so being able to have the whole collection and to be able to cross reference, have them in my grasp has really, really helped kind of see through material that would be difficult for me to see otherwise. And the canteens' really good!

VO: And while we're thinking about such things, let's not forget the social life!

RW: I think the social life over here is too good (!), because it's distracting me away from my Phd, and I need to write and when I came to DC, I thought great, this is going to be fantastic: I'm going to be able to get away from all my distractions in London, I'll be able to know not many people which means I be able to study really hard, not feel guilty about not going to certain events. No, not the case! DC's a lot of fun, and I like it a lot.

VO: Given all their experience, the group has plenty of ideas to help anyone wanting to follow in their footsteps - from exploring the Library of Congress online catalogues to persevering with the application process itself.

LM: My advice to potential candidates would be to speak to as many people as possible about your application in your own institution, in the AHRC and get as many people as possible to read your application because everybody will have their own point of perspective or contact that they may have had with how things work in the AHRC and that can be really beneficial.

KD: Something I found really useful was looking at the different pages of the different subject libraries, so for instance, the Eastern European collections were really useful for me just to get a kind of sense of what they kind of had there, and there's definitely something for everyone, even if your a medievalist working on Eastern Europe, so don't be scared to just go and investigate everything.

DS: My advice for candidates would be to certainly go and visit the website loc.gov and to examine the different departments the library has and the sections, and the website will also help you find information about the librarians who are working in each division and these people are professional experts and are very, very knowledgeable and often they publish books in the field, in the music division or the folk life division. These people will be delighted to help you with your research and they are certainly a good source of information.

RW: My advice would be probably, don't get put off by the form or the application itself because I think as Phd students we're constantly bombarded with forms, application, and you kind of get used to having a kind of "form-a-phobia" or a "fear of filling in forms" and while you're researching you really want to do research, putting into these separate funding applications is quite time consuming but I would recommend kind of persevering and just doing the form, I don't know...

VO: So, whether it's the academic rewards or the chance to experience life in America's capital city, ultimately the time spent at the Library of Congress will be an unforgettable one, benefitting not only your current research but your also future career.

KD: It would just look so excellent as a line on your CV, being able to say Library of Congress Fellow - that just sounds prestigious!

RW: I think it just gives you confidence in being a researcher in a way, and this is a part of what we have to do when we do our Phd - apply for post doctoral fellowships. And it's part of kind of getting used to going to libraries, getting used to archives, getting used to different research environments and I think that's really valuable.

VO: And finally, while the benefits to AHRC researchers are pretty clear, Mary Lou Reker sees important benefits of the international placement scheme to the library of congress itself.

MLR: The Library's interest is having the collections used and the collections of the Library of Congress are truly extraordinary. They're there, they're available... what a well of human knowledge! And the librarians that are there want to get that knowledge out and have those materials used by people all over the world, and it's so good international exchange - it's a wonderful way to keep peace.