

Bookends: Two Authors Reflect on their First Books



*In 2015, we each published our first books, on different aspects of early American history. Emily's book, *Christian Imperialism: Converting the World in the Early American Republic*, was published by Cornell University Press, and Cassie's book, *Founding Friendships: Friendships Between Men and Women in the Early American Republic*, was published by Oxford University Press. Now, seven years later, we are working on revisions to our second books and we wonder: if we knew then what we know now, would we have done anything differently?*

It often takes some distance from a project to really see it clearly, particularly when it comes to a first book. It's rare to see writers look back on their earlier books, but we both think it's something that should happen more often! So, here we share our conversation reflecting on our books and wrapping up with where we are now.



Figure 1: British Bookend made for the American market, 1800-1830. Gift of the Members of the Committee of the Bertha King Benkard Memorial Fund, 1946,

Metropolitan Museum of Art, CC0, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

What made you want to write your first book? What drew you to your topic initially? Did your thinking about it change over time?

Cassie: I entered my PhD program knowing that I wanted to write about friendships between men and women in the early American republic. I had done a master's degree already, and in researching my MA thesis (on etiquette in early Washington, D.C.), I came across this amazing letter by a female friend of Thomas Jefferson talking about how much she cared for him. I thought I had discovered an affair, but my advisor explained that people described emotions differently then and I couldn't make that leap. I wondered how people in the early American republic, when gender roles were much more strictly constrained, could have had male/female friendships when I personally found it tricky in the twenty-first century. Starting out, I had no idea what kind of arguments I was going to make, so that really did evolve over time. I'm guessing that, given the topic of your book, you had less of a personal connection to it. What brought you to writing about missionaries?

Emily: I came into grad school planning on writing about missionaries, but with a very different focus. I had initially wanted to write about missionary marriages in the early republic. Who were these men and women who had picked up their whole lives to marry someone they hardly knew and move to a whole other part of the world? But then, like you, I came across something in a source that really surprised me and had me thinking about doing something a little different. Ann Judson's memoir has these amazing scenes in India during the War of 1812 as the Americans were trying to figure out where they should go to avoid being arrested—reading that had me asking why this group of missionaries had imagined that this was a good time for foreign mission work in the first place. It got me started down the path of thinking about missions and empire and I set aside the questions I had about marriage for a little bit.

What did you anticipate the criticisms of your book would be? Is that what reviewers actually critiqued?

Emily: I was sure that I would hear a lot of criticism about my reliance on English-language archives. Given *Christian Imperialism's* globe-trotting scope, I think a very fair critique of the book is that I did not make use of many sources from the people the missionaries sought to convert (with the exception of a few in translation). Surprisingly, this was not the major critique I heard, which I hope means that readers accepted the ways that I limited the scope of the book to focus on American understandings of empire and mission. How about you, Cassie? What were the critiques that you were worried about?

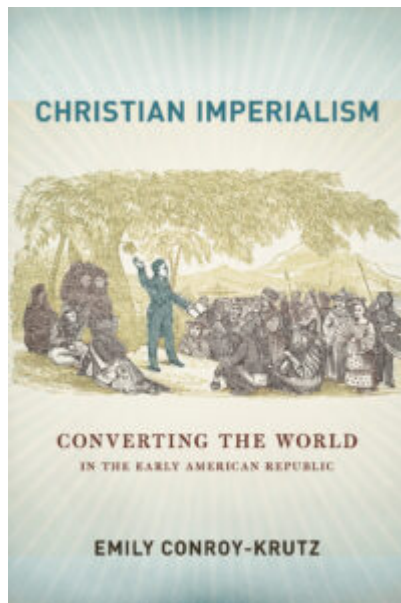


Figure 2: Emily Conroy-Krutz, *Christian Imperialism: Converting the World in the Early American Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

Cassie: I expected particular criticisms about what I truly thought were weaknesses in the book, but those weren't actually the criticisms reviewers had. Most of their critiques had to do with the degree of equality and political power women gained from these friendships. I was surprised that only one reviewer brought up something I found problematic: that I had limited my project's scope, just focusing on elite white people. But I just couldn't figure out how to get at this story for lower class people; I tried a few different avenues and hit dead ends. The other thing I could never quite wrap my head around was what these friendships meant for masculinity and men; I spent a lot more time on women and norms of femininity, but no reviewers brought this up. In both of these cases, I hope future scholars will be able to move this topic in new directions.

Is there anything readers or reviewers brought up that made you rethink your arguments?

Cassie: Absolutely. One of my readers pre-publication noted that the book focused almost entirely on challenges to male/female friendships rather than providing a picture of the actual experience of individual friendships. As a result, I added a new first chapter that examines three different friendships in detail, and it was a lot of fun to write. The most common critique from reviewers was that saying there was equality in these friendships was an overstatement. That's a fair point, and one I usually qualified—but I went bolder in the introduction. One reviewer referred to my take on these friendships as "optimistic" and I think that helps explain why I emphasized how much power women had in these friendships. It's interesting to think that coming at the same sources with a different mindset would have changed my argument. How about you, Emily?



Figure 3: Cassandra A. Good.

Emily: I love that first chapter in your book. It's such a powerful way to start the book—what a great example of the peer review process at work! I added a chapter at the suggestion of one of my initial readers, too. They had commented that I could and should expect critique for my English-language sources and might try to speak more directly to what I can and cannot say about the experience of those the missionaries were trying to convert. The chapter on schools and the meaning of conversion was my attempt to do that. After the book was published, one reviewer commented that it would be impossible to write the full history of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), given the size of its archive (1,261 linear feet). Their point was that my broad scope meant that I missed some key details in some locations. I wouldn't say that this made me rethink my larger argument, but it is a point well taken. When I set out to write the book, I knew that I should either go deep on one particular place or broad and try to capture the movement as a whole. There are definitely costs to either approach.

Who did you think your book would be in conversation with and who ended up taking up your work?

Emily: When did you start thinking about this, Cassie? For me, it was something I was really conscious of as I was talking to potential editors because I really wanted some help in reaching out to US in the World scholars. During grad school, my major conference had been SHEAR and, to a lesser degree, the American Society for Church History, so I felt pretty sure that I was already in conversation with those scholars. But I wanted to be sure to find ways to make my work resonate with folks thinking about empire and American foreign relations in different time periods. It was a big part of the reason why I ended up publishing with Cornell in their US in the World Series.

Cassie: I also had a really specific audience in mind. I essentially saw my work as an ethnographic study of a particular form of relationship in the past, and my hope was that other gender scholars would start looking for male/female friendships in other settings. That's why I published the article drawn from the book in the journal *Gender History* rather than an early US history journal. Apparently, the Library of Congress cataloguers thought my book went with books on the psychology of emotion, even though I (intentionally) don't cite a single psychologist in the book! Nonetheless, it does seem like mostly historians of early America have been citing the book. There have been scholars looking at male/female friendships in other times and places—including non-historians—who have used the book, and that is really encouraging. Emily, who ended up citing your book? I hear people in our field talking about it all the time!

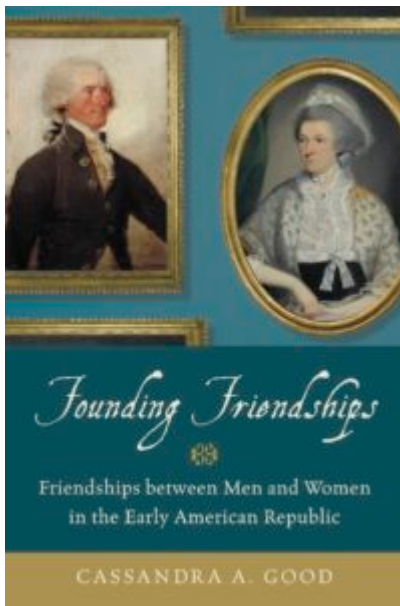


Figure 4: Cassandra A. Good, *Founding Friendships Between Men and Women in the Early American Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Emily: It's mostly landed where I expected—religious studies, foreign relations, early US and the world. It gets cited sometimes as the “early” example in work focusing on later periods, which is something I've really enjoyed.

What might you change if you were to rewrite the book?

Cassie: I have thought about this a lot over the past seven years. There is one key omission that just feels so glaring to me now: in writing about Thomas Jefferson's friendships in Paris with women, I failed to note that he likely began his sexually exploitative relationship with Sally Hemings during his time there. I was working from the correspondence, and of course Hemings isn't there; I needed to widen the frame and bring her in.

Emily: That's a really interesting point. Do you think widening the frame would have changed the argument at all? How is that helping you think about how to approach your current book?

Cassie: Certainly, when it comes to what I was arguing about Jefferson as a friend to women, juxtaposing that with his sexual exploitation of Hemings puts his behavior in a different and more complex light. Many of the very men—and women—who could have such emotionally rich friendships were at the very same time exploiting enslaved people. I've been much more cognizant in this second book of placing the people I'm writing about in the context of events going on in all aspects of their lives and in the country. My writing style is also very different for this book; because it's for a popular audience, there is a clear chronological narrative and more accessible language. Focusing on storytelling rather than solely analysis is, for me, just so much more enjoyable. What is your approach to structuring your second book?

Emily: Like you, I've been writing my new book differently—though I'm not writing for a trade press, I'm thinking more about narrative and hoping to reach a broader audience this time around. *Missionary Diplomacy* explores the relationship between the mission movement and the US government over the course of the nineteenth century (and a bit into the twentieth), with chapters comparing experiences in different regions. I've had to work through the same kind of structural questions about how to tell a story about Americans moving all around the globe in a manageable kind of way. The new book is organized chronologically and thematically, with some chapters that globe-hop and others that zoom in on particular case studies. Each chapter is more character-driven and narrative than I've written in the past. It's been a lot of fun to play around with writing in a different style and voice.



Figure 5: Emily Conroy-Krutz.

Cassie: I've often thought about how *Founding Friendships* would look if I had

written it in the style of my current book, although I still have never figured out how I could write it chronologically rather than thematically. I didn't have a clear thread of how friendships changed over time in the early republic, but I did have sets of themes that my evidence cohered around. How did you structure *Christian Imperialism*?

Emily: The structure I ended up with really reflects the argument I was making in the book and was a big revision from the dissertation. The dissertation actually took on more of a narrative arc—maybe that's why I really wouldn't rewrite the book as a narrative now! The dissertation had more of a narrative arc as a religious history and focused a lot on the question of how missionaries and their supporters defined what was “morality” and what was “politics” as they evangelized in a world of empire. When I thought about how to turn the dissertation into a book, I wanted to do a better job of centering the questions about empire that had gotten me so excited. To do that, I restructured the chapter outline a bit to allow each chapter to be more of a case study of different types of imperialism. This meant that I dropped one chapter in the dissertation about slavery that I need to come back to one of these days, but I don't think I could have made the argument I wanted to make in a more narrative style. I still really like the structure I used there, and I couldn't change it without having to really change the heart of the book.

How did working on this book lead you to your second book? What did you learn through that process that has influenced what you're doing now?

Emily: I love talking to folks about this question, because there are so many different journeys from the first book to the next. Some folks really seem to want to do something completely different; others have a very clear progression from one to the next. It took me some time to decide on which route I wanted to go in. I had actually received a warning from one mentor that I might not want to do the next book on missions—lest I get stuck in a “missionary ghetto.” But I ended up taking the advice of another mentor that it could make a lot of sense to build on what I already knew to position myself as one of the experts in this field. And I'm still finding lots to say about missionaries and American foreign relations, so I'm okay continuing to work on them for a bit longer. In the end, I wanted to answer some questions that I had received at conferences about missions and policy, which I didn't get to at all in the first book. That was the springboard for *Missionary Diplomacy*, the book I'm finishing up now.

Cassie: I definitely had a different journey to my second book, because I have shifted to writing a biography of a family. I'm still focused on early America and the intertwining of relationships and power, but otherwise this is a very different book. Nonetheless, I came to it from the first book; I read some correspondence of the people I'm now writing about, George Washington's step-grandchildren, in the research for *Founding Friendships*. I really enjoyed

digging deep into the stories of some of the people I wrote about in the first book, and I wanted to immerse myself in just a few individuals' stories. *First Family* tells the story of four rather eccentric but at the time very famous siblings from the American Revolution to the Civil War, and while the research for it took a decade, it's been so much fun.

Ultimately, books are static, material things. As historians and writers, we're always changing, and so is the field of history. We can shift approaches and apply lessons learned to the next book, but only in the rare cases of a second edition of a book does the author get to add later reflections to the physical text. We hope this conversation spurs more authors to find ways to remain in dialogue with their books and critics.

This article was originally published in September 2022.

Cassandra Good is associate professor of history at Marymount University in Arlington, VA. She writes and researches on politics, gender, and culture in the early American republic. Her first book, [*Founding Friendships: Friendships Between Men and Women in the Early American Republic*](#), won the Organization of American Historians' Mary Jurich Nickliss Prize in U.S. women's and/or gender history in 2016. Her next book, *First Family: George Washington's Heirs and the Making of America*, is forthcoming from Hanover Square Press (an imprint of Harper Collins) in 2023.

Emily Conroy-Krutz is associate professor of history at Michigan State University and the author of [*Christian Imperialism: Converting the World in the Early American Republic*](#) (2015). Her writings on religion, reform, empire, and gender can be found in the *Journal of the Early Republic*, *Early American Studies*, *Diplomatic History*, and several edited volumes. Her next book, *Missionary Diplomacy: Religion and American Foreign Relations in the Nineteenth Century*, is forthcoming from Cornell University Press.