

# World History – a Genealogy

*Private Conversations with*

*World Historians, 1996-2016*

Edited by

Carolien Stolte and Alicia Schrikker



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# Preface

Since its founding in 1977, the world history journal *Itinerario* has published extensive conversations with prominent world historians. In 1996, an anthology was published under the title *Pilgrims to the Past*. Edited by Leonard Blussé, Frans-Paul van der Putten and Hans Vogel and published by the CNWS (the Leiden School of Asian, African and Amerindian Studies, now the Leiden Institute for Area Studies), *Pilgrims to the Past* chronicled these conversations from the journal's first 1977 issue up to the retirement of Henk Wesseling in 1995. It was a fitting moment for an anniversary anthology: Wesseling had established the Centre for the History of European Expansion at Leiden in 1974, and *Itinerario* was founded under his watch by the first generation of the Centre's staff.

Why would an academic journal publish interviews? According to journal co-founder Leonard Blussé, the journal was initially intended for an audience of both historians and aficionados, and as a way to bridge the gap between a newsletter and the 'existing, somewhat staid, academic journals.'<sup>1</sup> The name *Itinerario* was chosen in reference to Jan Huygen van Linschoten's famous 1596 travelogue of the same name. There were very few thoughts at the time as to how the journal should be financed or who would publish it. These and other questions have long ago been resolved. The interview with Leonard Blussé in this present volume gives a good insight into the various incarnations *Itinerario* has undergone over the years. Today the journal is very much part of the world of established history journals, and it transferred to Cambridge University Press in 2010.

Other things have remained the same. The name is still a tongue twister for some readers, and the journal's issues still open with long conversations with leading world historians, recorded in various settings and by various colleagues in the journal's network. It was a small leap, therefore, to decide that the journal's fortieth anniversary would be a good occasion on which to publish a selection of the most interesting interviews from the past twenty years. This means that this book deals with a new generation or two of historians in several ways, and the differences manifest themselves on both the personal and methodological levels. More comments on this will follow below, but it is clear that 'the

world historian', if such a generalisation can be made, is a different person in the twenty-first century from the one (s)he (formerly he!) had been in the closing decades of the twentieth.

The first volume interviewed a generation that had not only studied colonial history, but had often also been a part of it. In one review, Jurrien van Goor sighed, 'summarizing these 27 interviews is a hopeless task. . . . Some are ex-colonial administrators, but there are also people from former colonies . . . others are former missionaries and priests who developed the study of a particular diocese or pioneered the recording of oral history.'<sup>2</sup> Many of the first volume's historians had come to history as a discipline through a series of coincidences, often an unexpected intersection of the personal and the academic. Reviewing *Pilgrims to the Past*, Jeremy Black went so far as to say that 'this is a fascinating volume that is full of interest and, in some of the cases, imbued with a powerful melancholia that stems from a sense of personal loss over the ebb of empire.'<sup>3</sup> That nostalgia is fortunately largely absent from the interviews collected here.

James Tracy, for his part, hinted that *Itinerario* as a journal had actually helped shape this generation and its historiographical lens: '[w]hat one can see from these essays is how *Itinerario* itself has promoted the evolution of the European Expansion approach, which began as a project conceived in the late colonial era . . . and has now become a means of using European documents to study the local history of different parts of the world. But *Itinerario's* biases seem evident in the fact that senior scholars working from a Marxist perspective, like Immanuel Wallerstein and authors of the "development of underdevelopment" school, are occasionally referred to, but not included.' What was missing, according to Tracy, was an 'extended discussion of the various historical approaches to a world that is tied together by European colonialism and its historical sequels.'<sup>4</sup>

This second volume of interviews is skewed in a similar way: both the interviewees and the interviewed are part of the journal's extended network. Yet, in the introduction that follows we offer our own take on what these interviews can tell us about this 'second' generation, their backgrounds and their approaches. This includes an interrogation of the various historical approaches to a world bound by colonial regimes and their historical successors.

Finally, the reviews of *Pilgrims to the Past* made it clear that a bibliography of the most important works by the interviewees would have been helpful to readers and would have increased the volume's use to instructors.<sup>5</sup> Thus prompted, we have added a bibliography referencing these works, but also the world historical texts that appeared in the conversations themselves.

We hope this provides further insight into the genealogy of world history, and the ways in which it has been shaped by personal connections and serendipitous encounters, as well as academic affinities. We make no grand claims to a greater validity for our findings: our sample—interviews published in *Itinerario* over the last twenty years—favours connections to Leiden and the journal itself. Nevertheless, every interviewee in this volume has contributed a body of work that has shaped the discipline of world history in several ways, and we believe an introduction to their intellectual life stories to be absolutely worthwhile.

## Notes

We thank all those who have carried out interviews for *Itinerario* over the years: in order of appearance Doug Munro, Herman Roozenbeek, Jurriën de Jong, Leonard Blussé, Maurits Ebben, Jaap de Moor, Peer Vries, Peter Hoppenbrouwers, Martha Chaiklin, Jos Gommans, Carl Feddersen, Henk Niemeijer, Ghulam Nadri, Frans-Paul van der Putten, Damian Pargas, Binu John Mailaparambil, Bede Moore, Suzanne de Graaf, Lincoln Paine, Andreas Weber, Martine van Ittersum, Jaap Jacobs, Iva Pesa, Karwan Fatah Black, Jessica Roitman, Rachel Koroloff, Jan Bart Gewald, Amrit Dev Kaur Khalsa, and Sanne Ravensbergen.

- 1 L. Blussé, F. van der Putten and H. Vogel, eds., *Pilgrims to the Past: Private Conversations with Historians of European Expansion* (Leiden: CNWS, 1996), 2.
- 2 Review by Jurrien van Goor, *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* [Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia] 156:4 (2000): 827–28.
- 3 Review by Jeremy Black, *Journal of World History* 9:2 (1998): 286–88.
- 4 Review by James D. Tracy, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 8:3 (1998): 464–65.
- 5 *Ibid.*



# Facing World History: inspirations, institutions, networks

**Carolien Stolte and Alicia Schrikker**

‘A historian is before anything else, a person, a living human being’. —  
Om Prakash

The twenty-five historians who give face to this book, from Brij Lal to Ann Stoler, come from different regional and disciplinary backgrounds.<sup>1</sup> What they have in common is that they are world historians, even if they might be surprised to find themselves in each other’s company here. Admittedly, world history is a wide-ranging field of study, and the boundaries with related fields such as global history, universal history, or the more recent fields of big history, planetary history and deep history, are porous and much debated. This volume is not about those boundaries and debates. For those we refer to the excellent historiographies that have come out over the past decade.<sup>2</sup> Rather, this book is about what world historians do, how they work and how they have contributed to the development of the field through their publications, as well as through their teaching, academic entrepreneurship and travels. What these historians have in common is that they question the nation state-oriented, Eurocentric approaches that for so long dominated historical scholarship, and that they aim at critical, inclusive scholarship. We might follow Jerry Bentley’s understanding of the field of world history, which refers ‘to historical scholarship that explicitly compares experiences across the boundary lines of societies, or that examines interactions between peoples of different societies, or that analyses large-scale historical patterns and processes that transcend individual societies.’<sup>3</sup>

The type of world historian that appears in these interviews—if a type can be divined at all—is one who travels the world to unearth data and stories from the archives and to view, feel and experience the areas about which they write. World history, they show us, is something you *do*. Their research takes them from Fiji to Zanzibar and from Allahabad to Arnhem, and along the way they meet other historians and exchange their findings and ideas. Historians, as Om Prakash points out in his interview, make critical choices about which questions to ask, which answers to give, and

which material to study. After all, he says, they are human beings. More than anything else, this collection of interviews gives us an insight into the way that historians work and think. And as most of the historians interviewed were at the end of their careers, this means that their reflections reach back as far as the 1950s. Reading the interviews as a set, therefore, makes it possible to evaluate the role of career-making and academic networking in the development of scholarship over a considerable period.

This introduction is an attempt to analyse what drives these historians, and we have sought to link their stories to larger trends and developments in the field. We do this in full awareness that this collection has a strong bias, as most interviews took place in and around Leiden University for the journal *Itinerario*, and the interviewers were largely scholars with a connection to Leiden and the journal. Neither is the collection complete—many more of these interviews were held in the two decades covered by this book than can be published in a single volume, and more continue to be held every year. World history, like any discipline, is a collection of overlapping and intersecting networks, and this collection pertains to one such network within the larger whole.

This limits our claims to one branch of the family tree, but this has advantages too: as a by-product of this selection bias, this introduction also shows the way historians in Leiden participated in world historical debates, and highlights specific institutional preoccupations and blind spots. The result is an impression of how world historians work, based on specific individuals and institutions. We offer a layered analysis of the interviews that evolves around the following four questions: What inspired them? How did their training inform their research? What role did collaborations, institutions and personal networks play in their work? And to what extent was and is their work shaped by personal experiences on the one hand and the global context in which they operate on the other? This, we hope, will offer fresh insights to students who are new to the field as well as to our colleagues.

*Old boys and new networks*

‘A man becomes part of history only when he is part of the society’. —  
Ashin Das Gupta

We teach our students that historians operate within historiographic trends and relate to the work of others in their writing. The interviews demonstrate that, invisible as it sometimes may be to their readers, such trends and debates are very much part of the lived experiences of

historians, and not merely of their work on paper. If one thing about the way historians work is apparent from the interviews, it is that they operate within networks, and that they tend to set up institutions and societies to facilitate exchange and debate. The interviews enable us to map out the lasting influence of such scholarly networks, tracing them back via the mentors of the interviewees into the interwar period, long before *Itinerario* was established.

Many of these mentors, however, were no strangers to the journal themselves. Several of the historians interviewed in the first collection of interviews, which covered the first two decades of *Itinerario*, influenced, taught and mentored those interviewed in this second volume. Ronald Robinson, interviewed in the first collection, here appears in the interviews with Leonard Blussé, Jürgen Osterhammel and Robert Ross. Philip Curtin and Jan Vansina play a role in the interview with Patricia Seed in this collection. Dharma Kumar worked closely with Om Prakash, collaborated with Chris Bayly and Leonard Blussé, and was eventually interviewed for *Itinerario* by Robert Ross. John Elliot, interviewed by a crowd of Leiden scholars in 1995, had his work discussed by Geoffrey Parker when the latter was interviewed at the exact same spot by the same people a few years later. His work also makes an appearance in the interview with David Armitage, held some fifteen years after that. But the interviews are equally informative about the connections they do not mention explicitly: Peter Reeves, whom Michael Pearson credits as his first teacher of Indian history in Michigan, collaborated intensively with Brij Lal, whose interview opens this volume.<sup>4</sup> And although *Itinerario* never published interviews with them, Charles Boxer and Holden Furber are also never far away, connecting Jack Wills to Leonard Blussé in Taiwan, or Om Prakash to Michael Pearson in Philadelphia.

Mentors are crucial nodes in the networks that make up the discipline, and invaluable resources in navigating them. It is hard to overstate how much this applied to Professor M. A. P. Meilink-Roelofs. No single historian is mentioned in this collection as often as she is. Ashin Das Gupta calls her his 'guru'; Leonard Blussé refers to her as the 'iron lady'. She advised Om Prakash, Adrian Lapien and Jack Wills in the archives, and co-supervised Cees Brouwer's dissertation. If the connections between the interviewed in this volume had to be revealed through a single person, it would be Meilink-Roelofs, and if they had to be revealed through a single site it would be the place where she spent most of her career: the National Archives in The Hague.

For most of the people interviewed it was neither the scholars at Leiden nor *Itinerario* that first brought them to the Netherlands; it was the archives. And here they stand in a long tradition. For historians working on particular regions and eras in American, African and Asian history, the Dutch colonial and Company—VOC and WIC—archives are extremely rich repositories. Om Prakash recounts his first encounter with the VOC archives in the 1960s which were then hidden in the old Rijksarchief. He tells us about his struggle to read Dutch in seventeenth-century handwriting, and how it literally took him months to get a grip on the material. In the 1960s, studying Dutch sources for local Ghanaian, Indian, Sri Lankan and Chinese political and economic history gained momentum. Prakash, Wills and Das Gupta each speak with nostalgia about the mid-1960s when they, as young historians, formed the now (in)famous ‘coffee gang’ in the Algemeen Rijksarchief. For others, like Cees Brouwer, the reconstruction of local history through the VOC records became their lives’ work. In his case, this local history was the history of al-Mukhā, more popularly known as the coffee marketplace Mocha on the Red Sea coast of Yemen. Later, other scholars of Africa and Asia such as Robert Ross and Leonard Blussé made their mark by taking this approach—local history supplemented by Dutch records—further in their social histories.

Reading historical sources can become intense, we learn from Robert Ross, who attributes his slightly angry writing style in his *Cape of Torments* to the experience of reading court cases in which extremely violent punishments and treatment of slaves dominated. In other ways, too, doing archival research is a physical experience. Tony Reid refers to the cold and lonely journey to the colonial archives when they were still located near Arnhem in the 1950s and 1960s. Many of the interviewees see archives as much more than repositories of documents. The archive is also made up of its location, its mode of operation, its staff and its organisational logic; and just as important are the archival canteens as social habitats and the personal connections made over long waits for documents, over off hours and closing days. The collective experience of archival frustrations and the opportunity to share one’s new-found gems (ranging from turtles to shipping data) with others are part of the historian’s job. In that sense, the interviewed refer to ‘horizontal inspiration’ from their peers as much as to connections with more senior scholars. It is in the archive, doing fieldwork, that academic networks are created. Jack Wills speaks of the importance of local archives for getting a feel for places, something also emphasised in the conversations with Fred Cooper and Robert Ross. For

both, travelling in Africa and working in the archives contributed to their understanding of the peoples and societies whose past they studied. ‘The landscape,’ says Robert Ross, ‘is my favorite source.’

It is also in the travelling and archival research that historians develop new ideas and directions. For Natalie Zemon Davis the archive is central to piecing together individual lives in the past in the fullest and most sensitive way possible. Sometimes it is years after her ‘first encounter’ with a historical figure in the archives that she finds new traces, and picks them up to reconstruct their lives. Allison Blakely’s study of Dutch racism was triggered by his unexpected first-hand experience with racism in what he had thought was a tolerant Dutch society. He was doing fieldwork in the Netherlands in the late 1970s, not long after the decolonisation of Suriname. As a Dutch-speaking person of colour, he was mistaken for a post-colonial migrant and suddenly treated with shocking disdain in the public sphere, something that had not happened to him on previous visits to the country.

For Ann Stoler, being in the Netherlands, interacting with Dutch academia and working in the colonial archives made her understand better the questions about Dutch colonialism that historians in the Netherlands had neglected or hesitated to ask. She notes, ‘There were already two trajectories to my work: one was about “subaltern” politics and our knowledge practices; the other one, deeply historical, that kept me traveling back and forth to The Hague and Amsterdam and Leiden from Paris to work at the KIT, to the KITLV in Leiden, and to the archives in The Hague. I was frustrated by what I couldn’t find, but utterly taken by what was there, and more than ever amazed by what Dutch historians seemed to so assiduously circumvent and dismiss—but could not have missed.’ Explaining why she thinks her critical studies of Dutch colonialism and colonial society were not picked up in the Netherlands at the time, she describes the Dutch scholars in her field as a particular species, ‘homo hierarchicus’. She is implicitly referring to prominent male academics, some with colonial roots, who neglected or preferred to look the other way from colonial atrocities and tensions of the past. Stoler reminds us that scholarly interaction and experience shape schisms and debates as much as they do trends and networks.

*Leiden through the lens of world historians*

‘I was somewhat of an ugly duckling in the History Department’. — Leonard Blussé

The interviews with Om Prakash, Jack Wills and Ashin Das Gupta in a way narrate the prehistory of the Leiden-based IGEER (Institute for the History of European Expansion) and its journal *Itinerario*. Their generation met in the archives in the 1960s and continued to meet in the United States and elsewhere. It was only in the late 1970s that they started to frequent Leiden. By that time, Henk Wesseling, as the newly appointed professor of general history, had the idea of establishing an institute for the study of European expansion and global interaction. Working amidst historians of Europe, he decided to pull into the department historians working on the world beyond Europe. The interviews with three of his ‘vassals’, Piet Emmer (The Atlantic), Robert Ross (Africa) and Leonard Blussé (China and Southeast Asia) were selected for inclusion in this volume. Each advanced their respective fields during their careers, albeit in very different ways: Piet Emmer dominated the debates about slavery in the Netherlands, and was well-connected to many American scholars of slavery who excelled in reconstructing numbers and life stories of African slaves in the Americas. Robert Ross has had an enormous output on the history of South Africa and remains a pre-eminent authority in the field today. Leonard Blussé’s work covered early modern East and Southeast Asia, with a focus on overseas Chinese communities and political and diplomatic history. Each speaks with a different degree of nostalgia of the early years of IGEER, when the networks were built up and *Itinerario* was first published.

IGEER was a success, and it placed Leiden on the world history map. What emerges is a picture of an energetic group of young men, who sincerely tried to do something different from what their predecessors had done. They sought cooperation with Area Studies, and they gradually edged out from their respective regional specialties into the field of world history. Ross remembers cooperation across disciplines as a difficult exercise, in which institutional boundaries continued to stand in the way and where characters and egos clashed. Quite a few of the interviewees remember the apparently legendary ‘Delhi–Yogya–Cambridge–Leiden conferences,’ in which experts in the field of South and Southeast Asian studies met to compare various aspects of South and Southeast Asia—focusing principally, though not exclusively, on the colonial experience. The conference proceedings were co-published in three issues of *Itinerario*, and are still popular among scholars and students.<sup>5</sup> From the introductions to the volumes we learn that more happened face to face than mere scholarly exchange: excursions and dance floors were part of the package, and the shared experience certainly strengthened the network and exchange of

ideas. As Chris Bayly notes, ‘Some of the published work that came out of these meetings was very interesting. But it was the long-term effects of informal contacts and discussions with scholars in different fields, who were working in different ways, that really mattered.’

The tradition of co-organising conferences with colleagues in Asia and Africa persists in Leiden to this day and does much to strengthen ties and foster debate with local historians. Some of the interview locations are a by-product of this. Adrian Lapien was interviewed in Jakarta, Brij V. Lal in Fiji. The world-historical orientation that emerged out of the comparative history-oriented scholarship of IGEER and, later, the American professional organisation FEEGI (Forum on the History of European Expansion and Global Interaction, with which *Itinerario* is affiliated) still carries a strong focus on local and vernacular histories.

Although IGEER director Henk Wesseling retained a strong political focus in his work, others, in particular Emmer and Ross, shifted their focus to socio-economic approaches. The energetic activities of the Centre and the talents for networking and fundraising displayed by some members also resulted in a continuing tradition of workshop and conference organisation in Leiden, The Hague and Wassenaar, where the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies (NIAS) is located. From the mid-1990s, the history department’s Crayenborgh honours class, co-founded by Blussé, became another such hosting institution. The twelve-session Crayenborgh course was organised annually around a big world historical theme, for which a variety of speakers were invited from abroad, many of whom were interviewed by Peer Vries, Leonard Blussé or Frans Paul van der Putten.

In the post-Cold War era, world history was much occupied with the debate around ‘the rise of the west’ and ‘the great divergence’. This diversified the archivally-focused group of regular visitors somewhat. Through the Crayenborgh class and the activities of Peer Vries, Wim Blockmans and others, world historians came to Leiden who were not working on Dutch archival collections per se. Scholars like Patrick O’Brien and Mark Elvin were interviewed in this way, and graduate students from the history department at large, and not merely IGEER, became part of the conversation. The ‘rise of the west’ debate is one instance in which particular preoccupations and blind spots of the Leiden Institute were made visible. The debate, after all, is very much ongoing, and currently carried out in books ranging from *Why Nations Fail* and *Why the West Rules—For Now*, to *Empire of Cotton*.<sup>6</sup> The great divergence debate has not so much ceased to be a research theme as become a focus of economic

historians. Books on the history of capitalism and global inequality appear every year. However, this branch of economic history has always been relatively underrepresented in Leiden generally, and specifically *Itinerario*, whose focus on ‘the human factor’ has only grown stronger over the years.

In the meantime, Blussé’s endeavours to publish and translate VOC sources further strengthened the centre’s expertise in the early modern history of maritime Asia. This brought in new visiting scholars and Ph.D. students from abroad, who were quickly pulled into the *Itinerario* network, as is witnessed by the participation in the interviews by scholars such as Martha Chaiklin.<sup>7</sup> And so the interviews represent a loose but global community of scholars that, one way or the other, were connected to activities in Leiden or of Leiden scholars. With the TANAP project, which was essentially a training, research and conservation programme for the VOC archives in the Netherlands and abroad, these activities reached a new high. TANAP stands for Towards a New age of Partnership, a riff on the title of Holden Furber’s seminal work, *The Age of Partnership: Europeans in Asia before Dominion*. This was a project that secured cooperation with a wide variety of universities and archives in Asia, and resulted in around twenty Ph.D. dissertations focusing on regional political, economic and social history. Jack Wills, who was invited as a visiting scholar while the project was running, talks with great enthusiasm about working with this diverse set of students. The parallel with his own experience, meeting scholars from all over the world in the Rijksarchief in the 1960s, is easily drawn. And again, several TANAP laureates like Ghulam Nadri and Binu John were involved in the interviews. TANAP was embedded in Leiden’s Institute of Area Studies (then called CNWS, or Centre for Non-Western Studies), which reinforced the idea that collaboration between historians and regional specialists had become common practice. TANAP was succeeded by the Encompass (2006–11) and Cosmopolis (2012–17) programmes, which have secured transnational cooperation and language and archival training for the next generation of scholars.

Midway through the 1990s, ties were also strengthened with scholars in the US when FEEGI adopted *Itinerario* as its official journal. FEEGI was born out of concerns similar to those that had given rise to IGEER some years earlier: the need to study European interaction with the rest of the world in a comparative way. It was highly empirically focused and strove to promote the study of early modern Portuguese-, Dutch-, French-, and Spanish-language materials. This opened up new avenues for the journal and has led to a strengthening of submissions from FEEGI members on the early modern Atlantic in particular. After twenty years,

ties with FEEGI are still strong, and on several occasions FEEGI members were interviewed or conducted interviews themselves. As an organisation, FEEGI features regularly in the conversations. Patricia Seed, a former president of FEEGI, suggests in her 2003 interview that a FEEGI conference could be organised in cooperation with IGEER every three years or so. She will be happy to know that this actually materialised in 2015 with the first FEEGI-in-Europe conference, thanks to the initiative of Catía Antunes in collaboration with Carla Pestana, Linda Rupert and Phil Stern.

But among the fond memories of IGEER there are also critical voices. IGEER was a typical exponent of the Leiden liberal tradition, which tended to exclude the more critical Marxist-oriented scholarship that held sway in the 1980s and early 1990s. As far as academic reputations go, the theory-aversion of some of Leiden's historians has become a bit of a truism. But it is here that the interviews are especially informative, shedding light on how such disciplinary boundaries (or perceptions thereof) were actually created. On closer examination, several of the historians interviewed in this volume place themselves squarely in the Marxist historiographic tradition, or at least position their work with respect to it. What stood in the way of a more inclusive approach were informal personal networks and clashes of personality, as Robert Ross explains. IGEER in its early days was—as was much of the academic world at the time—a monkeys' rock where alpha males reigned. This greatly influenced the centre's reputation, something that lingers even today, as the recent interview with Ann Stoler demonstrates.

But Leiden has changed with the retirement of the old boys and the emergence of new girls like Catía Antunes, Nira Wickramasinghe and Marieke Bloembergen. And this has allowed for a more critical engagement with the Dutch, and global, colonial and Company past. The interdisciplinary 'global interactions' platform, in which historians, archaeologists, area specialists and anthropologists are stimulated to work together, has provided *Itinerario* with interviewees such as Fred Cooper and Ann Stoler. Yet, colleagues like Jos Gommans, Michiel van Groesen, Gert Oostindie and Jan Bart Gewald, who have in a way taken up the IGEER banner, continue the strong tradition of local and regional cooperation and interdisciplinary approaches. Anthropology, art and literature have become more central to the historical studies they propagate, and this trend is reflected, too, in the orientation of the journal and the scholars interviewed. The interviews with Jürgen Osterhammel, Natalie Zemon Davis and Kären Wigen are good examples. Trained by the old school

and working with the new, we as editors have always found ourselves in dynamic company.

The institutions have changed over time. Personal networks have possibly become a little less central. Robert Ross sees this as a positive development: ‘Leiden has professionalized,’ he says. But the legacy of the activities of the ‘old boys’ is still present in many ways. The practice of world history in Leiden continues to be marked by a strong local and regional focus. Empirical research in multiple source languages is treasured, and visiting scholars are still caught by the *Itinerario* crew for a good conversation.

### *Inspirations*

‘I began to divide the Indonesian seas in the Braudellian way: the Java Sea, the Banda Sea, the Sulawesi Sea, et cetera’. —Adrian Lapien

The historians interviewed are connected by more than archival serendipities and institutional entrepreneurship. Conducted over the course of twenty-plus years, the interviews are evidence of particular shifts in approaches, as Brij Lal’s sensitive evaluation of the work on indentured labour of his predecessors makes clear. He explains his efforts to connect the Indo-Fijian experience of indenture to experiences elsewhere, broadening his horizons from the locally focused work of others. He also locates his work in a larger ‘human turn’, in attempts to represent the lived experience of indenture. This includes exploding certain myths around indentured labourers—in the case of Fiji, the ‘immoral character’ of *girmitiya* women. In this way, Lal’s interview sets the scene for a set of shifts that unites many of those interviewed: a focus on connected history, a focus on lived experience, and the deconstruction of colonial stereotypes and colonially-rooted tropes. It should go without saying that these historiographical shifts started long before this interview took place in 1997, but they resonate through many of the conversations.

By contrast, what slowly fades from view over the course of this volume is a preoccupation with the ‘rise of the west’ debate. It is still very much present in the interviews with Geoffrey Parker, Jack Goody and Patrick O’Brien in the late 1990s, but gradually disappears from the ‘must-ask’ list of interview questions. The selection of interviewees and interviewed is also a factor here, but we believe it is indicative of a large and noteworthy shift. Jack Goody fought Eurocentrism for much of his career. His work on family life demonstrated precisely how much the distinction between the ‘western’ nuclear family and the ‘non-western’ extended family has been

overstated in historiography. Moreover, his *The East in the West* centred on the argument that there are no structural, long-term differences between East and West.<sup>8</sup> It is this argument that ends up deciding the course of the interview, and the echoes of older historical preoccupations are still very much present as the terms under which the debate takes place. Likewise, the interview with Geoffrey Parker devotes considerable space to applying his work on military history to the role of military factors in the expansion of the West.

The 'rise of the west' debate is most immediately present in the interview with Patrick O'Brien, whose research to that point had been concerned primarily with the study of industrialisation. His work in the 1980s was written in part as a response to Wallerstein's 1974 explanation of why Europe industrialised first, and so naturally had to deal with foreign trade and imperialism as contributing factors.<sup>9</sup> By the time the interview was held in 1999, Kenneth Pomeranz's influential book *The Great Divergence* was about to be published and his argument was already making waves.<sup>10</sup> Much as the *Annales* historians had set the terms of reference for many of the interviews in *Pilgrims to the Past*, the rise of the west debate shaped the first interviews in the present volume. This matches the historiographical progression perfectly, as the rise of the west debate is in many ways a continuation of issues first raised by the *Annales* school. In books like *The Great Divergence* the influence of *Annales* historians is very much present. But nowhere is this continuation of themes more visible than in the continued importance of Fernand Braudel and Marc Bloch.

As the interviews show, these two *Annales* scholars continue to inspire historians and draw students to the study of history to this day. Fully a third of the scholars interviewed in this volume refer to one or both of them. This appears somewhat counterintuitive, as the institutional framework of area studies has largely hardened regional boundaries in the academy, but the fact that the European focus of Bloch and Braudel's work is no impediment for their continuing global impact is a testament to their timelessness. It should also be noted that engagement with their work transcends gratuitous reference or the general admiration that Braudel's *La Méditerranée* habitually receives. The work inspired maritime historians such as Adrian Lapian, Michael Pearson and Anthony Reid, in all of whose work Braudel's influence is immediately obvious.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, Braudel's assertion that there is no single Mediterranean Sea but in fact many different seas on multiple spatial and temporal levels was attractive to scholars seeking to de-Europeanise the history of the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. And in an even wider sense, *La Méditerranée*

inspires as a successful integration of methods from the social sciences in historiography, which is particularly attractive to scholars working on regions where primary sources may be other than written records. Finally, the word itself has become part of the academic idiom: Kären Wigen, who was based at Duke University when it became a hotbed of social theory and of questioning received notions, speaks of a ‘mediterraneanizing’ of the academy, when talking about connecting existing disciplines and areas in new ways.

The possibilities for mixed-method research that Braudel, Bloch and other *Annales* historians pioneered were also poignant for the project of decolonising historiography. Michel Foucault is referred to in this context, although Ann Stoler rightly notes in her interview how little Foucault actually refers to colonialism and empire in his own writing, even if he inspired many others to do so. It is interesting to note, further, how rarely the Subaltern School actually makes an appearance in these interviews. As noted above, it would be too easy to dismiss this as a lack of engagement with Marxist historiography or the post-colonial turn. Several of the interviewees presented here consider themselves Marxists. Neither is it an unwillingness to engage with the nature of the archive and what it can and cannot tell the historian. Rather, it seems to be a refusal to believe, as per many of the scholars in the subaltern studies collective, that the subaltern strata of colonial society are unknowable.<sup>12</sup> Robert Ross says this in so many words: ‘you have to think about how collections of written sources, which are filtered, which came into existence through the colonial society, through the colonial government, can tell you things about what is going on among non-colonial people. . . . The idea that you can’t actually say something about the subaltern classes of colonial society because the sources are colonial is of course a mistake. It is one-sided, but I have not found any better way out of it than anyone else.’ This echoes Ranajit Guha’s deconstruction of what can and cannot be found in the colonial archive in his famous essay, ‘The Prose of Counter-Insurgency’, although Ross is slightly more optimistic. Guha still concludes by stating that even historians seeking to write from the subaltern’s point of view are distanced from colonial discourse ‘only by a declaration of sentiment.’<sup>13</sup>

Conversely, Ashin Das Gupta acknowledges the impact of the subaltern studies group but does not actually buy into their image of academic revolutionaries. He calls it ‘more a brand name than a new way of doing history,’ positing that the approaches the subalterns pioneered are not all new:

To some extent one can't help but be influenced by them. But I suspect that the postmodernist emphasis on 'fragments' or the subaltern school's emphasis on resistance is actually a continuation of earlier trends in historical writing. The French *Annales* School made the real breakthrough long ago. The emphasis on the history of experience and on the autonomy of localities or individual actors goes right back to Marc Bloch in the 1930s. Again, subaltern history was anticipated by the writing of E. P. Thompson or Christopher Hill in their emphasis on resistance and the 'world turned upside down'.<sup>14</sup>

It is here, in Ashin Das Gupta's remarks, that we see the lasting influence of the *Annales* school once more. Although Thompson can indeed be credited with popularising the term 'history from below', the term was arguably first used by *Annales* historian Lucien Febvre, when he spoke of '*histoire vue d'en bas et non d'en haut*'.<sup>15</sup>

Colonial knowledge practices and colonial knowledge complexes are most directly interrogated in the interviews with Ann Stoler and Frederick Cooper. Stoler, in particular, talks at some length about the activist aspects of her work. But even so, Cooper cautions against jumping off a 'theoretical deep end', taking abstractions so far that they exist only in relation to other abstractions. But there is also an 'empirical shallow end' where facts speak for themselves, which, according to Cooper, they should not. It is the interplay between the two—the abstract and the concrete—that is productive, a position with which most of the historians in this volume would agree. And the internalisation of the idea that sources produced by trading companies or colonial states cannot be taken at face value—so much so that it is now a truism—can in itself be considered one of the subaltern collective's major successes.

Finally, there is a practical side to academic decolonisation, most directly present in the interview with Adrian Lapien, who organised Southeast Asian conferences for MIPI (now LIPI), which, he notes, 'was the first time when Southeast Asian scholars had worked together. Before independence, each of them was oriented towards their respective colonial metropolises'.<sup>16</sup> His regional engagement, moreover, was rooted in one of the most famous moments of the history of decolonisation: the Bandung Conference, which he witnessed as a reporter for the *Indonesian Observer*. This unusual starting point marked much of his career. He enrolled at the Universitas Indonesia and attended courses given by the first generation of post-independence scholars, among them Husein Djajadiningrat, who taught the history of Islam and the Middle East, and Tjan Tjoe Som, a

Sinologist who taught the long story of China's past as well as Chinese historiography. His being a product of the late-colonial Dutch school system likewise contributed to a 'regional turn' in Lapien's thinking.

*Towards World History?*

'The idea that you do world history for an American audience doesn't mean you're doing it for the rest of the world, because other people are going to have different visions as to what constitutes the world'. —Patricia Seed

What world history is and what it is not is still hotly debated. This discussion is arguably best traced through the archive of H-World, the H-Net space where the issue has been discussed since 1994.<sup>17</sup> World history as an academic field of enquiry emerged just as the Cold War was ending. All interviews in the present volume, therefore, were conducted when world history as a discipline was no longer a new and emerging field, but one with a professional organisation, although even today its institutional infrastructure remains limited. Whether one's work is or is not world history does not really come up in the interviews, as a few of the interviewees would object to the label, though some, such as Felipe Fernández-Armesto, advocate for it enthusiastically. But their understandings of the term do differ.

The World History Association (WHA) itself, established in 1988, has an inclusive definition of the field. It states that 'as long as one focuses on the big picture of cultural interchange and/or comparative history, one is a practicing world historian.' In this it sets itself apart from global history, which it considers to be limited to the 'the study of globalization after 1492.'<sup>18</sup> This specific date would suggest that global history grew out of the historiography of European expansion, whereas world history did not. This is not a tenable viewpoint, and many scholars who self-identify as global historians, especially those who concentrate on the land-based trading routes of Eurasia, would strongly disagree. And, in fact, the mission statement of the *Journal of Global History* is not very different from that of the WHA. It seeks to clarify global change over time, 'to transcend the dichotomy between "the West and the rest", straddle traditional regional boundaries, relate material to cultural and political history, and overcome thematic fragmentation in historiography.'<sup>19</sup> Patrick O'Brien's prolegomenon for the *Journal of Global History* frames it as a mission even more than a methodology: to construct disciplined, cosmopolitan, and trustworthy narratives of our universal heritage.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, if there is a separation to be drawn between world and global history, it can certainly not be drawn from these interviews.<sup>21</sup> Especially in the earlier interviews, the economic focus sometimes attributed to global history was still very much ‘world history.’ Jack Goody cites Max Weber as a world historian, though he does so primarily to attack the Eurocentrist hypotheses that he sees as dominating the field.<sup>22</sup> In the interview with Patrick O’Brien that economic focus is at the forefront. O’Brien is sympathetic to the mission of Andre Gunder Frank’s *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, which is to prove that things happening in China fed back into world trade through India and via the Indian Ocean back to Europe.<sup>23</sup> But he does not believe in such integration on any meaningful level, in the sense that it actually influenced regional economic trajectories. He notes that Frank ‘wants to say, and I do not agree with him, that there was already an economic world system way back in time. He has edited a book with Barry Gills with the title *The World System: Five Hundred Years or Five Thousand?* . . . There may be 5000 years of long distance trade, but there was no world system or anything a modern economist would recognise as globalisation.’<sup>24</sup>

The interview with Patricia Seed is interesting because it talks specifically about the practice of world history in the United States. Asked whether World History in US academia is ideologically motivated, she notes that ‘world history is a ground-up phenomenon, which is why there are no world historians at the Ivy League. . . . The course usually replaces the Western Civilization course—the one that began with Greece and Rome and ended with post-World War II United States. That course originated at a few elite universities early in the twentieth century, but never became popular until after the Second World War.’ She goes on to explain some of the motivations behind the original ‘Western Civ’ course—to show that all European immigrants belonged in the US, and that this migration had been a positive development. As this migration itself globalised, the narrative had to follow suit and include the pasts of new immigrant groups as well. This development of world history as a bottom-up teacher’s response to world events is not quite as true of Europe as it is in the United States, to which the strong world history tradition at Cambridge University and other places may attest. But, given the ubiquity of US-made academic textbooks, these origins are felt worldwide.

Seed claims that for a long time world history was not much more than ‘Western Europe plus China’. Nonetheless, Chinese history does indeed inform several of the interviewees’ thinking about world history. This is not limited to the discussion of *ReOrient* outlined above. Jack

Wills, for instance, ‘can’t think of a better starting point than China for thinking about the transformations of our own times and contributing to this strange new trend we call “world history”.’ In that connection, it is interesting to note that Wills’s confrontation with the world history/global history question was a very direct one: his *1688: A World History* was published as *1688: A Global History* at the request of his publisher. Natalie Zemon Davis would sympathise: in her interview, she notes that ‘global is becoming a publisher’s cliché.’

As a visiting professor at Leiden in 2004, Wills taught a course called ‘Big Books in World History.’ He notes that the students ‘were particularly taken with John R. McNeill’s *Something New Under the Sun*. . . . Clearly they see these big environmental problems as the policy challenges of their adult lives.’ It is interesting to see how often the environment comes up in the interviews in a world historical sense. Current preoccupations with climate change can feel very recent, and the interviews serve as a reminder of how intimately environmental history has been connected to the world historical project. When Wills was interviewed, Mark Elvin’s *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China* had just appeared, although Elvin explains in his interview that he had been interested in environmental history much longer.<sup>25</sup> Elvin’s view on the importance of the environment to world history is explicit: ‘you can’t put the economy out in a world of its own.’ This is seconded by Felipe Fernández-Armesto, who notes that ‘history is unintelligible except in the context of the environment that surrounds us and the ecosystem that sustains us. I don’t think you can make sense of what humans do unless you locate them in their ecological context.’ Fernández-Armesto also reminds us that Toynbee was a pioneer of environmental history.<sup>26</sup> Toynbee put stock in both climate regimes and climate change, and his work on environmental history dates back to the first volume of *The Study of History*.<sup>27</sup> Of course, given the sheer volume of Toynbee’s work and the fact that he is simultaneously reviled and revered means that he can be many things to many historians, but he was a world historian with an eye for environmental factors.

#### *New Frontiers*

‘The Pacific is still in the process of being discovered’. —Kären Wigen

Collectively, the twenty-five interviews collected here provide as many perspectives on the future of the field. If the field of world history has many pasts, as Patrick Manning reminds us, it also has many futures.<sup>28</sup> Not

all of these possible futures can be outlined here, but two developments deserve highlighting: the new approaches to the history of the sea, and the new possibilities offered by the expanding 'digital sea'.

Seen from the larger network of IGEER, the interviews collectively make clear that world history as it is practised today has developed far beyond the history of maritime trading companies that once made up the bulk of one of its branches, the 'history of European expansion.' The historiography of those trading companies themselves has transformed as well, and the same material is now being used to ask new and innovative questions, as FEEGI conference programmes continually demonstrate.<sup>29</sup> Seen in this light, it is interesting that this development has also included a 'return to the sea'. Oceans are popular again as spaces that connect, transform and hybridise people, goods and ideas. Today, however, this includes the privileging of non-European agency, before as well as during the age of empire. Important works in this regard range from Lincoln Paine's *The Sea and Civilization*, which is a rare example of a truly decentred maritime history of the world, to Enseng Ho's Indian Ocean-centred *Graves of Tarim* and Seema Alavi's recent *Muslim Cosmopolitanism*.<sup>30</sup>

This new oceanic approach was pioneered by some of the historians interviewed in this volume, like Ashin Das Gupta and Michael Pearson. Building partly on their work, Indian Ocean studies has grown exponentially from the 1990s onwards. Centres and endowed chairs have emerged the world over. But old focal points remain: many of the Indian Ocean initiatives, for instance, centre on South Asia. This is no surprise, as historians of South Asia are over-represented among the pioneers of Indian Ocean history. Das Gupta and Pearson are cases in point. But the same focus is visible in centres such as Tufts University's South Asian and Indian Ocean Studies Center, or in books such as Sugata Bose's *A Hundred Horizons*.<sup>31</sup>

One exception remains, on which Kären Wigen dwells in some detail in her interview: the Pacific Ocean. Wigen co-directed a Ford Foundation-funded project the premise of which was that a reshuffling of area studies scholars into ocean-centric working groups would yield new insights. The Pacific working group was the hardest to hold together. As she notes in her interview, the Pacific is still in the process of being discovered: there is no consensus of the 'what, where, and when' of Pacific history. David Armitage, in his interview, clearly agrees when he states: 'I am also convinced the next frontier for oceanic history is Pacific History.' His Pacific Histories project, first convened at Harvard in 2012, likewise sought to create a pan-Pacific perspective.

If it is possible to point to ‘new directions’, then this is one. Recent years have seen a proliferation of studies on the Pacific.<sup>32</sup> Rather than emphasising the North Pacific’s role in an Asian Century, many of these new studies underscore small islands, large seas and multiple transits. As Pacific historian Matt Matsuda notes, the point is ‘not to concentrate on the continental and economic “Rim” powers of East and Southeast Asia and the Americas to define the Pacific, but to propose an oceanic history much more located in thinking outward from Islanders and local cultures.’<sup>33</sup>

If the Pacific Ocean is one of the major geographical frontiers for the discipline, the one most transforming the practice of doing history is digitisation generally, and the rise of digital humanities in particular. The 2003 interview with Patricia Seed, an award-winning pioneer of digital mapping who identified the educational potential of digital resources early on, provides an interesting baseline for this volume. More than a decade ago, she saw opportunities that would still be considered out-of-the-box today. ‘I use computer, board, and role-playing games as vehicles for teaching an introduction to history,’ she explains, ‘because by the time they reach university, undergraduates have spent a good part of their life playing games, dissecting, and criticising them. In short, they arrive with an existing critical apparatus that can be sharpened and refined by showing how narratives, plots, and arguments influence the way you re-tell history.’

Still, it is astounding to see the strides made between the interview with Seed and the one with David Armitage only eight years later. By that time, he and his interlocutors are speaking of digital libraries and massive online open courses (MOOCs) as staples of academic life—exciting ones whose potential has not nearly been reached, but staples nevertheless. This interview takes Seed’s quest to embed digitisation in historical practice and turns it outward. As Armitage asks in reference to the low retention rates in open online courses: ‘what are the university’s responsibilities towards a wider audience beyond its gates? How can faculty members reach out, under what circumstances, with what kind of encouragements?’ Armitage is not afraid to voice a prediction: he is ‘absolutely certain that we are in the midst of the single most transformative moment in academic life since the modern research university was created at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. In five years’ time, the landscape is going to be unrecognizable.’ This is a safe bet in one sense at least: it is a given that in less than a decade the digital frontiers discussed in his interview will also appear quaint.

While huge strides have been made in the democratisation of the archive, there are downsides as well. A looming digital divide creates new inequalities both between and within countries. It is not a given that open-access journals and source digitisation efforts will in fact create universal access to the world's knowledge or democratise the writing of history. As a vision, it will require the sustained effort of a critical mass of committed advocates. But the interview with Armitage does afford a glimpse of a potential world in which it is possible to work productively with classes of tens of thousands of students.

Given the indisputable potential of digital humanities, it is interesting that several of the historians interviewed here point to the mixed blessing that is digitisation: the era of spending months on end in reading rooms with the same researchers, while not fully dead, is over for many people in many places. Funding concerns, programme rigidity and pressure to produce Ph.D.s at ever-increasing speed do play a role, but many of those interviewed caution against what one misses in the 'point-and-click' approach to visiting archives.

Many of these historians have important messages for their early career counterparts in other areas of life as well. If there is one single thread that runs through all the interviews, it is this: do not be afraid of choosing your own path. Learn from your mentors, but decide how, and when, and why, and where, to apply that information. Frederick Cooper uses the most vivid metaphor: 'being influenced by what other people are doing is perfectly fine, the question is what one does next—whether you want to jump on a bandwagon because it's a bandwagon, or to see where it takes you and to jump off when the time has come to jump off it.' Armitage likewise urges young scholars to stop and think about why they take a particular approach to history: 'we need to be more reflexive about exactly why we choose those things, rather than the path-dependency of historiographical activity.' Finally, Wills is vocal about the perverse incentives in the way academic funding is structured: it actively punishes risk-taking, making the discipline less diverse. He notes that 'one of the reasons I'm glad to be retired is . . . that I was fed up with the status anxiety that is so prevalent in American academia. About a hundred American universities aspire to be in the inner circle, the top twenty. A few do improve their relative standing, but at the cost of not doing anything different from those who already are in the circle.' Leonard Blussé expresses a similar sentiment not at the institutional but at the personal level when he laments that the current output-focused climate rewards the unimaginative.

*Adventures of History, History as Adventure*

'I am sorry that I do not have the standard stories of how I spent six months on a banana boat, chatting to the Indonesian crew. . . . I am sorry I do not have more glamorous or romantic stories for you!' —David Armitage

Above, David Armitage eloquently apologises for his lack of maritime adventures, and presents himself as an exception to the 'standard adventurous historians' that grace *Itinerario's* pages. Yet he does emphasise the wanderlust of some of his family members as the possible source of his own wanderings in global academia. But the question remains whether, when read as a collection, it is indeed possible to identify character traits of this 'generation' of world historians. The interviews provide an opportunity for self-fashioning, so how do the interviewed tend to represent their lives, their work and the choices they made? We might rephrase this question in the words of Herman Paul, a student of the scholarly persona: What kind of talents, skills and virtues do these historians cultivate?<sup>34</sup> Has this changed over time and, if so, how? And does it differ between, say, China-oriented scholars and those focused on the history of colonialism? Some generalisations have already been made above. All, however, have their exceptions—most of the historians interviewed are men, but not all. Most had received an elite education before entering academia, yet some, such as Brij Lal (being of *girmitya* background), came a long way and worked their way up by their innate talent and with the help of mentors.

The reason that some thoughts on the world historical scholarly *persona* can be offered here at all is due entirely to the fact that the 'personal' was folded into the 'professional' from the very first interviews. The standard was set by Blussé and George Winius, who were interested not only in the scholarly trajectory of their interviewees, but also in the personal experiences of doing history and the motivations behind it. Real revelations about the latter two required a comfortable setting, a nice dinner and the right conversation partners. The aim was, as Blussé puts it, 'to speak with prominent people active in the field. . . . George and I loved to ask colleagues about their backgrounds, their personal interests and their approaches to teaching and research.' A number of the conversations recorded in this volume were led by Blussé in this way. But he was also 'put on the rack' himself, and excels in presenting a personal history that combines 'accidental scholarship' with maritime adventure.

Felipe Fernández-Armesto plays down the historian's craft by stating that 'everyone can be a historian.' In his view, there is nothing particular

about historians as a group. And indeed, the image of the ‘accidental historian’ that dominated the first volume of interviews has not disappeared in the second. It is still present in several stories: Blussé wonders whether he should not have continued in shipping, which would have been a good outlet for his entrepreneurial talents and lust for adventure. The Indonesian historian Adrian Lopian was bound for journalism and converted fully to the writing and teaching of history only late in his career. Pearson’s adventurous stories of his exploration of the history of the Indian Ocean are thrilling and one would have loved to be part of his crew when he was sailing. Bayly tells us that his fascination for Indian history really started during his travels, especially the time he lived in Allahabad as a young student. It was then that he gained a sense of Indian urban history, and that he could decentre the Raj as organising principle. Robert Ross’s tale of being chased by the police during his fieldwork in Tswana in 1970s apartheid South Africa likewise speaks to the imagination.

Inspiration was found not only in location, but also in politics. Both the Vietnam War and the anti-apartheid movement appear in the interviews as moments that decisively shaped the choices historians made in their field. Cooper explains how the Vietnam War actually motivated him to study African history. The fact that Africa was in the process of decolonising gave the young anti-imperialist a sense of hope. Many historians interviewed reveal a great degree of societal and political engagement, which one way or the other influenced their work. On one side of the spectrum is Piet Emmer, who actively voiced his liberal views on slavery and migration in public debates about immigration in the Netherlands. On the other end of the spectrum we find Nathalie Zemon Davis’s personal confrontation with McCarthyism in the United States. It brought her to Paris, and it was in French history that she made her first incursions into the micro-history for which she has become famous. Brij Lal, when interviewed, had just started as a member of Fiji’s constitutional committee, which enabled him to influence the future of his country.

For Ann Stoler, political activism and research are intertwined, and she talks about her career mainly in terms of battles—struggles against dominant views (particularly those of Clifford Geertz) and politics (especially ideologies of neo-imperialism). Her adventures go beyond the political, though. Like many of the others interviewed, her work is characterised by the crossing of disciplinary boundaries, merging anthropological and historical approaches. Perhaps the real champion in this respect was Jack Goody, who moved from anthropology in Africa to the field of European mediaeval demography.

Perhaps the adventurous element is exactly what characterises this group of historians. They are enterprising in the way they feed their curiosity, through travelling the globe and through crossing methodological demarcations, eras and areas of expertise. The societal engagement of many of those interviewed, whether in terms of inspiration or in terms of practice, is remarkable. The scholars whose lives are recorded in this volume are anything but ivory-tower academics, and that is what makes these conversations such exciting reads.

## Notes

- 1 We are grateful to Peer Vries, Adriaan van Veldhuizen, Lincoln Paine, and the anonymous reviewers of Leiden University Press for their thoughtful comments and suggestions on this introduction.
- 2 Including, but certainly not limited to David Christian, 'The Return of Universal History', *History and Theory* 49 (2010): 6–27; Patrick O'Brien, 'Historiographical Traditions and Modern Imperatives for the Restoration of Global History', *Journal of Global History* 1 (2006): 3–39; Bruce Mazlish, 'Comparing Global History to World History', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 28:3 (1998): 385–95; Jerry H. Bentley, 'The New World History', in Lloyd S. Kramer and Sarah C. Maza, eds., *A Companion to Western Historical Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 393–416; Fred Spier, 'Complexity in Big History', *Cliodynamics* 2 (2011): 146–66.
- 3 Bentley, 'The New World History', 393.
- 4 Brij Lal and Peter Reeves, *The Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora* (Singapore: Didier Millet, 2006).
- 5 India and Indonesia from the 1920 to the 1950s: The Origins of Planning, *Itinerario* 10:1 (1986); India and Indonesia from the 1830s to 1914: The Heyday of Colonial Rule, *Itinerario* 11:1 (1987); The Ancien Regime in India and Indonesia, *Itinerario* 12:1 (1988).
- 6 Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty* (New York: Crown, 2012); Ian Morris, *Why the West Rules—For Now* (London: Profile, 2010); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton* (New York: Knopf, 2014).
- 7 Martha Chaiklin's first book was published in Leiden as *Cultural Commerce and Dutch Commercial Culture, The Influence of European Material Culture on Japan, 1700–1850* (Leiden: CNWS, 2003).
- 8 John Rankine Goody, *The East in the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

- 9 Immanuel M. Wallerstein, *The Modern World System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974).
- 10 Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).
- 11 Especially Reid's *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450–1680*, vol. 1, *The Lands below the Winds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) and *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450–1680*, vol. 2, *Expansion and Crisis* (New Haven, Yale University Press 1993); Adrian Lapien's *Orang laut, bajak laut, raja laut: sejarah kawasan laut Sulawesi pada abad XIX* (Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada, 1987); and Michael Pearson's *The Indian Ocean* (London: Routledge, 2003) and *The World of the Indian Ocean, 1500–1800: Studies in Economic, Social and Cultural History* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishers, 2005).
- 12 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in Carry Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313. For a critical reflection see, among others, David Ludden, 'A Brief History of Subalternity' in David Ludden, ed., *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning, and the Globalization of South Asia* (London: Anthem Press, 2001), 1–39.
- 13 Ranajit Guha, 'The Prose of Counter-Insurgency', in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak, eds., *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988) 45–85: 84.
- 14 E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Gollancz, 1963); Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1972).
- 15 Lucien Febvre, 'Albert Mathiez: un tempérament, une éducation', *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* 4:18 (1932): 573–76: 576.
- 16 The Majelis Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia (Indonesian Sciences Council), established in 1956, was succeeded by the Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia (Indonesian Institute of Sciences) in 1967.
- 17 See the discussion logs of H-World: <https://networks.h-net.org/h-world>.
- 18 See <http://www.thewha.org/about-wha/what-is-world-history/>.
- 19 <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-global-history>.
- 20 O'Brien, 'Historiographical Traditions and Modern Imperatives for the Restoration of Global History', 37–38.
- 21 Many historians, including William McNeill, would argue that there is simply no difference. See Mazlish, 'Comparing Global History to World History', 388.
- 22 See also Jack Goody, *The Theft of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

- 23 Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
- 24 B. K. Gills and A. G. Frank, eds., *The World System: Five Hundred Years or Five Thousand?* (London: Routledge, 1993).
- 25 Mark Elvin, *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China* (London: Yale University Press, 2004). See also Mark Elvin and Liu Ts'ui-jung, eds., *Sediments of Time: Environment and Society in Chinese History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
- 26 See, especially, Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, 12 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934–61) on the relationship between 'civilization' and the environment; and idem, *Mankind and Mother Earth: A Narrative History of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).
- 27 John R. McNeill, 'Toynbee as an Environmental Historian', *Environmental History* (2014): 1–20: 12.
- 28 Patrick Manning, *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 3–15.
- 29 <http://feegi.org/conferences/html>.
- 30 Lincoln Paine, *The Sea and Civilization: a Maritime History of the World* (New York: Knopf, 2013); Enseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility Across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Seema Alavi, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).
- 31 Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006). Bose is a South Asian historian and Gardiner Professor of Oceanic History and Affairs at Harvard.
- 32 See, among others, David Armitage and Alison Bashford, eds., *Pacific Histories: Ocean, Land, People* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
- 33 Matt Matsuda, 'AHR Forum: The Pacific', *The American Historical Review* 111:3 (2006): 758–80, 759.
- 34 Herman Paul, 'The Heroic Study of Records: The Contested Persona of the Archival Historian', *History of the Human Sciences* 26:4 (2013): 67–83; idem, 'Introduction: Repertoires and Performances of Academic Identity', *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 131:4 (2016), 3–7.

# Interviews



## Interview with Brij V. Lal, Historian of Indenture and of Contemporary Fiji

*Born in 1952 and raised in a small village outside the Fijian sugar town of Labasa, Brij Vilash Lal received his first degree at the University of the South Pacific and then went on to graduate studies in Canada and Australia. After completing his Ph.D. at the Australian National University, Lal received his first academic appointment at his alma mater where he published his first book, Giritiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians, in 1983. Since then, he has written extensively on twentieth-century Fijian history. In 1984, Lal moved to the University of Hawaii where he taught both World and Pacific Islands History. While there he also became the editor of the prize-winning journal The Contemporary Pacific. Returning to the Australian National University in 1989 as a Senior Research Fellow, Lal began to work on his biography of the Indo-Fijian leader A.D. Patel, which is now nearing completion. Currently, Lal is one of three members of Fiji's Constitutional Review Commission, a committee set up to review the contested 1990 constitution in this ethnically divided society. His present assignment precludes him from making statements about the Commission during his lifetime. Doug Munro conducted the following interview with Lal on 9 October 1995 at the University of the South Pacific.*

*I would like to start off by noting that you are the grandson of one of the 60,000 Indian indentured labourers on Fiji. How would you describe your background?*

My grandfather came to Fiji in 1906. After serving his five-year term of indenture he leased some native land and started his family there. My parents grew up in Labasa and I was born in Tabia village where the family farm still exists. Like most Indian people of that generation, my parents were illiterate, although my mother somehow learned how to sign her name. But always at the back of their minds was the memory of indenture—the poverty, the petty humiliations—and my parents did not want to see their children go through a similar experience. Moreover there was the insecurity of land tenure. We could only lease land for a short period; we could not own land. We were a large family of eight so there

was no way in which our parents could provide for all of us with a future on the land, so economic insecurity played a part. Also education was culturally valued by our community. Most primary schools were started by our parents and grandparents amidst great difficulties. I went to the local primary school (which in fact is celebrating its fiftieth anniversary this year) and then to Labasa College for my high school education and from there to university here and elsewhere. But it was that experience of growing up on the farm that I think has been very important in shaping my imagination, helping me understand certain things. My interest in history really starts there.

*It is fair enough to say that you come from an improving class that was intent on upward social and economic mobility for subsequent generations. But you come from a fairly disadvantaged background and also an improbable background for someone who has since become one of the two foremost historians of Fiji and also an authority on the history of indentured servitude. So, interest aside, what made you become a historian and not something else? You did say that your background gave you a sense of a past that had to be rectified. But what about the opportunities that came your way and the people who helped to make it possible?*

Growing up on a small farm in an isolated part of Fiji where a week-old *Fiji Times* or *Shanti Dut* was the only interesting reading material available, I felt the need to know about the outside world beyond the village. My grandfather was alive when I was a child. I used to sleep in his bed and he used to tell me stories about India, about his growing up in a village, about why he came. When I was a child I used to see these funny looking people, the surviving *girmitiyas* [Indian indentured labourers], wearing turbans and *dhoti*, congregating in the evenings under a mango tree or in a small shed, smoking *hukka* and talking in a strange language. They used to sing *bhajan* together. This intrigued me, and I suppose it is not altogether surprising that my first book deals with the background and identity of these people, a kind of collective biography.<sup>1</sup> My high school teachers played an important role, too. I wanted to do English Literature and History. Both these subjects really interested me and I had some fantastic teachers who asked us to read writers like W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, the Bronte sisters, Shakespeare, the American classics of John Steinbeck and F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Australian authors like Patrick White. We read many of the great classics of English literature. And we had a history teacher—who later became a labour politician—who one day turned up for class with a placard around his neck bearing

the opening words of *The Communist Manifesto*. They were people who took their profession seriously, were interested and interesting, and who encouraged us to go on. I got the sense when I was at high school that knowledge was fun and that passion to understand has continued. I chose history but to this day I have an abiding love of good literature.

*As you said earlier, you found your niche, initially, in the history of the girmitiyas. I take it that your own background provided you with some advantage, if only a sense of commitment.*

Yes, it was a project in which the heart and the head came together. I was writing about my own people, about myself really. So there was a sense of immediacy, emotional attachment. I had the language, I had contacts. I was making discoveries which had a direct social and personal interest. I have since discovered—no doubt my early exposure to great literature played a part here—that I am not very good at things abstract, remote. A subject has to appeal to me emotionally, has to have some personal relevance, for me to be intellectually engaged with it. The great Australian historian, Ken Inglis, once said that history is largely concealed autobiography.<sup>2</sup> I think there is much truth in that. Take my eventual choice of a thesis topic. At first I wrote to the Australian National University saying that I wanted to do a Ph.D. in historical demography. But they had no one to supervise me and also thought that I had insufficient background in Mathematics. So they shifted me into History, and there was Ken Gillion, the distinguished scholar of Indian migration and of indenture.<sup>3</sup> Ken told me that there was the topic of the Fiji Indians and he also mentioned that I could work on Sikhs on Fiji, because my Master's thesis was on Sikhs in Vancouver. There was this larger Sikh diaspora which Ken thought I could explore. But I found after a month or so of reading that I could not become enthused with the subject, so Ken said: the Fiji aspect of indenture is covered (and there might have been a territorial element there) so why not look at the background of these people in India—why they came, who they were, and the whole process of recruitment and migration. He had in mind the idea that I might be able to provide some insights into the whole process of migration and social change in one part of India. So that is how I started.

*Soon after we first met as postgraduate students in 1979 you presented a seminar paper on your Ph.D. work that challenged the notion that girmitiyas were deceived into signing on for service on Fiji. It struck me at the time as rather too assiduous an application of the type of history that was around the*

*Department of Pacific History at ANU at the time—the Davidson tradition, if you like—where Pacific Islanders (and indentured Asians for that matter) were accorded a proactive role in the shaping of events and their outcomes.<sup>4</sup> Afterwards, by contrast, when you followed the girmitiyas onto the plantations, and published a series of articles in the mid-1980s, a very indignant tone enters your writing, and you stress the exploitative and oppressive lives led by the girmitiyas.<sup>5</sup> Put it this way: I noticed the contrast.*

I am not sure that when I went to do my Ph.D. I had read what Davidson had written about agency and the role Pacific Islanders themselves had played in the making of their own histories. The book on Pacific history that most impressed me initially was Peter Corris' work on the Solomon Island labour recruitment and migration.<sup>6</sup> Also, a highly influential work came out in 1974 and that was Hugh Tinker's *A New System of Slavery*—a very emotional work whose thesis is explicit in the title.<sup>7</sup> I began to wonder as I read more about the tremendous changes taking part in nineteenth century India, and the enormous migration from the Indo-Gangetic plain to different parts of the world, whether it could be that millions of people would leave their homes because they were deceived. It just did not sound right to me. Also, I realised that people over a forty-year period, even more in some cases, were leaving India for other colonies, coming back, and so there were communication links. So I was not convinced that deception was as important a factor in inducing people to leave. I do not discount that fraud and deceit were important factors in inducing people to move. But their extent seemed to be exaggerated. After all, migration to Fiji and other colonies was but a very small part of a larger process of migration to, say, the Assam gardens, to the Calcutta jute mills, to the coal mines in Bihar, to the Bombay textile mills—and there was a very lively debate going on at that time about the role that the British had played in undermining the handicraft industry and to what extent poverty in India was caused by British colonial policies.<sup>8</sup> Given the context of what was taking place in India at the time, my emphasis was on agency and participation by the subjects themselves. Now, if there is a shift in tone when I write about indenture on Fiji, I would say that it is not as marked as you suggest. It is all a matter of perspective. I do not discount the oppressive consequences of the plantation system, and the terrible conditions under which girmitiyas lived and worked and survived. But I have also emphasised the role of individuals themselves in making their own history. You will note the emphasis I have placed on sirdars or Indian foremen—their collaborative role with the overseers and the plantation management. In my article on women and suicide—the social

history of indenture—I look at the role of sexism and racism.<sup>9</sup> I look at the role that the patriarchal values played in marginalising women from the social processes.<sup>10</sup> So there is some continuity. I look at the role of individuals in making their own history. When I talk about recruitment I look at the reasons why they left. And when I look at the experience on plantations, I try to understand why things happened the way they did, and in that context I emphasise individual agency.

*Those articles in the mid-1980s were highly revisionary. Where do you think that your work goes beyond your predecessors? I mean, Ken Gillion must have been a hard act to follow.*

Ken Gillion's book *Fiji's Indian Migrants* is still a standard starting point, but it is a product of its time. I think what Gillion was trying to do was to maintain 'balance'. I have looked at the same records that he looked at, and many more. I have the sense that he did not mine as much out of the historical evidence as he might have. He was loath to upset the balance of perspective, so everyone gets their share of his attention. As a historian Ken was making an evaluation of the total system and he attempts to provide a complete picture of the entire experience. I admire his work to that extent. It is what helps to make it an invaluable point of reference. But when you go beyond that framework, I think you begin to realise that things are more complex.

*Such as the question of women and suicide?*

Exactly. Not only Gillion but others who have written about the very high suicide rate among the girmitiyas always held out the 'immoral character' of women as the major factor. But I cannot expect them to anticipate the thinking and research of a generation later. I respect and admire the work that has been accomplished and I am mindful of the context in which it was written, the paradigms used. But I think that we have moved on in pushing the frontiers of indenture historiography.

*In what ways do you feel, then, that your work has advanced on your predecessors?*

I suppose my contribution would be in enlarging our understanding of the everyday life on plantations—through the exploration of specific issues, such as the treatment of women, such as social problems of suicide, such as workers' actual experiences on plantations, and the methods that they used to accommodate and resist the demands made on them. That is where I have tried to link the Indo-Fijian experience with experiences

elsewhere. I have tried to be broader than the very Fiji-focussed work of my predecessors and relate it not only to the Indians' indenture experiences elsewhere but to work into Pacific Islands history generally. I think, if I can be so bold as to say so, that my contribution is to locate Fiji Indian history in the indenture experience in this larger context. I think I have also used more cultural evidence, such as in my work on Totaram Sanadhaya,<sup>11</sup> and the kind of work I now propose to do, looking at representing the human reality of the experience.

*Both of us take an explicitly comparative perspective. Where we broadly differ is that I am concerned with the more conventional questions of power relations in the plantations, resistance and accommodation. You are concerned with that too but go further because you are interested in the hidden world of the worker—on questions of evolving identity, individual and group.*

Well I think that the work that you have done on power relations is vital. That sets the framework and the parameters. Without that groundbreaking work it would be very difficult to do the work that we are thinking of doing now. I do not think that one is necessarily better than the other. I think it is very important—and this is in line with developments in historiography—to look at the experience of workers, the unwritten history of people, deciphering their texts. That is interesting, that is useful. I believe I have access to certain sources and that I have certain skills by virtue of who I am—a member of the community that I am writing about—access to information, and to that extent I am privileged. I find it interesting, this history of the subaltern strata. It fascinates me and how to incorporate their experiences, their vision, their hopes into the larger text is what historians have done for other parts of the world for slavery, indenture, peasants. So this approach is informed by developments elsewhere, which try to represent the experience of the ordinary people.

*If you had to make a statement on the nature of indenture, at least with respect to the Indian diaspora, what would it be?*

Leaving aside the questions of exploitation, racism and the institutional aspects of indenture, I think that the indenture experience is an extremely important, formative and defining period in the history of overseas Indian communities, particularly in the Caribbean, Mauritius, South Africa and Fiji, because that is the site of the initial social transformation. It is fundamental. When the Old World meets the New, then old ways of doing things, old values, institutions and practices start to change. We begin to confront the reality of a completely different order when former

ways of doing things, the world view, seem to lose their relevance. The caste system breaks down, and along with that a host of social conventions and practices. Everyone is a 'coolie', huddled together on estate lines in cramped quarters. In that sense, everyone is equal in the denial of their individual humanity. The indenture experience was a great leveller of hierarchy and status. So I see the indenture process as the death of one world and the beginning of another. The details vary from colony to colony, but the process is the same everywhere.

*A feature of your work is that you have moved purposefully through the major divisions of not just indenture history but Fiji history—from your Master's thesis on the Sikhs through to the origins and plantation experiences of Indo-Fijians. That done you have written extensively on contemporary Fijian political history, most recently a biography of the great Indian leader A.D. Patel. Now you are looking at indenture in a far more comparative perspective. There does seem to be a rhythm and a pattern that your work has gone through. Was this planned or semi-planned, or was it the way that things simply panned out?*

Simply the way things panned out. I had absolutely no idea when I finished my Ph.D. that I would go on and do work on Fijian indenture. When I went to Hawaii I thought I had done enough on indenture on Fiji and I expected to move on to other things. For a while I contemplated writing a history of indenture on Hawaii.

*But that was exactly the time that you were writing all those articles on indenture on Fiji.*

If in hindsight there is a pattern, it was not carefully designed. My journey into various things has basically come from the quest to understand myself. Indenture provided an understanding of my origins, my social identity, my beginnings. Then I wanted to look at my place in the wider society of Fiji and that is why I began to think more systematically about the larger social environment which also informed my identity and where I was. As for contemporary political history, I have certainly had a very keen desire to understand the present. For me history provides a tool and a method to understand the contemporary world. And I have always found myself, as one reviewer put it, an interested spectator of the history of Fiji. My work, when I was here [at the University of the South Pacific] and then on Hawaii, deals with contemporary issues—beginning with my research into the 1982 Fiji elections<sup>12</sup>—partly because I was living in separate environments where I was constantly called upon to comment

on social problems and social issues—and more so on Fiji as a member of a small educated elite. I could not have neglected that responsibility, and the more I was asked to comment about politics, about contemporary developments, the more I began to move closer to the recent period. The past and present, to me, are not discrete entities, they are two sides of the same coin, and I enjoy living and working at the interface between the two.

*And then, I guess, Fijian history thrust itself upon you with the coups in 1987, and that was something you could not have avoided even if you had wanted to. You have made the point that your approach to political history, and especially writing the contemporary history of this country, is one of '[c]ritical attachment rather than cool detachment.'*<sup>13</sup> *Could you elaborate?*

Yes, I was here during that critical period in 1987. I care deeply about this country, about its people, about its future. I cannot be indifferent to it. Cool detachment, in my view, comes from someone who assumes an air of dispassionate objectivity, distance and a certain coolness—the sense that one can stand outside time and space and history and judge things impartially, which is certainly not for me. One cannot be neutral about the coup. One can try and understand but one cannot claim complete detachment. So in that sense when I talk about critical attachment I write with affection, I write with a certain concern and commitment. I just cannot be indifferent to what happens in this country where I was born.

*I remember you telling me that you wrote your book on the Fiji coups in a matter of weeks, this outpouring of words with papers and research notes lying all over the living room floor, totally absorbed in your work, your family life on hold.*<sup>14</sup> *I was under the impression that this writing performance was a matter of release, almost as though the exorcist had walked through the door. What is it like, to work under that sort of impetus?*

A month after the coup I went back to Honolulu where I was teaching and where I had my regular job. I had just experienced a major event in the life of one Pacific island nation, but on Hawaii, except for very brief and rather ill-informed commentary, there was absolutely no awareness of the depth of the tragedy and its implications for the Pacific islands region as a whole. There were colleagues who were sympathetic but they lacked even the most basic understanding of Fijian politics and social dynamics. I found myself talking to myself. I could not communicate my experiences to people under these circumstances, so I turned to writing. I found that words just came tumbling out. I sat there and wrote and wrote and

wrote, and at the end of it I felt exhausted and relieved. I also desperately wanted to contribute an alternative explanation about the causes of the coup, contrary to what was portrayed in the media. There was that additional pressure, self-imposed I suppose. You see, there is something fundamentally wrong and immoral about deposing a duly democratically elected government through a military coup, a government that had been in office less than a month. Most people in this country regret that the Labour government was not given sufficient time to prove itself. Given its inexperience and the nature of the coalition agreement it may or may not have succeeded. But I think that denying it the opportunity was wrong. Fiji faced the first test of democracy—respecting the electorate’s verdict on a change of government—and it failed the test.

*I guess that you find writing about recent events a very different type of exercise from writing about the more distant past.*

No.

*Could you comment, then, upon the possibility and the desirability of writing about the very recent past, particularly when you do not know what is going to happen next, such as a coup just around the corner?*

I would disagree with you about the differences between writing about the distant past and more recent times. I would argue that the processes of investigation are the same. The critical approach to one’s sources, the evaluation of evidence, rigour, rules of verification—all these apply as much to ancient history as to modern history. I think there are distinct advantages in writing about more recent times, in terms of evidence and more varied opportunities to cross-check it. Oral evidence has an extremely vital role to play. It is a source, when properly used, that can enrich and deepen a study in ways that archival documents cannot. So I feel that in that sense there are opportunities.

*But there are certain opportunities that you will not get in dealing with the more distant past, apart from the advantage of oral evidence, and of course there is more evidence as time moves on. I am not questioning the points you made about the need for the critical approach, methodology and rigour. But often the documents are not available to you, and in your book *Broken Waves* you could only use documents up to 1959. And also perhaps the constraints of common decency will not allow you to talk about certain things within the lifetime of individuals, in much the same way as Jim Davidson, when writing his book on Samoa, imposed a self-denying ordinance by declining to*

*identify those people, especially close colleagues, when he had something wholly derogatory to say about them.*<sup>15</sup>

Yes, certainly the points you make about the unavailability of certain kinds of documents can be a problem. But when I researched the more recent period, from the 1960s, I found that a lot of confidential material had found its way into the media, into the Hansard of the Legislative Council and the House of Representatives, private papers and tapes of the meetings in the possession of individuals. Information is available in different ways and I think that I was not unduly disadvantaged. And then of course you have the vernacular and English-language newspapers which report meetings, issues and events of substance. While you do not know exactly what the governors said to London, for example, you do know broadly speaking what happened. For a historian it is not so much these facts but explaining them and providing the context that is important. The other point you raised, about people taking to you into their confidence, is one we have to grapple with. It does raise the ethical problem of how to use that evidence. The approach that I have taken is not to mention names, who said what to whom, but if I found the evidence credible, and was able to verify it independently, I would state the substance of their view without breaching confidentiality, real or implied. I am not being dishonest with the evidence given to me but at the same time I am concerned not to divulge the source, unless the person said otherwise. Of course, when you talk to people and get to know them, socialise with them, it does become rather difficult to write critically about them and there is always the risk of compromising yourself. For that reason I have deliberately kept myself away from the powers that be. I always want to maintain my distance and my independence. There is nothing more satisfying than writing the truth as you see it, unaffected by social obligations and unfettered by the potential consequences of your work.

*Writers of contemporary history, more so than so-called 'conventional' historians, are at risk of being overtaken by events. If you had to write your book on the Fiji coup now, rather than in 1989, in what ways would it be the same or different?*

This is a very important question. Since writing the book I have read what other people have written, I have talked to many people very close to the action, and I can say truthfully that nothing I have heard since I wrote my account causes me to change my mind. On the contrary, if I can say so, I am comforted, reassured by what has happened since the coups, that my analysis is correct. A few details here and there may vary,

but the foundations remain unshaken. I argued then, and I believe even more strongly now, that the coup was not so much about race as it was a deliberate act of contrivance by vested interests bent on recapturing power they had lost at the polls. There was nothing inevitable about the coup. Coups do not solve problems, they compound them.

*In what ways do you apply your training as a historian to your work on the Constitutional Review Commission? Does it give access to insights and understandings that would not be possible otherwise?*

Yes. I think I have a fairly good understanding of the dynamics of Fijian history. I am aware of previous attempts at constitution making, and I have read very carefully and closely the Hansard; the transcripts of the constitutional conferences in 1965 and 1970; the records of the Street commission in 1975; and the various commissions in and attempts at constitution-making since 1987. When you see the kinds of issues that were raised, the kinds of solutions that were devised or proposed, you notice that the basic issues have not changed very much. The same issues are repeated in various forms at various times. So it is an awareness of the historical dimension that I bring to my present work on the Commission. I suppose I also bring the ability and the training of the historian to read critically, to make an evaluation of an enormous amount of evidence that comes your way through public submissions. Reading, analysis, synthesis: these are part and parcel of our trade. Also, a certain humanistic perspective, as I believe that constitution making is not simply a legal task; it involves people, it involves the hopes and aspirations of people, and in that sense the background and broadening experience in the humanities helps me understand better the large issues.

*You have written prolifically but you have also confined yourself largely to Fiji and the Indian diaspora. I make this observation in the light of Oskar Spate's call back in the late 1970s that historians from the Pacific Islands should tackle European themes 'in their own right', and that we should have as 'our ideal, a community of scholars drawn from both cultures, each of whom can move in either with reasonable, even if not quite equal, assurance.'<sup>16</sup> Even after all these years it has not reached the stage where historians indigenous to the region have moved outside their own cultures and backgrounds. Do you have any comment on this state of affairs?*

Yes, it is a pattern; but I am not sure that it is a bad one, actually, because we are able to offer a particular perspective, born out of life-long experience. We have access to certain resources—language, people, data, evidence—

that may not be easily available to others. And once you begin writing you tend to stick to a particular course, and unless there is a major shift in your life from one university to another, or some other circumstance, you tend to keep generally in the same broad field. It is natural and pretty universal, I think. The other thing that is important for me is the commitment I talked about earlier. I have a commitment to my discipline and profession, but my greater commitment is to the subjects that I write about. I am very deeply committed to the history and politics of the country of my birth, as I am also to the broader Indian diaspora of which I am a fragment. I have not ventured further afield because there is so much that keeps me occupied. Unlike international relations experts, sociologists and such, for whom the concepts and theories matter more than particular geographic regions or topics as such, historians tend to learn the language, immerse themselves in the culture, and that gives their work a certain depth and enduring quality. They make a longer-term commitment to their particular subject.

*There is also another point and that is the Pacific Islands of the 1990s reminds me very much of New Zealand in the 1950s. I grew up in a place where there were very limited opportunities for artists and writers, many of whom took off for greener overseas pastures. Is it not necessary, in much the same way, for historians from within the region to get out in order to get on, and often just to do worthwhile things?*

I think that is absolutely vital. I do not at all accept the idea that to write sympathetically and knowledgably about the Islands you have to live in the Islands. Certainly you have to immerse yourself in the culture and learn the language, but the place where you work and write is irrelevant. In fact, it is very important for Island scholars to spend time outside the region, to reacquaint themselves with the latest developments in their fields. I would take Oskar Spate's point further and say that it is invaluable for Island scholars to spend time at metropolitan universities, and for people from those areas to spend time in the Islands. I am a strong believer in collaboration, in doing things together, helping each other out and sharing information, experiences, and in the process enriching ourselves and our discipline as well.

*Finally, could you provide a preview of your forthcoming book on A.D. Patel? A.D. Patel was politically active on Fiji from the late 1930s to the late 1960s. Fine mind, fine intellect, who believed in democracy, liberty, equality, justice; who fought against colonialism and the mighty Colonial*

Sugar Refining Company on behalf of the cane growers. He was a man of wide reading and great learning. Edmund Burke was regular fare, Tolstoy, Thomas Hardy, Gerald Manly Hopkins, great Indian classics of Kalidas and Kautilya and, most important of all, Bhagvat Gita. He spoke several languages and was the leading criminal lawyer in this country. Lord Denning, the Master of the Rolls, described him as one of the most outstanding advocates he had ever met. So I found him fascinating. I empathise with his vision of Fiji as an inclusive, democratic, non-racial society. These are things I find attractive, but I feel that he has not been given enough credit in the history of Fiji. He was the one, more than anyone else, who agitated for independence, and was responsible for the departure of the CSR Company [in 1973], three years after independence. But you find his name omitted from the gallery of people who have had a hand in making the history of the country. I have never written a biography before and what I am trying to do in this work is to present an alternative vision for Fiji, and I have let Patel speak as much as I can. I am not being judgmental. I just say: this is what he was saying, and the context in which he was saying these things. I place on record his thoughts, ideas and experiences, and create a text that others will hopefully find interesting and useful.

*And after Patel?*

Let me finish this constitutional work first.

## Notes

- 1 Brij V. Lal, *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians* (Canberra: Journal of Pacific History, 1983).
- 2 K.S. Inglis, *This is the ABC: The Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1932–1983* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press 1983) 1.
- 3 K.L. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants: A History to the End of Indenture in 1920* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1962).
- 4 J.W. Davidson, 'Problems of Pacific History', *Journal of Pacific History* 1 (1966) 5–21.
- 5 Especially 'Murmurs of Dissent: Nonresistance on Fiji plantations', *Hawaiian Journal of History* 20 (1986) 188–214.
- 6 Peter Corris, *Passage, Port and Plantation: A History of Solomon Islands Labour Migration, 1870–1914* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1973).

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- 13 Brij V. Lal, *Broken Waves: A History of the Fiji Islands in the Twentieth Century* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1992) xvii.
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- 15 J.W. Davidson, 'Understanding Pacific History: The Participant as Historian' in: Peter Munz (ed.), *The Feel of Truth* (Wellington: A.H. Reed, 1969) 37–38.
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## ‘I end up with the question “why”, but I don’t start with it’: Interview with Geoffrey Parker

*Herman Roozenbeek, Jurriën de Jong, Leonard Blussé, Maurits Ebben and Jaap de Moor had a conversation with Geoffrey Parker at the seaside resort of Noordwijk, at exactly the same place where we interviewed Sir John Elliott two years ago. While we were driving up to the beach, Professor Parker tried to find out what questions we were going to ask, but we just asked him what kind of ice cream he liked. Here are his spontaneous answers to spontaneous questions as they were selected and noted down by Jurriën De Jong.*

*This morning in your lecture you talked about the style of government in the Spain of Philip II. Spain in the sixteenth century is always seen as a very centralised state. Is this a reliable picture?*

We really have to get away from the idea of a unified Spain; until the eighteenth century that just doesn’t exist. What we do have is a remarkably unified Castile. And within Castile by the sixteenth century the authority of the crown is remarkably powerful. There are very few institutions that can stand up to the monarchy in Castile. The other parts of the peninsula—Aragon, Navarre, Catalonia—are areas in which the king’s authority is mediated through institutions. It’s not a unique division; you find the same in France with the *pays d’état* and the *pays d’élection*. Just so in Spain: the polities that have strong representative institutions tend to be on the periphery.

This creates what H. Koeningsberger has called ‘composite monarchies,’ and he has argued that they were the norm for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>1</sup> What I think he understates is that within the composite monarchy you can have a core which is extremely powerful, which is able to mobilise resources in an unusually effective way. And although Castile, for example, is much less populous than France, it actually can mobilise more effectively because there are very few obstacles to royal power. So it seems to me that in Castile you do have perhaps

the most absolute government of Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

*Generally, the decline of Spain in the seventeenth century is seen as a result of economic and social problems. This morning in your lecture you ventured another possible factor, concerning the management of information and the style of government under the Habsburgs.*

This is the result of trying to apply modern techniques of analysis and modern strategic concerns to early modern problems on the assumption that there are probably some underlying similarities. It is clear that one of the great problems of today, especially in war, is the temptation that extraordinary good communications give to the central authority to interfere and micro-manage. And it seemed to me that when I considered this and looked at the evidence from the reign of Philip II, exactly the same happened: he created a remarkably effective and comprehensive system of information-gathering that gave him access to data from all over the world and led him to believe, I think falsely, that he knew everything. And with that knowledge, he became more and more prepared to overrule the theatre commanders on the grounds that, although they might understand the local situation, he had the big picture, he knew best. And that seems to me the fatal miscalculation then, just as it is a fatal miscalculation now.

*But is this system linked only to the reign of Philip II, or does it extend further into the seventeenth century?*

It's difficult to see whether it begins with him, because in 1559, on the journey between the Netherlands and Spain, the ship containing most of the government archives was lost at sea, and so we don't entirely understand the governmental system of Charles V. One reason why there is no first class biography of the emperor is because of the loss of those papers. The system is certainly there in the early years of the reign of Philip II but probably in order to get that degree of sophistication in information gathering you need a stable centre, and Charles V never provided that. Instead he toured around all the time. He also delegated a great deal, whereas Philip did not delegate. Sitting at the centre he was able to build up the networks with a degree of permanence which had not been there before.

It certainly survives his death. Philip III and Lerma and more notably, as John Elliott has shown, Philip IV and Olivares clearly have the same sort of structure, which gathers enormous amounts of information and channels it to the centre where all the decisions are taken. A great process

of consultation takes place while policies are being formulated, but once they're formulated it is almost impossible to change them for two reasons. Number one: the government will not delegate to the theatre commanders. Number two: there is a tendency to accept only that information which coincides with the policy already chosen. That's called 'irrational consistency': you stick to the policy even when it is clear that the data don't fit. Thomas Kuhn talked about this in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.<sup>2</sup> He called it the 'paradigm'. It is extremely difficult for scientists to recognise that the paradigm no longer works, and I think that is equally true of statesmen.

Olivares' domination of Spanish policy is no less complete than that of Philip II. So I see that system continue until it's clear that Spain has collapsed as a great power in the 1640s, 1650s and 1660s. The problem is that in certain phases, I believe, information technology creates a surge of knowledge that leads to the illusion that it is safe to intervene and micromanage. We saw that in the 1970s, when for the first time satellite communications provided an almost instantaneous link up between theatre commanders, area commanders and the supreme commander in the White House. You had it in 1914 when the telephone and the telegraph gave almost instantaneous communications between diplomats and their governments in a way that had not existed before. And I think you had it in the sixteenth century, in the reign of Philip II in particular, when the increased sophistication of the diplomatic, the espionage and the postal systems suddenly channelled in further knowledge which had not been there before.

It takes time for statesmen and soldiers alike to adjust to the fact that, although they have exponentially more knowledge than before, it is still not enough to justify changing the rules. It's as if there's a new horizon. There is a quantum leap and it allows people—especially politicians and statesmen—to delude themselves that the rules have changed. Indeed, with the telephone you can do lots of things. In World War II every tank had its own radio-telephone. Guderian, in 1940 in the fall of France, only avoids that problem by turning off his radio. He wants to go right ahead, so he doesn't want to hear his commander say: 'Come back'. The temptation to micro-manage when you have a new technological toy is very hard to resist, and avoiding the perils of micro-management is harder still.

What interests me are those moments at which things change. Let me give you what I think is a very sophisticated and very attractive theory of military revolution. It's called the 'punctuated equilibrium model.' It derives from a model for the evolution of the species devised by Niles E.

Aldridge and Stephen Gould.<sup>3</sup> Their idea is that the basic tendency in evolution is balance, but that something sometimes happens which causes a very dramatic change. That change destroys the whole balance within the evolution of the species: a number of other things have to change to compensate and then you get a new equilibrium. If you apply that model to military affairs, then, for example, the invention of really powerful artillery in the West, and only in the West, in the mid-fifteenth century creates a totally new situation which requires everything in warfare to change. The evolution of the artillery fortress—the *Trace Italienne*—is another such revolution which causes everything around it to change. The creation of the ship of the line, also in the sixteenth century, is a third.

I like to study those punctuations. That's why I don't spend as much time as I should on the philosophers, who are trying to find general rules. I am not convinced that there are universal rules. Look at Alfred Mahan, who argued that there were certain universal rules of war at sea.<sup>4</sup> He never considered the impact of changes in sail plans, the creation of steam power, new technology, new gunnery or new techniques of using guns at sea. These for him are irrelevant: for Mahan, the rules of warfare at sea remain the same. I just don't buy it; I don't think these theories recognise the specificity of situations, that things do change over time.

I believe if you look at how things happened you will find the cause. I end up with the question 'why', but I don't start with it, whereas most historians, I think, start with a 'why,' and only then look at 'how'. I am a historical technician, and that's the methodology that I have evolved. Although in the end I try to explain why the *Trace Italienne* works, I have never found a treatise which says: 'This is how we do it, because...' All I found is people saying: 'Jesus Christ! The French are doing this. If we don't do this too we're going to lose out'. So it seems to me that this was very much the way things happened. As Ranke said, what we really have to do is to 'tell things how they really were.' And I don't think on the whole people start out by asking why. By definition, it is an anachronistic question.

*This brings us to the idea of the 'Military Revolution'. In your writings on this subject you concentrate on the sixteenth century, while Jeremy Black points to the eighteenth.<sup>5</sup> Are there, in your opinion, any moments of punctuated equilibrium in the eighteenth century? And if so, why are these less important than those in the sixteenth century?*

I do think so. There is a major punctuation in the 1790s with the *Levée en masse* and the ability for the first time to mobilise so many troops that

armies don't have to take fortresses. Also the creation of a road network that enables armies to move quickly in many different directions and then concentrate, which is the genius of Napoleon. There is a major disequilibrium there. I don't see that much between then and the sixteenth century. If Maurice of Nassau had come back to fight for Frederick the Great, he would have known what to do; but he would have been lost at Waterloo. Likewise, if a general from the Crimean war had been parachuted into 1914, he would have understood exactly what was going on. But if he'd been parachuted into 1918, he wouldn't have understood a thing, with airpower, mechanisation, the tanks and stormtroopers. Things can change very, very quickly after a long period of equilibrium.

Let me tell you why I think the sixteenth century is important. Four different developments took place, each of them significant. First of all you have the artillery fortress, which evolves in Italy in the 1520s and 1530s. Second, you have the ship of the line. I'm not absolutely certain of the date at which this happens, but one of the first was a Scottish ship, the *Great Michael*, built in 1511 with really big guns on its lower decks. Third, you have the development of controlled firepower on the battlefield. If you like, it's like the line of battle at sea, transposed to land. And the pioneer there was, of course, Maurice of Nassau. Again the date at which that happened is very difficult to pinpoint. I had hoped to find it at Nieuwpoort. The problem is: nobody mentions it. There's a nice map in the Dutch version of the *Nassausche Lauren-crans* that does show ranks of men firing at each other in sequence.<sup>6</sup> The description explicitly refers to this. And yet, Francis Vere, who was there, says that '[w]e were not able to use our exercises, which we thought would give us a decisive advantage.' There's no question when it's invented: it is both illustrated and described in 1594, in a letter from Wilhelm Ludwig of Nassau to his cousin Maurice. But when it's put into effect is not so clear. The first use in battle may in fact have been at Breitenfeld in 1632. The fourth element is the growth in manpower, which you can pinpoint to the 1530s and 1540s. Now if you take these four things together, you have changed the equilibrium of warfare on sea and on land. And I think that's revolutionary.

*All these developments seem rather closely connected to the process of state formation. How do you think that process relates to the Military Revolution? Does one cause the other?*

My 'Military Revolution' argues that it is the growth of the army which forces the state to grow, but Jeremy Black has argued in his book that it's the other way round.<sup>7</sup> The image I like is that of the double helix,

the DNA molecule, which consists of two interlocking spirals. I believe that at different stages you have military expansion, military change, forcing alterations in the structure of government, and at certain points the structure of government forcing or permitting or encouraging the expansion of armies and innovation. But I see these as being very closely related: it's a symbiotic relationship. I don't think that one causes the other all the time; at certain points you get that interlock. The data, to me, don't seem to be so equivocal. Once you have the big armies you simply have to expand the state. You'll have management problems and the army develops an impetus of its own. Armies grow almost by themselves. And certainly there is the element of competition. The Habsburgs, because they ruled such an enormous area, were capable of putting together a larger army than anybody else. So France simply had to field an army of equivalent size. And that forced administrative change.

There's another controversy here. It seems to me that the key period for military expansion was the 1520s and 1530s. In those two decades the size of standing armies increased very rapidly. The same two decades saw a proliferation of a new sort of fortification, the *Trace Italienne*, and I believe that there is a connection between those two. It has been hotly contested, but I believe it's true. I think that the proliferation of new-style fortifications increased army size in two ways: first, if you had twenty to thirty new-style fortifications, you had to garrison them all. And that automatically increased army size, because the total of garrisons could be 20,000 to 50,000 men. By the end of the seventeenth century Louis XIV had half of his army in garrisons. On the other hand, to take one of these fortresses you needed a very large army indeed, because you can only blockade it by cutting it off from the outside world. And to do that took 50,000 to 60,000 men. These are very large figures, and I believe that this is why army size went up. Furthermore, the increase in expenditure on the fortifications and garrisons and on the larger armies for offensive purposes forced the state to increase its taxation, forced the state to intrude more into the lives of subjects and therefore represented a major influence on the rise of the modern state.

But I think there was more than that: fortresses came to be laid out in layered lines, a defence in depth. The fortifications built by Vauban in France resembled a giant bastion. You had various lines, ending in the 'Ne plus ultra' lines. The best piece of luck Louis XIV ever had was that eighteen-month period between 1700 and 1702 when all the fortresses in Belgium were delivered to his forces. It was just an extraordinary stroke of luck, and Vauban was able to fortify them. So that when, eventually,

William III declared war and the Grand Alliance went to war against Louis XIV, France enjoyed the terrific advantage of possessing these advance fortifications. In other words, they'd already gone far beyond their frontiers and the war would end when they had lost them. But it was not French territory that was being lost; it was just the new acquisitions. France had devised a defence in depth which made it almost impossible to invade. It was almost impossible to get close to Paris. It could be done, but in the end the problems were such that, unless you took a significant number of fortresses, you couldn't go any further because your own lines of communication became vulnerable. And you couldn't take more than two or three of these artillery fortresses in a single campaign. So war just stagnated. Battles were no longer significant and generals found themselves tied down in sieges.

Now that's very interesting in Europe, and it creates a pattern, but I'm also very interested in what happens when you export that aspect of the military revolution abroad. Because it creates a bridgehead which is almost impregnable. There are very few examples of western-style fortifications being taken by non-western forces. The Dutch took Portuguese fortifications in Sri Lanka, but the king of Kandy did not.

*Do you think there were other advantages that Europeans had over their opponents?*

It has always struck me that one of the big differences between Europe and other centres of power is the existence of a plurality of states, which means that e.g. Columbus is rejected by England, by France and by Portugal, but there's still Castile. In China this is not so. If you're rejected by the emperor, you're finished. Likewise with technological innovation, it seems to me that there is a competition among the European states which does not exist in China.

I believe that there are five different elements in what I would call the 'western way of war,' which distinguish it from other regions. Not all of them are unique, but the combination, I think, is. First of all, it's clear that western society has always put a very heavy premium on technology. It has always favoured capital-intensive solutions over labour-intensive solutions, no doubt since it has usually been at a numerical disadvantage. Secondly, it has always exalted discipline. Right through from the hoplites and the legionaries down to the Gulf war, discipline has been a key ingredient of western warfare. Thirdly, there is a very aggressive tradition: the idea that you go for the big battle which will exterminate your enemy; that you go for unconditional surrender, total victory. Now the Chinese also like

total victories, the Chinese also favour technology, the Chinese also have discipline. But I think there are two other elements which are not found in other societies.

Fourth then, there is what I call the ‘challenge and response dynamic’: the idea that if one part of this pluralistic society has an innovation, the others have to match it. Because in war, if you don’t adapt, you go under very quickly. So, when e.g. the Flemish at Kortrijk in 1302 use pikemen offensively and stop the charge of the French, it’s noticed. And in 1314 at Bannockburn in Scotland, the Scots do the same. In 1356, at Poitiers, the French even start trying it. According to one account, a Scottish nobleman tells the French: ‘If you want to win this battle against the English, you get off your horses and you fight on foot. That’s what we Scots did.’ So you actually have a clear learning process. I don’t think you find that in many other societies, one army learning from another. The pace of this ‘replication’, to use an ugly word, differs over history. In some periods when the various competing states are disorganised and weak, so the process of challenge and response is very slow. But at other times, such as the sixteenth century with that same *Trace Italienne*, the learning process is very fast indeed—because if your enemy has the *Trace Italienne* and you don’t, you won’t last very long. Look at Siena. Siena invests in one fortress, Siena itself, and when that falls it’s the end of the war. So you have to do it right, you have to replicate, but you have to do it in the right way. The final element, which I see as the West’s secret weapon, is finance: the ability to finance prolonged war through credit. It is something which is not present throughout western warfare. The Romans didn’t need it; the Middle Ages hadn’t got it; but around the sixteenth century you find that ability, starting right here in the Netherlands and spreading from here as the ‘Financial Revolution’: the ability to borrow very large sums of money at very low interest rates. When Britain had finished with the North American Revolution, it had lost the American colonies and borrowed well over two hundred million pounds, equivalent to twenty years’ revenue, at 3 per cent. Okay, they didn’t win in the Americas, but the financial ability to survive a defeat as big as that represents the fifth element in the ‘western way of war’. And the combination is unbeatable. That is the major reason why the West expands, even before the Industrial Revolution. It has a method of fighting on both land and sea that, I think, is simply superior.

*But can you explain the expansion of the West just from military factors? Isn't there room for other explanations?*

It seems to me that we can no longer explain the rise of the West before the Industrial Revolution in the traditional terms of the moral superiority of the white man or superior trading organisation. The Europeans certainly possessed some advantages and one of them is their extraordinary ability to maximise their resources: they're really good on the 'economy of force'—whether in their trading companies or in missionary activities or in military activities, the West seems remarkably good at doing a great deal with very little. And I accept that. But I don't think it's quite enough. I prefer the formulation of Anthony Reid in his new book on the lands below the wind.<sup>8</sup> He says there is really a sort of trilogy, three factors which explain the rise of the West in Indonesia. One is the artillery fortress, another is the ship of the line and the third is the ability of the Europeans to find local alliances and exploit local rivalries, so that they are in fact always allied with a powerful local coalition. I like that formula and I would like to test it. Reid throws it out when he is considering the western power in the Indonesian archipelago, but could it not be equally true in the Spanish conquest of Mexico and Peru?

Ross Hassig, after all, offers very similar explanations for the triumph of Hernan Cortes and a small number of Spaniards in 1519–1521.<sup>9</sup> He sees the entire episode as a battle for power in the valley of Mexico, in which the Spanish serve as mercenaries on the anti-Aztec side. And when the Mexicans have been defeated, the Spaniards then turn round and blackmail their allies, thereby exploiting the victory; thereafter disease does the rest. So it would seem to me that Cortes doesn't need either the ship of the line or the artillery fortress. Alliances are enough to explain his success, because in the Americas, but only in the Americas, the Europeans possess another secret weapon, which is biological warfare. The enormous mortality takes out large numbers of the indigenous population and destabilises the rest. The actual numbers we can dispute forever; the fact is that it was a catastrophe so great that, just like the Black Death in Europe, it made people wonder if there was a God. So the collapse of the demographic structures in the New World seems to have totally disorientated the native population. Outside the Americas that did not happen.

I therefore find Reid's formula, for Africa, India and Indonesia, very attractive. It's the combination of the ship of the line, which enables the Europeans to project their power abroad; the artillery fortress, which enables them to maintain that power on land as a bridgehead; and their

remarkable skill in exploiting divisive situations, picking out allies from one side or another and playing them off against each other, just waiting until the situation develops when they can penetrate the interior. That's why the West expands before the Industrial Revolution. I have no problem with the rise of the West after the Industrial Revolution; it is very clear that, once you harness steam power and electrical power to industry, you have something which cannot be replicated outside Europe. But before that, I'm struggling with an explanation.

*Does the ability of the Europeans to intervene in local politics also stem from the long-term stability in the policies of the trading companies?*

Of course, some changes of policy occur within the various companies, but compared with the fluidity of Asia they preserve an extraordinary stability. It is this ability to wait and see, and to wait and exploit, that seems to me so important. E.g. when Bengal gets out of hand in the 1750s the British are there just waiting to expand their power.

*But maybe they didn't want to project their power and take on the extra responsibility.*

Who are we talking about here: the people at the periphery or the people back home, in the metropolis? The first time I came across this paradox was in the book of your illustrious colleague George Winius, *The Fatal History of Ceylon*, which made a very good case for saying that there was a subcolonial elite in Goa which really wanted a 'forward' policy in Ceylon and got it, but unfortunately at a time when the central government could no longer back it up. The policy was being made on the periphery with the expectation that it would be supported by the centre, and I think that was a norm. People like Jan Pieterszoon Coen were also making policy on the periphery while counting on endorsement from the centre, and usually getting it even though the central government did not really want the creation of a territorial empire in Asia. It wanted the trade, but it did not want the high defence costs, whereas the people on the periphery, of course, want security. So they want the fortified bases, and what's the point in having a fortified base unless you have a hinterland which protects it? And when you have a hinterland, then you settle it, and then you need another line of defences to protect your investments there, and pretty soon you're dragged in. I see here a permanent tension or, as Winius says, the 'Colonial paradox.'

*But how do you fit the conquest of the Americas into this picture? Why does Spain go through all this effort to establish an overseas empire?*

Because it's presented to them. What is Charles going to do? Who could have predicted the success of Cortes and Pizarro? And once they've conquered New Spain, they cannot allow areas like that to escape from government control. So it has to create a structure to cope with the new conquests. It must, it cannot afford not to. Surely, the Dutch East India Company in the end allows a very high proportion of expenditure on fortresses and factories because it doesn't really want to give these things up. How many fortresses are abandoned? Very few.

*Because of inter-state competition?*

Yes.

*But as soon as these countries like India are taken over, apart from the replacement of several Indians nothing changes, except that much of the money now goes out of India.*

Well, some of it does. What interests me is that the new money gives the British the ability to maintain a huge military presence on the continent, with which they can intervene anywhere. By 1780 there are over 100,000 troops in British employment. That's unprecedented. With that you can intervene effectively almost anywhere. I would say that the Bengal settlement is the turning point: it provides solid, regular, reliable income. A lot of it goes back to England, but a lot of it is kept on the spot to finance huge armies and build enormous fortifications. Fort William at Calcutta cost a million pounds. It's inconceivable that a British government would have paid that. But if your income is two million a year from the Bengal Settlement...

*You say that a lot of revenue came from India, but was it not that the individuals were sending money back, while the companies were going bankrupt?*

True before 1765; but again, there's a Dutch precedent for that. The VOC made what I believe you call these days 'negative profit', because in its first twenty or thirty years it was spending so much on fortresses and ships.

*Throughout this interview you have stressed the importance of naval development, e.g. in the military revolution and the expansion of European power in the rest of the world. Do you find that other historians are equally aware of these influences?*

It seems to me that a disparity exists between the study of naval history and military history. Naval history, especially overseas, has not really advanced very far in the last twenty or thirty years. The questions that are being asked are much the same; not many new people have entered the debate. The difference between how the Dutch fight and Chinese fight at sea is not a subject that has attracted any attention, and yet it's absolutely critical. We do have studies on the differences between the military effectiveness of Asian trained troops, European trained troops, but that has not been paralleled in naval history. I really don't know why. Whether naval historians are just more traditional or whether it's a problem of the languages. Furthermore it's much more difficult to create a navy, isn't it? You can create an army in a matter of weeks or months. But if you want a first class navy, you should have thought of it four, five years ago. It's like asparagus: if you want first class asparagus, you should have planted a bed five years ago. You can't just snap your fingers and expect it to come. And so much more investment is required for a warship; a much more extensive and sophisticated infrastructure is required. And perhaps that has discouraged such study, because the study of navies requires the study of much longer periods and therefore much more data.

*Is it true that navies took so much more time to build up? The Turks were able to put a new fleet to sea in the year after they suffered a tremendous defeat at Lepanto. Also the Dutch were at some times able to build ships in a matter of months.*

What you're talking about is a galley. And I think that there is a difference from galley warfare, which depends primarily on very highly trained marines. It's true that the Turks recover after Lepanto in that they create a galley fleet. What they cannot replace is the experienced troops they lost at Lepanto, and this the Christian powers recognise, because they kill all experienced personnel after Lepanto. But I'm interested to hear you say that you can build a Dutch man-of-war in a few months.

*These were East Indiamen and some other, smaller types of ships.*

That's extraordinary, because I know of no example in the Royal Navy where that was the case. It takes about a year from the beginning to the end. And dockyard capacity is limited; although it is the largest employer, the largest industrial enterprise in Britain by a long way, it still cannot turn out more than three or four ships a year. In a battle fleet you need twenty or thirty of them, so, by definition, you can't do it overnight, you can't do it this year, you can't do it next year: it's a process. You need a

programme, and of course, as you build new ships the old ships will need repair. The only way to have a first class navy in wartime is to maintain a first class navy in peacetime, and that's not true of armies. You can cover up your inadequacies by having large numbers of men and a certain number of NCOs who will train them. You cannot short-circuit that in a ship. Remember that a man-of-war is larger than a country house and that it has more artillery aboard than a fortress. Each of the ships that defeated the Spanish Armada had forty or forty-five guns. Not many castles boasted forty or forty-five guns, so this is a major investment; you can't simply snap your fingers. There's opportunity costs too. And again the Armada demonstrates this to the hilt; it is not possible to convert a merchantman into an effective ship of the line, because the problem is not just cutting more gun ports in the side, it's strengthening the structure to resist the recoil of the gun.

*Although the Dutch did use converted merchantmen up to the 1650s.*

I was reading the *Journaal* of David Pietersz de Vries, a really first class account of early colonisation in New Netherlands.<sup>10</sup> Before he goes to New Netherland he makes a number of other trips: he goes to the Mediterranean, then goes to Africa, and everywhere he goes he has to fight, and this is in the 1620s. Everywhere that man sails there's an occasion for fighting and I think that's one of the reasons why the difference between a merchantman and a warship is not quite as great as you would expect, because if your merchantman was not quite heavily gunned it would be lost. However, as security at sea in peacetime increases, one can scale down a bit the armament of merchantmen, but at the same time warships get bigger and bigger, with more and more decks, so you can't just substitute. In the end all warships look alike. One of the standard pieces of equipment of any man-of-war by the eighteenth century was a complete set of enemy flags, because you couldn't tell them apart by the silhouette. So if they ran up French colours, English colours or Dutch colours, it was the only thing that really distinguished them and it was a standard *ruse de guerre* to run up the wrong set of colours until you got really close and then haul them down to run up your own colours, because the silhouettes of these vessels were so alike. That's why I've stressed the challenge and response dynamic: in the end it creates the perfect tools of empire.

## Notes

- 1 Helmut G. Koenigsberger, *Politicians and Virtuosi: Essays in Early Modern History* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1996) chapter 1. See also J.H. Elliot, 'A Europe of Composite Monarchies', *Past and Present* 137 (1992) 48–71.
- 2 Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971).
- 3 Niles Eldridge en Stephen J. Gould, 'Punctuated Equilibria: An Alternative to Phyletic Gradualism' in: T.J. Schopf (ed.), *Models in Paleobiology* (San Fransisco: Freeman, Cooper & Co., 1972). Albert Somit and S.A. Peterson, *The Dynamics of Evolution: The Punctuated Equilibrium Debate in the Naturel and Social Sciences* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992) both cited and applied to the historical process by C.J. Rogers, 'The Military Revolutions of the Hundred Years Wars' in: Rogers (ed.), *The Military Revolution Debate: Readings on the Military Transformation of Early Modern Europe* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 1995) 76–77.
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- 5 Jeremy Black, *A Military Revolution? Military Change and European Society 1550–1800* (London: Macmillan, 1991); Black, 'A Military Revolution? A 1660–1792 Perspective' in: Rogers (ed.), *The Military Revolution Debate*, 95–114.
- 6 J.J. Orlers and M. van Haesten, *Den Nassausche Lauren-crans* (Leiden 1610) folio 156 and battle-plan of Nieuwpoort.
- 7 Michael Roberts, *The Military Revolution, 1560–1660* (Belfast 1956), reprinted in Rogers (ed.), *The Military Revolution Debate*, 13–35.
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- 9 Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare, Imperial Expansion and Political Control* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988) and Hassig, *Mexico and the Spanish Conquest* (London: Longman, 1994).
- 10 David Pietersz. de Vries, *Korte Historiae ende joumaelsaentyckeningen van Verscheyden Voyagiens* (Alkmaar 1655).

# The Importance of Knowledge-Systems: Interview with John Rankine Goody

*John 'Jack' Rankine Goody (b. 1919) is one of the most distinguished social anthropologists of post-war Britain. He received his education in pre-war Oxford and Cambridge, then the home ports of some of the intellectual giants of this century, such as Bertrand Russell, John Maynard Keynes and Ludwig Wittgenstein. As a field anthropologist, Goody spent many years in Africa and India. His main fields of interest were: family structure, oral versus written culture and the impact of westernisation on traditional societies; on all of these big themes he has written important books. His interest in family and kinship systems has brought him in close contact with Peter Laslett, initiator of the famous Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, and, through Laslett, with the history of pre-industrial Europe. This association has resulted in, among others, a remarkable book on family and marriage in medieval Europe (Cambridge 1983). Subsequently Goody's interest shifted to the historical confrontations between 'the East' and 'the West' on which he wrote the book that is the main subject of this interview. At present Jack Goody is a fellow of St John's College, Cambridge. The interview—by Peer Vries and Peter Hoppenbrouwers—took place on 6 February 1998 when Goody was in Leiden as guest speaker at the Crayenborgh Honours class, organised by the Historical Institute of Leiden University.*

*Could you explain what has been the motivating theme of your latest book, The East in the West?*<sup>1</sup>

The motivating theme is a dissatisfaction with the explanation of the rise of the West given by social scientists and historians who seemed to me not to be taking a comparative enough view of the situation. Even those who go for what they call 'world history,' like Max Weber, do so from very Eurocentrist hypotheses. The data from China or India for example are very much interpreted from that standpoint. My interest really comes from working with historians, particularly in the area of the family. It has always worried me that people like Lawrence Stone, Alan MacFarlane—who is a historian and an anthropologist—and Peter Laslett of the Cambridge Group, with all of whom I worked quite closely, take a view

for example of the role of the family in the development of capitalism, modernisation or industrialisation which seemed to me to be unrealistic. I wrote an article—in a deliberately provocative way—in the first volume of papers that were published by the Cambridge Group in 1972 which I called ‘The Evolution of the Family,’ and my contention was that relatively small households were common not only in Western Europe but in many other parts of the world as production units as well as reproduction units.<sup>2</sup> It is true that there were some examples of large ones. But by and large the differences were relatively small and could not account for the kind of effects that the other authors claimed that they were having.

*But don't you see signs of these interpretations changing? The authors you refer to wrote their most important studies quite some time ago. Are you not, as some people suggest, flogging dead horses?*

I do see their work as still being very influential in many ways. Of course there are changes. I think Lawrence Stone has modified some of his earlier views and I see some changes in the work of John Hajnal and Peter Laslett. But there are many continuities too. I think the continuities really require looking at again. I find people working for example in the development field in Africa using their—that is Hajnal's and Laslett's—work in order to predict the future. I see it for example in a fairly recent volume on Asian populations using the Hajnal and Laslett hypotheses on the differences between what they see as the grand families in China as against the small families of Japan. But if you look at the statistical differences they are very small.

*How did you become fascinated by the comparison between Asia and Europe? Your earlier work was about Africa.*

It was about Africa, but I didn't go to Africa to study Africa. I would have done European work in Europe if after the war there had been funds to do so, in Italy or somewhere like that, or indeed in Western Europe. I would have worked more on the sociological side, if you want to put it that way. But at the time the only social science funds in Britain were directed to work abroad, to colonial work. There was a colonial social science research council in London while there was no British social science council, and I got money from that. I was interested in Africa because I spent some time there during the war, but it was not in fact my prime focus.

*Then how would you describe your prime aim or interest? Is there a basic theme in your intellectual life?*

I went to university to study English literature. After the war I came back having spent some time in the Middle East, some time in a *Kriegsgefangenenlager* in Italy and Germany and some time with peasants in Italy in the Abruzzi. I became interested in land tenure and peasant life in a general way. I didn't have any formal instruction in any of those areas and I did not work with anybody who was interested in them. My collaboration at that time was with my friend Ian Watt, who wrote a book about the rise of the novel. Together we wrote on literacy. I had become interested in literacy because I was deprived of books when I was a prisoner during the war. I wondered how people operate without books. Watt and I became interested in the difference between oral cultures and written cultures. I had done some anthropology by that time and he had done some work with Talcott Parsons in Harvard. We wanted to know what it was that constituted the Greek advantage. We wondered whether there was an adequate explanation in the spirit and genius of the ancient Greeks. We looked for an explanation that had to do with the advent of writing systems, the development of alphabetic literacy, the spread of writing and the ease of learning to write in Greek. I had also been interested in European history in a general way earlier on and I was fascinated by the work of a Dutch trader who came down to West Africa at the beginning of the eighteenth century and who commented—I thought very intelligently—on the difference between inheritance systems in Europe and Africa and on the fact that in Africa you did not have bilateral systems of inheritance. That struck me as being very significant. I began wondering how this fitted in with wider socio-economic systems. What, for example, were the predisposing factors that led people to try and maintain the status of daughters as well as of sons? That always seemed to be critical in stratified systems, whereas in Africa it didn't really matter. The ruling class married commoners or anybody else. There was no tendency for it to marry in circles, as Marc Bloch noted Europeans tended to do. There was a tendency to spread your bets rather than to concentrate them. That interested me in the relationship between inheritance systems and systems of stratification.

*You are mostly referred to as an anthropologist, but you know quite a lot about early modern and medieval history and are very interested in that period. Most anthropologists do not have the kinds of interests you have. Don't you see basic differences between social science and history?*

I think there are differences of emphasis but not of principle. There are some people practising my subject, and more often sociology, who could well do with a greater dose of history. One of the things that you constantly find is that sociologists never look back very far—that's a broad generalisation—so they think everything is new. On the other hand, some of my historian friends stop at the end of the nineteenth century and never see how things carried through. Lawrence Stone talked about the importance of the modern nuclear family, not taking into account that 50 per cent of the dwelling units in Paris now are inhabited by one person, not by nuclear families at all.

*How for instance did you come to study marriage in the Middle Ages? The book you wrote on this subject is quite a remarkable one, an eye-opener for European medievalists.*<sup>3</sup>

I came on that out of this interest in inheritance systems and my unease about what had been said about them. Most anthropologists don't care about medieval Europe, except to make a few analogies. The training I had in anthropology had some advantages. It did get me to read Marc Bloch for example, whom we regarded as an anthropologist, at least in those days, as well as George Homans, whose book on life in a medieval village impressed me very much.<sup>4</sup>

*You already hinted at your interest in literacy. That is part of a field of study that definitely appears to be one of your favourite subjects, knowledge systems. A theme you also discuss in your The East in the West. Do you think there are basic differences between knowledge systems in the West and those in other parts of the world?*

There did emerge differences with the new learning and with the Renaissance. It's perhaps because there was a kind of breakthrough in secular knowledge. You got this great demand for different kinds of proof and knowledge. In comparison with family life, the secularisation of knowledge came much earlier. I think the secularisation of knowledge systems was of fundamental importance for the disenchantment of the world.

*That's a concept you believe in?*

Actually I do. It was not a total disenchantment of the world but...

*So you would claim the West was more disenchanted than the rest?*

Not necessarily. To some extent China was partly disenchanted all the time. The disenchantment was built into Chinese culture much more than into Christianity. In China you had an interesting discussion between church and state in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The advisors to the emperor were saying: if you let this Buddhist church get any stronger with all those gifts and donations of the faithful, it will rule the country. They made actual provisions against the 'dead hand,' against mortmain. They stopped the handing over of wealth to the 'Church.' To some extent the encouragement of Confucianism and of ancestor worship seems to me not some *primaevae*, primitive move but almost a deliberate effort to counterbalance the state vis-à-vis the Buddhist church. They brought in various rules such as that no Buddhist monk could ever train more than one other acolyte to take his place. So the system could never extend. There was certainly a great deal of encouragement of local religion, non-hegemonic religion in order to preserve the power of the state. That becomes very clear in China. They always had more secular elements involved in learning and writing.

*In the book you wrote on the Middle Ages you picture the Church as a very potent and driving ideological force. Do you think this is an explanatory factor for moving the West in a certain direction as compared to the East?*

Yes I do, but I do not see it as moving it altogether in a forward direction. Sideways perhaps, investing a great deal in religious artefacts, beautiful buildings like cathedrals, but taking away from other features. One of the important lessons to me, looking back, was the fact that in the town I grew up in—it was a Roman town—the Roman theatres and baths were dismembered brick by brick in order to build a cathedral. After that we had no bath or theatre in our town for the next thousand years. In early Christianity there was this shift from the municipal elite leaving money to the town for the maintenance of baths and theatres to leaving it entirely to the church. And that seemed to me absolutely remarkable in its consequences. This desecularisation was very important. People have not paid enough attention to it. It was when I came to look at kinship systems that I was struck by this. I am thinking especially about a letter of Augustine of Canterbury, missionary of the Anglo-Saxons, to pope Gregory the Great (590–604) about how you should treat the natives and how you should stop them marrying their dead brothers' wives. This leviratic marriage was widespread in Africa, in Judaism, in Asia. It was there in the Old Testament as well. And here you had it forbidden. How

is it that missionaries with the background of the Old Testament forbade any close marriage? Where did they get the idea? Not from their Scriptures or their Roman background. It had to come from somewhere else. It had to be some kind of invention of the early Christian Church.

*So after all there is a difference between the way families are arranged in the West and elsewhere?*

Yes, at this level there certainly is. But I don't think this has anything to do with the coming of capitalism or modernisation. In fact, when you look at the course of the history of the family in the modern period, these features get set aside with secularisation. Whether it is in Protestantism, where Luther gets rid of dispensations, or whether it is the Catholic Church in France in 1917, which reduces the ranges of prohibited marriages. With secularisation these disappeared. There were important distinctions in family life, but I don't think they affected productivity or even modernisation.

*The main thesis of your 'The East in the West' is that there are no structural, long-term differences between East and West. Suppose we were to agree on that. It would nevertheless be hard to deny that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there is a gap. That must have arisen some time somewhere.*

There is a gap and I think it did arise in Europe, but only in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, or perhaps even later. When you look at Jesuit writings on China in the eighteenth century for example, they considered China as much more advanced in some ways. It is in the nineteenth century that you get this idea of stagnant oriental societies coming in. Then it is true, in so far as our productivity and knowledge systems had increased so much, fundamental distinctions appear.

*What are the distinctions you are referring to?*

There were distinctions in educational systems. One feature that was seized upon in the nineteenth century in China was the development of higher educational systems. Not that these educational systems or learning were widespread in Europe. There is an obvious difference—although I do think one can make too much of it—between the kind of writing system that you have in China and the one you have in the West. There, before you go to university you have to have learned 3,000 different signs, whereas in Europe you learn 25 or 26. We know how difficult it is to learn those few, but to learn 3,000 does present a learning problem. It's a very complicated task and it takes a lot of time.

*But a critic might say that this was the case for ages. Then, why at a certain moment in time would it help the West to make a kind of quantum leap? You use a structural factor to explain an 'événement'.*

Well, people have used the difference to explain the Greek achievement. The development of the alphabet in Ancient Greece was significant, particularly the ease of learning it. Many people used Greece to explain the quantum leap forward of the West. And the alphabet was in a sense part of the process. It did not create the democratic system—universal education did not become compulsory until the 1870s–1880s—but it did make it possible. Which I think is very difficult to accomplish in China. It is not that difficult to learn a few signs, but to memorise a great number is very complicated. There are many complexities in, for example, the Japanese educational systems. They get round them, but only with difficulty. It is a factor of difference, but I think the difference has been much exaggerated. In fact, the Chinese and the Japanese have accomplished a lot, dealing with very different forms of scripts. I think you can argue their educational systems have been slightly more complex than ours are. But that is the level at which I would want to discuss this question. I would not say they cannot as a result develop x or y, because it is quite clear they developed a lot of things in their own way.

*These remarks on literacy and educational systems are something of an extension of your interpretation of the difference between oral and literate culture. According to you an oral culture cannot stand up against a literate culture, because sooner or later you have to make notes. Why should that be the case? Is not the memorising potential much bigger in an oral culture?*

I have done more systematic work on that than anybody else. When I started working on this question, I recorded a long recitation in Africa. It took me eight days to write it down. When I went there, I was convinced—because that was what people told me—that the reciters remembered everything exactly, in a verbatim fashion. Many anthropologists make this claim. When I actually got hold, in the 1960s, of a portable tape recorder, I had fifteen different versions of the recitations. The difference between these was enormous in length, content and ideas. I do believe certain people do remember very well, but when you look at the actual techniques they use, visual representation and so on, you are not dealing with people repeating in an exact fashion from memory alone. What these people learn is a technique of recitation: they remember certain points along a line. It is true that one person, once he has got to know his own version, will tend to do something quite close the next time he recites. But

his version will be very different from the next man's version. I worked with an African friend. We recorded and translated the versions together. He was just amazed that there was this discrepancy between the versions and the written text. He thought there would be one version. But their notion of identity is very different from yours and mine. They cannot put the versions side by side. It is completely different with written texts.

*Is that not the difference that is referred to by Koyre, the French historian of science, between knowing more or less and knowing precisely? According to him the transition to knowing precisely is the basic element of the scientific revolution in the West.<sup>5</sup>*

I think that is absolutely true. It is measurement and having instruments of measurement. If you have not got them the problem of difference is very difficult.

*But then how about sacred texts, for instance the Koran, which is recited...*

But then, like with the learning of the Bible, you always have a written text to check on. A memory and a mnemonic are personal. I can give you a book but not my memory. The same applies to the arithmetic that comes from written tables that you learn exactly. We can always go back to a table. It's a purely automatic thing. You can't work on this from basic principles, but once you have learned it, it gives you command of a great deal of mathematical operations that you could do quickly.

*You have become sceptical about the possibilities of memory because of your own experience?*

Yes. But not only because of that. There was an important Cambridge psychologist, Bartlett, who wrote a book after the First World War on remembering.<sup>6</sup> He did experiments with memorising tasks, in particular with people whom he sat round a table and then passed a message, in whispers. In the end you get extraordinary results. People could not remember word for word. If you think of memorising a book, that's very different. The other thing you have got to take into account: if you can be satisfied with more or less, why should you worry about whether you can memorise precisely?

*But then immediately the next question arises: is there a specific reason that people in the West could no longer be satisfied with more or less? The Europeans, after all, were not the first nor the only people who were able to*

*measure exactly. There have been cultures other than the European that had the capacity for mathematical exactness. For instance, the people in India.*

Oh yes, the Indians. But they had a literate culture. A lot of their manipulation of numbers was related to literacy. There may be problems of cognition as well. One group could have a higher efficiency with numbers than others or with science. My brother, who has been teaching a scientific subject at Harvard for many years, says that over the last ten years his advanced classes were full of people from Asia. Caucasian students have become a small minority. Does that mean that they are less good at mathematics than others?

*I think nobody would say that it is a matter of some people being inherently more or less bright, but there can be social institutions that encourage you to develop certain capacities. This morning you suggested one of the basic problems in the development of Africa was exactly this.*

Yes, in Africa they don't have those institutions. They don't have the kind of what I call the 'technologies of the intellect' that we developed early on.

*But then the basic problem would become: why has science or rational thinking become institutionalised? Floris Cohen in his book on the scientific revolution says one of the most fascinating things about it is that in Europe people thought science was effective before it actually was. Science became institutionalised before it was an empirical success. People like Francis Bacon made all kinds of promises they never fulfilled, but science nevertheless received societal backing.<sup>7</sup> There is an American historian, Edward Grant, who makes a similar point and he relates it to a specific Western institution, one you only had in the West: the university.<sup>8</sup>*

I do not think that only in the West do you find institutions of higher learning, but you did get them more developed there. That was important, but much science developed outside the universities.

*But is not the university specific in the sense that it is an institution in which you can have quite an autonomous search for truth?*

It became autonomous. My own college refused to admit anybody who was not of the Anglican faith until about 1870. If you were a Jew, a nonconformist or a Calvinist you could not go there.

*In the Middle Ages Cambridge was quite liberal, as compared to, for example, Paris.*

Yes, you are right in a way. There certainly were some differences within those institutions. If you invent an institution which you think you can control, it always spreads outside the original boundaries. You can't really control learning in the end. It always has a tendency to move outside the boundaries and into other spheres. But I don't think the universities were terribly significant until the fifteenth or the sixteenth century. I would argue that they were mostly for training priests. It's quite true that there was some knowledge coming out of them, but no more than there was coming out of educational systems in China, which were not as well organised. For example, it took the universities quite some time to secularise.

*The largest output of medieval universities was secular masters. They were clerics, but not priests. As in China they formed the personnel of the administration and the bureaucracy.*

That is true. It is also true that you had a canonisation of texts in China just as you had in Europe. On the other hand a lot of these bureaucrats were not priests. And one should not forget, in China there was a gradual increase of knowledge too, for example mechanical knowledge. I'm thinking of the encyclopaedias of the Song, in which one encyclopaedia followed another a few years later and corrected what they thought was wrong. There was a definite accumulation of knowledge. It is true that they didn't develop experimental systems as did the West. But that was very late...

*But extremely important. In empirical science the ability to experiment is fundamental. That idea of experimental science is post-mediaeval.*

That's absolutely right. But there are many different forms of experiment. Historians and social scientists cannot experiment at all. We have to use other techniques.

*Many people are convinced that sheer power, violence and aggressiveness are very important in explaining the rise of the West. They seem to play a minor role in your work. Is that because they are not the elements of societal life you are interested in, or do you think they are not that important? Guns and sails, so to say, are not as important as ideas and knowledge systems?*

Well, I have written about both. What I call differences in the means of destruction or coercion, differences in weaponry, they were absolutely crucial in the European expansion.

*But is not aggressiveness a core characteristic of any human society?*

I think it is, but it depends on what you are going to be aggressive with. You can be aggressive with an atomic bomb, with an aircraft carrier or with a sword. You can do much more with the bomb or the aircraft. What impressed me was the attempt by, for example, the Portuguese, supported by the pope, to prevent the infidel from getting guns. When some renegade Portuguese did sell guns to the coastal people, these stopped the weapons from getting to the interior. The locals were doing the same as the Portuguese. What impressed me even more was that Africa lacked the metal technology to copy European inventions. In Asia they could make muskets, and of course they knew gunpowder. Africa never had the technology. They could never get ovens to the right temperature. They had iron, but they could never produce the steel to make the barrels for guns. They could only repair them. To this day there is no bicycle made in Africa. Every barrel, like every wheel, has to be imported. The Japanese were ambivalent about guns, but they did make use of them. Their presence had important effects just as they had in India and in Arabia where they manufactured their guns. Africa could never do this. What is also of fundamental importance: there were no carts, everything was head-loaded in Africa. The wheel, at least the principle of it, was not adopted in Africa. Now they are using them, but they don't make them. Education has gone a long way, but technology has lagged drastically behind, despite the fact that there have been enormous efforts, especially since independence.

*Geoffrey Parker has argued Western people had not only a special technology, but also a specific aggressiveness, a specific way of waging war in which the destruction of your adversary is very important. In other cultures, according to him, the goal is not destroying your adversary, it is showing him his place.<sup>9</sup>*

I think that if you are turning back to psychological dispositions, you have a problem. These change quite rapidly over time. A culture that may have been very aggressive at one particular period can become remarkably less so in a relatively short period of time. Or vice versa, as in Israel.

*I agree, in the knightly culture of the Middle Ages battles were still aimed at showing your adversary his place, not at killing him.*

Yes. However, I think it is more difficult to change technologies, for example weapon systems or farming systems, than it is to change dispositions.

*What would you think would be the subject to study for somebody who would like to resolve the riddle of the rise of the West? Is there one specific research agenda that you would suggest?*

Knowledge systems, their impact and the relationship between them and technology are very important. That is the problem with Africa. You have got knowledge systems coming in from outside, you have got the universities. But they are not affecting, or affecting only marginally or even in negative ways (they are taking people off the land and not getting them to go back there) what is happening in production. The relationship between the development of knowledge systems and their application to production processes that seems to me of vital importance. What we have done in Africa is give people knowledge systems without the means to apply them. We can tell them that mechanical farming enables you to farm a lot more than you can do with the hoe, but every tractor has to be imported from Europe and it costs enormous amounts of money. The productivity just is not there to pay for this. So they are very dependent on aid. We are producing societies more dependent on the outsider than they have ever been under colonial regimes. Their problem is not so much, I would argue, neo-colonialism, as this gap between education and technology.

This problem is not something you should look at in psychological terms, or in deep cultural terms. If you do so you miss the point: that is that there is a great deal of intellectual borrowing taking place between cultures. There were differences and, at a particular moment in time, maybe for some centuries, the Europeans were ahead. But if destructive systems, navigation, sails and guns, were critical in the advancement of the West, where did gunpowder or the compass come from? Yes, we developed timekeeping in a certain way and then we brought that form of timekeeping back to China. When gunpowder came from the East, we did something with it that was different. There is a lot of interdependence of knowledge systems. People develop a feature at a particular moment in time, and you have to look quite precisely at the changes over time.

*But people could say: it's all very nice that there is always interdependence, borrowing and lending, but the Europeans went to Asia, to America. They*

*went everywhere. Whatever for example the Chinese did, they did not go to Europe.*

Let us make clear that the Chinese did voyage. It is true that they didn't go as far. But they were not living in a bog like the people in the West of Europe. They had a very big country to trade with and explore.

*They didn't need to go?*

They voyaged internally. They were colonising their 'own' country and, for example, parts of Indo-China.

*But still, why did they not go elsewhere?*

They did go elsewhere. We have Chinese pottery on the coast of Kenya. It's true that they didn't establish colonies, but they did go there and to Malacca for example.

*But the Europeans went to North America, South America, Africa, Asia. There is an English pub on every shore.*

I think the explanations for that are rather specific. Partly they are doing it through developments in guns and sails.<sup>10</sup> In Europe there were certain revolutions in navigation and map-making. It's not that we were the first people to make maps, but we did develop the techniques. Map-making was very important. For example, maps were one of the most important items the Dutch got hold of from the Portuguese.

*The Chinese had very detailed maps. There is a recent book by P.D.A. Harvey. It shows that the Chinese were the first to draw grid-based maps to exact rules.<sup>11</sup>*

I don't know much about Chinese map-making. It would not surprise me. One has to remember that long before we were crossing the Atlantic, the Indian Ocean was a world-system of its own. The Chinese were going down to Indonesia. They were going to Malacca, came down occupying parts of Vietnam, and so forth. We do not call that region Indochina for nothing. The same goes for the Indians. Who was it that led the Portuguese to Gujarat? Asia was where people wanted to trade and travel and Europe was not. Europeans were not anywhere then. We were traders up and down the coast. They were doing the big voyages at that time. When you think of the extension of Europe and the big voyages at the time of European expansion, you forget that earlier on there was Zheng Ho. He was possibly going to Mecca. He was a Muslim incidentally, following

Muslim connections and trade routes in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

*You could as well refer to the Mongols who dominated Eurasia up to the Polish border until the beginning of the fifteenth century. But still, the dominance of the Westerners in the world was of a different kind.*

Well, it has been a different kind, because, to put it in terms you would recognise, the modes of production changed in the West...

*You think we are Marxists...*

No, I was not implying that. In any case, I have no quarrel with my friends like Eric Hobsbawm, whom I have known for a long time and from whom I learned a lot. At the end of the 1930s, when I went to university, the mass party in Cambridge was the communist party. Most of us belonged to it at that time and that gave us a historical perspective. In a way that linked me to Eric Hobsbawm, E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams.

*But I suppose Hobsbawm as a Marxist would say: 'Why did not you start by studying modes of production?'*

Well, I did, but I also looked at modes of communication and of destruction: the impact of the gun and gunpowder in West Africa. And the impact of the horse. I was very interested in the fact that tribal people didn't have horses, but state systems did.

*Hobsbawm has been called a Eurocentrist, while you fiercely attack what you see as 'Eurocentrism'.*

He is not as much a Eurocentrist as others are and he is not something which is worse than being a Eurocentrist, which is being an Anglocentrist, as are too many English historians.

*You have been a Marxist yourself!*

I still regard myself, in a way, as heavily influenced by Marx. But if you follow Marx, there is a single line in history and you have to go to feudalism in order to get anywhere. That is a problem, not only for him, but for a lot of other intelligent people. They try to save the old Marxist scheme while they should be looking more freely and openly.

*The kind of anthropology you are practising, is it held in high esteem in the Anglo-Saxon world?*

I don't have a school or a following. I myself never followed anybody. I just have students, some very good students.

## Notes

- 1 J. Goody, *The East in the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). See also: Jack Goody, 'The East in the West', *Archives européennes de sociologie* 38:2 (1997) 171–184.
- 2 J. Goody, 'The Evolution of the Family' in: P. Laslett and R. Hall (eds.), *Household and Family in Past Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972) 103–124.
- 3 J. Goody, *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
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## The Best of Two Worlds: Interview with Om Prakash

*In 1995–1996 Professor Om Prakash spent some time as a senior visiting fellow at the International Institute for Asian Studies at Leiden, where he also gave the annual lecture. The subject of the lecture (which was published by the Institute) was ‘Asia and the Premodern World Economy’. When he was interviewed in 1997 at the Center for the History of European Expansion by Jos Gommans, Carl Feddersen and Leonard Blusse, he had just returned from England where he had handed in the proofs of his latest book European Commercial Enterprise in Pre-Colonial India (Cambridge 1998), a volume which appeared last spring as part II.5 of The New Cambridge History of India series. The tapes of the interview were transcribed and edited by Martha Chaiklin, who did not have to wait long to meet Dr Prakash and update the interview, since he is presently at Leiden University as a visiting scholar before moving to the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies (NIAS) in January 1999 for three months as a guest of the rector. It would seem that while all other Indians are visiting the hill stations, Professor Prakash has found his own alternative for a breath of fresh air in the Netherlands.*

*Let us briefly review how you came to the Netherlands to work on the VOC material many years ago.*

I had all my education, both school as well as University, in Delhi. I received my MA in Economics from the Delhi School of Economics in 1961, with specialisation in economic history. While I was still doing my MA Tapan Raychaudhuri, who was then in the faculty, told me that if I wanted an academic career in economic history, one of the major repositories of an important body of source material on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Indian economic history was in the Netherlands. That was about the time that some kind of a plan had been put together by the Dutch government to invite young Asian scholars to use those archives. So if I was interested, Raychaudhuri told me, a fellowship to enable me to work at the Algemeen Rijksarchief [General State Archive, The Hague—ARA] could be arranged. Soon after I gave my consent, I received a nice

letter from the first secretary at the Dutch embassy in New Delhi inviting me to spend a year at the Algemeen Rijksarchief.

*Was that in the 1960s?*

That was in 1961. I arrived in The Hague in September of that year. I had just done my MA and I was 21 years old. Tapan Raychaudhuri was spending that year in the SOAS in London as a Visiting Research Associate. So he came over to The Hague for a week to introduce me to the VOC documentation at the Algemeen Rijksarchief which at that time, as you know, used to be in Bleyenburg in a very different kind of building from the one that now houses the Rijksarchief. I had learnt some Dutch in Delhi from one Mr. Schaap. He was the cultural secretary of the Dutch embassy and was interested in this kind of thing. I used to go to him twice a week in the afternoons and we spent an hour or so together going over the basics of the language. On my arrival in The Hague, Raychaudhuri introduced me to Mrs. Meilink-Roelofs, the keeper of the VOC archives, and Mr. Avelingh, the person in charge of the Reading Room at the Algemeen Rijksarchief. When I first looked at a VOC volume, then carrying K.A. numbers, I said to myself: ‘This is not Dutch, this is something else.’ I spent about a week or ten days trying to get some sense out of the documents with the help of a dictionary, but to no avail. I persevered for another two weeks or so and then went to see Miss Talsma at the Ministry of Education who was in charge of my fellowship programme. I explained my problem to her and said I was seriously thinking of going back home. She counselled patience and agreed to finance a private tutor for me. That gentleman was a teacher of English in a school. He lived somewhere near Scheveningen. So I would go to him twice a week and we started, at his suggestion, by translating bits from *Het Beste*.

*The Best of Reader’s Digest?*

Yes, *Reader’s Digest*. Then he got so interested in the project that once in a while he would come with me to the Rijksarchief, but he confessed that he couldn’t read the difficult handwriting either. But by that time, I had begun to get the hang of the documents. From that point on it went quite well. By the time the first three months or so were over, I was quite comfortable with the documents.

*Your first connection with Dutch Universities, was that Professor Coolhaas?*

The connection with Leiden University at that time was quite marginal, in the sense that there was really nobody here who was particularly interested

in that kind of thing. Professor Heesterman came to Leiden only after I had left the Netherlands. The only person who was really into the field was W.Ph. Coolhaas of Utrecht University, and he was far too big for me to go and bother. That was one of the problems. I really had nobody to turn to for academic guidance.

*You were a pioneer at that time. Even in Holland at that time nobody was working on this?*

Absolutely. But at the Algemeen Rijksarchief there was an active group of foreign researchers working. Diaku from Ghana, for instance, who later wrote an excellent book on the West India Company. There was also an archivist from Ghana whose name I unfortunately cannot recall. Then there was Jack Wills from the United States, Karl Goonewardena from Sri Lanka and one or two others. All these were ever willing to help each other and also interacted socially. We would once in a while go out for dinner and that kind of thing. But there really was nobody from the Netherlands who was particularly interested in this kind of research. I had initially come for only a year but at the end of the year I was not even halfway through the work. But my fellowship was extended for another year so I stayed here for a total of about two years. In the meantime, I also went to London for three or four months to look at the English East India Company documentation. The bulk of my documentation, however, came from the Rijksarchief.

*So was it more or less a coincidence that you started here? Was there no special attraction to the Dutch material?*

No, I didn't really know about it. I learnt about it only through a course I was doing with Tapan Raychaudhuri. There were only two students taking this course. The other one was not particularly interested, so in a sense I was the student and Raychaudhuri would once in a while deviate from the regular lecture and talk about a whole lot of things which were not part of the lecture, but which were taken from the material here. There already was a tradition of Indian scholars using the VOC material—Tapan Raychaudhuri himself and Ashin Das Gupta who, as you know, sadly passed away recently. Raychaudhuri would talk about how rich this material was and in one meeting he simply came up saying: 'look we are thinking of this and if you are interested in making an academic career, this would be a good opening.' Frankly speaking, my father, a civil servant himself, wanted me to go into the civil service. But to be fair to him, he said: 'this is what I would want, the family would want, but if you do this

at my asking and if you are not happy with it, it is not worth it.' And he added: 'try this Dutch option, if it doesn't work, you can always come back.' It was in fact in that context that at the end of the first few weeks I had seriously thought of returning to India. In retrospect, of course, I have no regrets whatsoever that I decided to stay on and try and write a Ph.D. thesis.

*You were working through the Dutch material, which was slowly becoming something of your own; you were beginning to feel comfortable with that material. But to what extent did you have the feeling that it was about India?* One of the things that Tapan Raychaudhuri had done all along was to emphasise that these documents were really like turnips, in the sense that if you wanted to squeeze material relevant to specific aspects of Indian history out of them, then you really had to squeeze them hard. It was there, but unless you were consciously and deliberately looking for it, you would not get very much. So what I did was to have a large number of subtopics in my notes system. And I had cards for each and every one of them, and even if I got no more than a few sentences on one of those subtopics, I would take them down. So I tried from the very beginning and very consciously to extract all that was possible from the documents. And there were some very interesting things that I have probably not used in my work. Let me give some examples. There was some trouble between the Dutch and the local people somewhere in Orissa about the Muslim Muharram procession. And in the documents there was this very detailed description of what the procession was all about. The Dutch factors there were complaining that this was always a problem area between the Hindus and the Muslims, and this time they had been the unintended victims. The factors who wrote the report were indeed quite knowledgeable and provided fascinating details. So I took all of it down because this kind of detailed description one wouldn't find often. Another example was the minutes of a meeting between the head of the Dutch factory and a senior government official. Serious disagreement arose between the two on some point, making the official angry enough to use swear words in Urdu, which are still the same 300 years later. The transliteration was in Dutch but the words were unmistakably recognisable. I also found a list in the documentation that contained fascinating details of the structure of bureaucratic corruption in Mughal Bengal. Starting with the top, it indicated in great detail how much had to be paid to officials at various levels to get a particular job done. This sounds so familiar in relation to the Indian bureaucracy today, particularly at the lower levels. In fact

I think this entire notion that we, as a people, as a society, were very different 300 years ago is something which needs to be looked at again. Many of the essentials, you see, are very much the same.

*But now you haven't told us what your subject was when you started out then.* Yes, the subject was also a bit of a problem. We had agreed that I would work on Gujarat. Ashin Das Gupta had worked on Malabar, Raychaudhuri himself had worked on Coromandel, but on this major region, Gujarat, there was no work yet. So I started out on Gujarat and began to look at the Surat documentation. But after about two months or so, I decided to try something else, partly because I had expected a lot more from the documents than I was actually getting. From Glamann's work, which was still a new work at that time, I knew that in terms of the volume and value of trade Bengal was an immensely important area.<sup>1</sup> So I decided to move to the Bengal documentation and somehow, partly because my capacity to get things out of that documentation had in the meantime improved somewhat, I felt more comfortable with the Bengal documentation and I decided to stay with it.

*I remember you saying that there is not such a big difference in the early modern age between Asia and Europe if you take a look at the East India Company material.*

Yes. Coming back to that, let me put it this way. It was always a struggle to get anything out of this documentation as far as the Indian economy or Indian society was concerned. Once in a while you would get things on religion, on society, on this and that, but that's limited. But, when it got to the real subject of my dissertation, which was the functioning of the VOC, there was so much material that you really had to make a decision early on regarding the kind of information that you would want. And one particular kind that fascinated me was that concerning the relationship between the local ruling authority and the Company, and between the central authorities of the empire and the Company. It was quite clear from the very beginning that both sides were interested in getting things sorted out, rather than in confrontation. And that meant that whenever there was a problem they would talk it over and almost always sort it out eventually. But on actual matters of trade and the kind of problems they were facing in procurement etc., one could immediately see that the factors were often overstating their case. This was done usually for the benefit of the Heeren XVII or Batavia so that they themselves would not be called inefficient or corrupt or whatever. The general picture, however,

that comes through from the documentation loud and clear is that of a very vibrant economy, a very vibrant system, where the VOC was just one of many operators in the market with no qualitative advantage over anybody else. There, however, was a distinct advantage available to it in quantitative terms. This followed from the substantially larger body of resources available to it than to almost any other entity operating in the market. But this was a very different picture from that, say, in Indonesia or Ceylon where the Company enjoyed extraterritorial authority and was in a position to coerce producers and suppliers into submitting to terms considerably below the market.

*Is the economist Prakash speaking here? I mean how do you see yourself, as a historian, as an economic historian?*

When I started out I really had no formal training as a historian. My degree was in Economics. Economic history was my elective paper. So I was more interested indeed in the economic part of it. But from whatever I had been talking over with Raychaudhuri over a long period of time, I was very keen to get whatever else I could get out of these documents. So while I was looking at this documentation primarily as an economist to begin with, it was quite clear that they were rich in many other respects as well.

*So how long did it take you before you finished your thesis?*

I arrived here in September of 1961 and left for home in December of 1963. I took a boat for Bombay from Marseilles. It was an extremely enjoyable trip and I spent Christmas and New Year on the boat. On arrival in Delhi, I learnt that since the Department of Economics at the Delhi School of Economics had recently been recognised by the University Grants Commission as an Advanced Centre for research in economic history and economic development, new faculty positions had been sanctioned and that I stood a good chance of getting one of them. But there was some administrative problem whereby the interviews for the positions could not be held for a while. So for that stopgap period I joined St Stephen's College as a lecturer in economics. That is the best college in Delhi University and probably in the country. Initially my idea was that I would stay there for only a few months, but then the Principal persuaded me to stay on for a little over a year. It was only in August 1965 that I joined the Economics Department at the Delhi School of Economics where I have been ever since, now thirty-three years.

*So you were at St Stephen's for just one year. But you haven't yet answered the question, when did you finish your thesis?*

The one year I spent at the St Stephen's College was a most pleasant experience in many ways. One came into contact with the best undergraduate students in the country. But from the point of view of my research and writing the year was a complete washout. It was only after joining the Delhi School of Economics in August 1965 that I began writing. I submitted the thesis in January or February of 1967. In our system, the thesis has to be referred for approval to three external examiners. My examiners were Arun Das Gupta of Calcutta University, Kristof Glamann of Copenhagen University and Holden Furber of the University of Pennsylvania at Philadelphia. All three were kind enough to recommend the award of the degree.

*You were at NIAS as well later on.*

My connection with the Netherlands was resumed in 1976. It was around that time that you people were just starting to set up the shop here in the form of the Center for the History of European Expansion and Reactions thereto. The first time I was at NIAS was in 1982–83.

*At that time was there still nobody working on this?*

Well, some work had started but not very much. In fact in the old Algemeen Rijksarchief building at Bleyenburg there were not yet very many researchers working on the VOC documentation.

*Well, the whole VOC project had started then.*

It had started yes, but it was still in its initial stages. I shall tell you about an interesting experience I had in 1976–77 in the Rijksarchief building. In the old building at Bleyenburg, the Reading Room had a capacity of only about thirty people and if you did not reach there by about ten past nine in the morning, all the seats would be taken. You would then have no option but to return home. So I would always be there at nine o'clock. Then, of course, you can go out for coffee or whatever but you have reserved your seat. And then since you are among the first, you always get the seat of your choice. And then you get used to a particular seat and go back to it every day as a matter of routine. A kind old gentleman who probably was in his eighties always took the seat opposite me. Every morning we would religiously nod to each other. He stopped coming after about two months or so and it was only about eight or nine months later that he reappeared. I was still there struggling with the fat VOC volumes. And then he comes

up to me one day and says: ‘Mijnheer, ik moet met U praten.’ [Sir, I need to talk to you.] So we went down for coffee. He said: ‘You have been here all these eight months that I have been away and reading these big books?’ When I said ‘yes,’ a look of utter sympathy came on his face and in a low voice he said: ‘young man, I admire your tenacity, but tell me, do you really expect to find your name in these books?’ I hardly need to add that he was one of the large band of genealogists regularly using the Algemeen Rijksarchief. The researchers using the VOC documentation at that time could perhaps be counted on the fingers of one hand.

*But VOC research was starting up again.*

Yes, it was just starting. But things were already very different in the 1970s from what they had been in the 1960s. You know the field had opened up at Leiden. And that was very helpful.

*And Mrs. Meilink-Roelofz of course had taught as an extraordinary professor from ‘70 to ‘75, but that was too short a time for her to produce a school of her own. Still there were new people, I mean Femme Gaastra, Frank Lequin, Els van Eijck and, of course, Jaap Bruijn who were continuing some of her courses. A lot had changed, but India was not yet in the picture.*

In fact, Sri Lanka was more in the picture at that time than India was.

*Yes, Jur van Goor, who was working with Coolhaas at Utrecht, was doing research on Ceylon.*

Yes, Van Goor, Goonewardena, Arasaratnam. And later another Sri Lankan scholar, Kotalevele. But of course it was at that point that I came into contact with people like yourself, Dirk Kolff, Henk Wesseling and others. Since then the contact has been unbroken.

*But to what extent did this research on maritime trade also link to what was happening in the economy of mainland India? We have already discussed this distinction between what was happening on the coast and in the mainland during the NIAS meeting of June 1993.*

You are absolutely right, and this is a gulf that has persisted. It is only in the last several years, the last few years actually, that conscious attempts have been made in the direction of bridging that gulf. As you said, many of the questions asked are the same, but the approaches have been so very different. And even amongst the little group of those of us who have been using this material I think the approaches have been quite different. Let me talk for a moment about the work of Ashin Das Gupta, for example.

Das Gupta used the VOC material not really to talk about the VOC itself, or about international trade, or the movement of precious metals, or from the point of view of the export of textiles, but almost exclusively from the point of view of what this material could tell you about Indian merchants and their functioning. Of course in a way he was lucky to have worked on Gujarat, because if he had taken that sort of approach in relation to, say, Bengal, the amount of information he would have obtained on that front, even with that very conscious bias, would have been quite small. So as it happened Gujarat was a good choice for Das Gupta, because you have all these major merchants in Surat who are not rivalled anywhere else and you have in fact a great body of material available around them.

Anyhow, the great divide between the coast and the interior needed to be bridged; one of the first people to talk about these things was Jan Heesterman. Increasingly, it was realised that the coast could not exist except on the basis of a strong support structure operating in the interior. And by the same token, the interior could do with support from the coast. But the nature of that relationship, except at this very obvious and in some ways very superficial level, somehow never came through. And unfortunately the research on the interior came to be concentrated more and more on the agrarian sector. That was the other big divide. The agrarian school would not touch anything that was not concerned with the land revenue system, the agrarian structure and whatever.

*Are you referring to Irfan Habib's school?*

You see Habib himself is a great scholar. That kind of range of mind is not very common. In his own work, Habib does deal a little bit with the monetary system and things of that sort. But this kind of lack of integration between the inland economy and the coastal economy has always existed. An increasing number of scholars are now looking at these things somewhat differently.

*But in that sense Pearson's book didn't really help either.<sup>2</sup> He showed that the Portuguese could develop their operations on the coast because the inland powers were not really interested in what was happening there. He actually emphasised that there was a separation.*

I had first met Pearson at a seminar I had given to Holden Furber's group in 1971 at Philadelphia, and we had talked about some of these things. He had either just finished or was finishing his thesis. And the book came out in '76 and as it happened I read it almost immediately. It was a book that for a while made a great impression because it proceeded on the basis of

distinct categories. But I think at one level these categories were stretched by Pearson into such exclusive compartments that they ceased to be very real categories. He said the ruler was the ruler, the Indian merchant the Indian merchant, the foreign merchant the foreign merchant, and there was nothing that brought them together. But you cannot really have these exclusive categories—if you are this, then by definition you are not that. Not only are you by definition not that, but you have nothing to do with that other category and you are either opposed to each other or completely indifferent to each other.

*You mean that the people from the coast were not really that different from those from the inland and people from big cities?*

I think it would make much more sense to talk of a continuum. A continuum not in any big political sense, but in the sense that where the inland stops and where the coast begins is something which is in a way an artificial distinction. The hinterland sometimes really goes all the way.

*That is of course a subject that Braudel has been talking about.*

And in this context I must talk with great admiration about the work of Hans van Santen. I strongly feel his dissertation should be translated into English and then published.<sup>3</sup> It is one of the best pieces of work on this kind of thing where you are bringing out the relationships between the internal economy and the coast. That thesis again I think shows a great imprint of Heesterman's thinking. You have material available, and that is the kind of material you would need.

*I want to go back to a very basic issue. And that is if you look at your career, you have had to battle with certain existing or emerging paradigms, right? You started out with, let's say, the Van Leur paradigm. Then you were confronted with, let's say, the Pearson paradigm that came out of Portuguese India. Then you were facing the Cambridge school, which developed new explanations for what happened in India in the second half of the eighteenth century. Not forgetting Glamann who showed how the Company worked as an intra-Asian entrepreneur, or Niels Steensgaard with his original thesis that has been pestering everybody in the field for twenty years. It seems to me that there is something quite specific to the Indian Ocean studies: you seem to have this succession of big paradigms. A new book comes out, Glamann, Steensgaard, Pearson, and each time everybody says, 'well that's it,' until a new study appears. You must have had this feeling when you were working your way through the VOC archives 'Oh my God, now I also have to deal with this new*

*paradigm'; or perhaps even 'I have to pierce through these theories because I have so much more material.'*

As you say it has been in many ways, for a young scholar at any rate, a very confusing picture.

*But exciting.*

Exciting but confusing. You see I wrote my thesis in the 1960s and it was a very different kind of work. A publisher in Delhi offered to publish it straight away, but in retrospect I am glad that I didn't do that, because it would certainly not have done much good to my reputation. But when I really sat down and began revising it, it began taking on a very different shape. I was lucky to get the help of many people in doing that. One I distinctly remember was M. M. Postan from Cambridge who spent a few months in 1968 or 1969 at the Delhi School of Economics as a Visiting Professor. His own field of work was very different, but he was kind enough to read my thesis and spend several hours talking about it with me. The gist of what he said was that on the basis of the material I had in the thesis I could write a much more broadly based book. I then decided to go beyond Bengal and situate the book and the VOC in the Indian Ocean–South China Sea trading network. Today if you ask me, I think the only merit of this book, which was eventually published by Princeton University Press in 1985, was placing Bengal in the VOC's Indian Ocean trading framework.<sup>4</sup> I had realised that without bringing in, in a major way, Japan and the Spice Islands, one could not tell a very meaningful story. So this is not so much a book on Indian economic history alone; it is really on the history of the operations of the VOC in the Indian Ocean–South China Sea trading network. I do not believe that anybody until that point had emphasised strongly enough the critical significance of the spice monopoly and exclusive access to the Japan trade as the principal factors behind the outstanding success of the VOC in intra-Asian trade. Now in this Cambridge book which has just been published, I have covered a good deal of additional ground.<sup>5</sup>

*So what is the new Cambridge book about?*

As I just said, the canvas has been broadened a great deal. The book deals with the Indian operations of each of the European corporate enterprises as well as those of the private European traders functioning in Asia between 1500 and 1800. As in the earlier book, the quantitative base remains important. I believe that if you are providing a quantitative profile as an important ingredient in the story you are telling, then it is important

to be as precise as you can. You see, there may be situations where you don't have data of the kind that you would need, in which case you must say, yes, this is the limitation of my work. What I am strongly opposed to is a situation where, on the basis of a very small amount of data, you are offering very wide generalisations. That's one kind of problem. The other kind of problem is that in situations where the data do not allow you to be sufficiently precise, you are nevertheless conveying a false sense of precision. Let me give you an example of the second kind of problem. In 1993 there appeared a book called *Portuguese Trade in Asia under the Habsburgs* by James Boyajian.<sup>6</sup> It is a major book that completely revises the orthodoxy in relation to the Portuguese trade in Asia and the relative role of the official trade on the Malabar Coast in the total Portuguese Euro-Asian trade. But if you look at the statistical basis of Boyajian's revisions of the orthodoxy, there is a very serious problem about the quality of his data. He is completely honest and he has covered himself fully. There is no question about that. But only a specialist will really find out that some of the quantitative data are indeed very shallow and much too fragile to bear the weight of a major reformulation of current orthodoxy. He is, I'm convinced, moving in the right direction, but the extent of the revision is not fully supported by the kind of data that he has.

*I think all of us have been over-enthusiastic at some stage when working in the archives and discovering all these shipping figures. You get all enthusiastic and say 'My God, so many ships came on Monday and on Tuesday,' and before you start thinking you are noting all this down and you make this fantastic pie diagram say for two months, and then suddenly you don't have anything for eight months and then you again have a little bit and then you don't have it for two years, and then by the time you have amassed all this you suddenly realise that you cannot do at least what you originally wanted to do. Am I hitting you at a weak spot?*

No, quite the contrary. I spent quite a bit of time putting together all the shipping lists relating to Bengal and then processing them. In the course of the processing, I found that a very large part of the statistical material pertaining to the goods carried by the ships would have to be thrown away. This was because of a whole range of problems relating to the manner in which this material was available in its raw form. Even in respect of an analysis of the number of ships on a given route in a given season, a large part of the data was unusable. That is the kind of problem that you just pointed out. The biggest problem was in terms of the coverage of the lists. I soon found out that in a shipping season of, say, six months, if I did not

have information for the whole of the six months, I would have to live with that. Because if I made a rule that I must have information for the whole of the six months, then there would probably not be even one list left. So I laid down the arbitrary rule that I would accept a shipping list if it gave me information for a minimum of, say, five and a half months.

*Five and a half months?*

Whatever. On the basis of their usability as a credible indicator of shipping movements over the entire season. All those lists that did not fulfil those criteria simply had to be dumped. It was a very hard thing to do. I had spent all that time recording them, but I did exactly that. If you are completely open and completely honest about the quality of your statistical material and you are continuously emphasising its limitations, then it is for the reader to decide how much trust to put in your conclusions. But it is you alone who know the weaknesses of the data, and I believe it is incumbent upon you to come out explicitly with its limitations. I would nevertheless emphasise that in spite of all the problems that exist in relation to the various kinds of quantitative data available in the VOC documentation, it is still probably the richest body available, and if one is deliberately conscious of the methodological problems involved in using this material, one can still get an enormous amount of mileage out of it.

*Not only figures, but what used to be seen as a hard fact, has of course been very much questioned recently by the post-modernists or subaltern-studies people. What do you feel about this viewpoint as an economic historian?*

I must admit that I am not quite into post-modernism. I'm not terribly comfortable there. In many ways I am a traditional historian where telling a story in an analytical, interesting and meaningful framework constitutes the basic craft. The particular points of departure may vary—everybody has his own view on things—but so long as you are specifying clearly the underlying basis of what you are doing and are putting all your cards on the table as it were, I think that is still the best way of writing history. I don't feel terribly comfortable with post-modernism not because I have any specific problems with their approach, but partly because I have never felt interested in it. In relation to the subaltern and related work, it's a different kind of a problem. I don't think it's my job as a historian to feel obliged to propagate a particular viewpoint. In short, let 100 flowers bloom.

*I have a very silly question about the position of being an Indian scholar. Because having witnessed your going and coming over the years, I have this personal distinct mixture of slight jealousy on the one hand and empathy on the other. I know that you spend the horrible summers in Delhi and melt away. I know how you have been building your new house with all kinds of problems. So on the one hand there is this empathy, but when you think of it, there is also 'envy,' in the sense that through all kinds of international agreements or whatever, as a good Indian historian you can go places. I am sure you have spent about five times as much time in the archives here in the Netherlands as I have. When you just think of those years, the time you have been able to travel and there is also this whole network of conferences. Now what does this do to you? Do you find it a silly question?*

No, it is not a silly question. Let me put it to you this way. You see living and working in India vis-à-vis living and working in the West is a choice that one has to make. It has not been an easy choice. It was not an easy choice in the sense that when I came here first in the 1960s, I am sure that if I had chosen to stay here that would not have been a problem. But I went back. And when my wife and I were at Harvard for a little over two years in the early 1970s, I was offered a job at another American University. That was in 1971. This was not an Ivy League University, but it was a well-paid job, and I spent many sleepless nights deciding whether to take it and stay in the United States or to go back to my job in Delhi. I must say one of the important factors in this has been my wife, who has consciously maintained that travelling is fine, but that she would not want to live in the West. So I finally said no to the offer and we returned to Delhi in 1972. But this was the period of the great shortages in Delhi and elsewhere in India. You had to stand in a queue for bread and things of that sort, and then sometimes I would wonder if I had made the right choice. But fortunately that phase did not last very long. In retrospect, let me put it to you that if you are a bit envious I can understand that, because in some sense I have had the best of both the worlds. I live in India and by Indian standards Professors are paid reasonably well. If the weather is hot, it is hot for everybody. And in addition, it is a good University Department that I happen to be in. It's an unusually good Department both in terms of its academic stature as well as in terms of inter-personal relations amongst colleagues. So from the point of view of job satisfaction, I am quite happy. And then I have been able to travel a great deal. I spent two years as a research student here, and then came back for a full year each time in '76-'77, '82-'83, and '92-'93. I have been a visiting professor at Virginia University and a visiting scholar at Harvard, Heidelberg and

Paris. I have done my share of travelling and academic work. And, as you said, I have had access to the Algemeen Rijksarchief on a continuous basis so that my research at no point has really suffered because of my dependence on a body of archives which is located several thousand kilometres from my home base. So I think in some sense it has been the best of both the worlds. If I had lived in the West, I don't think I would have been a happier person.

*Is that perhaps the reason why only a few Indian scholars are actually interested in Europe, in Western history; they always seem to stick to India?*

That is another thing. This reminds me of the Presidential address that Furber gave to the American Association of Asian Studies in 1969. That was the Gandhi centenary year and one of the points Furber made towards the end of the address was that while we have associations of Asian studies in the West, there were no associations of Western European or American studies in the East, which made for an unreal basis for a continuing mutual exchange. So you are absolutely right. If you ask me to name five major Indian historians working on non-Indian history, and it is a very large category, I would find it a very tough job to do that. Of course there are some outstanding exceptions, but they are just that: exceptions.

*This is in a sense a shame because when you look at Orientalists like we are, or even Indians teaching in America, they will get a lot of their new ideas, their methodological ideas, in short get a lot of mileage out of what is happening in European history. The first time I read Foucault for instance was at the campus at J.N.U. in Delhi. Because everyone was talking about Foucault and the French coupe and things like that.*

But not many of them would perhaps have read Foucault. Some of them would really know about Foucault, but almost nobody would use Foucault in his own work. This is something I frankly have never have thought about. But now that you mention it, yes, it is a problem area.

*It is a waste of talent because there is so much talent.*

Absolutely. But there is one thing about borrowing models lock, stock and barrel. There can be big problems with that sort of complete borrowing.

*But you have to start out somewhere. Wasn't Van Leur really in the same situation when he applied Weber's ideas on Asian trade? He used even less material than most theoreticians nowadays.*

Let me put it this way. You see there are different ways of writing history, and each historian chooses the way most suited, not just to his material, and not just to the kind of problem he's addressing. An important ingredient is his temperament and style. A historian is before anything else a person, a living human being. And I think the approach that he takes is a personal decision. After a while, once you have made that kind of decision, it sometimes becomes too late to go back. That, I think, is the way in which some of these things develop.

*You have met quite a lot of the great historians. You worked with Holden Furber for instance.*

Holden Furber was one of the kindest men I have come across. As I mentioned earlier, he was one of the examiners of my Ph.D. thesis, so he knew my work very well. He taught at the University of Pennsylvania at Philadelphia but he spent his summers at his house in Marblehead, very close to Cambridge, Massachusetts. Since I was at Harvard for over two years, I would often go to his place in the summers and we would talk extensively. I would always cherish whatever I learnt sitting, as it were, at the feet of Holden Furber. The kinds of things that would come out in a very gentle way would make you stop and think, 'why didn't this occur to me' and 'if I looked at it this way it would make more sense.' He was such a humble man. He was writing his *Rival Empires of Trade* at that time and he would say: 'Look, I am looking at your chapters, would you be so kind as to look at mine?'<sup>27</sup>

*So those who have been most influential in your work, who would they be?*

Starting with Tapan Raychaudhuri who was my teacher/mentor, I would say yes, Holden Furber. Another person, who influenced me a great deal, although he was not in this field, was Henry Rosovsky. He was then a Professor of Economics at Harvard. He had done an enormous amount of work on Japanese economic history, some of it together with a Japanese colleague, Ohkawa. Our fields were quite different but he was kind enough to read my dissertation and comment extensively on it. At the level of pure ideas, I have benefited a great deal from Harvard. Another professor of economic history there, the late Alexander Gerschenkron, used to run a seminar which I attended regularly. And one year when Gerschenkron was on leave, Henry Rosovsky ran that seminar. The presentations I made in these seminars elicited extremely valuable comments and suggestions. David Landes was still in the History Department but he would come to this seminar often. In Delhi, I have benefited extensively from

discussions with Dharma Kumar. Our fields are quite different, so are our temperaments, but I have nevertheless learnt a great deal from her. And here in Leiden, first of all Jan Heesterman. During 1976–77 when I was here for a whole year, I interacted with him a great deal. And of course there are many others. Henk Wesseling, more than anyone else, has helped facilitate my work in a whole lot of ways, providing a support structure that I could always bank upon.

*How do you see yourself in relation to a younger emerging generation? Is there such a generation? We have all the time been talking about you assembling materials, thinking about books, uniting books, but what about you as a teacher?*

Let me put it this way. I am a teacher in an economics department. And although we have a Centre for Advanced Study in Economic History and Economic Development, the students that we get are of a kind where economic history essentially is at the fringe of things. So I cannot really expect to get the very best students of ours to come to my field. The only exception was Sanjay Subrahmanyam. In a way I am very pleased that I was associated with him. I was his teacher in his MA programme. And then I was his advisor for his Ph.D. programme together with Dharma Kumar. I am very glad that he has reached heights that anybody can be proud of. I have lots of students who are very much interested in the kinds of things I do, but they would not want to do it for a living.

*You have been working with all these source materials close to forty years. In Holland we have the Linschoten Vereeniging, the R.G.P., in Britain the Hakluyt Society; we have published some substantial series ourselves at IGEER; but don't you think European research institutes like for instance HAS should play a much more central role in setting out a policy on how to make Western materials better available to Asian scholars?*

I couldn't agree with you more. In my own case, *The Dutch Factories in India* which I published in 1984, contains in English translation and annotation the documents of the VOC relating to India for the early years of the seventeenth century.<sup>8</sup> That was a modest beginning and Bhaswati Bhattacharya, Dirk Kolff and myself are now planning to continue this series. But the point is that, partly because the kind of organisational framework that you are talking about has not been available, the progress has been rather limited.

## Notes

- 1 Kristof Glamann, *Dutch-Asiatic Trade, 1620–1740* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1958).
- 2 M.N. Pearson, *Merchants and Rulers in Gujarat: The Response to the Portuguese in the Sixteenth Century* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1976).
- 3 Hans Walther van Santen, *De Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie in Gujarat en Hindustan, 1620–1660* (Ph.D. thesis, Leiden University 1982).
- 4 Om Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal, 1630–1720* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).
- 5 Om Prakash, *European Commercial Enterprise in Pre-Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), *The New Cambridge History of India Part 2: Indian States and the Transition to Colonialism*, vol. 5.
- 6 James C. Boyajian, *Portuguese Trade in Asia under the Habsburgs, 1580–1640* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).
- 7 Holden Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade in the Orient, 1600–1800* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976).
- 8 Om Prakash (ed.), *The Dutch Factories in India, 1617–1623: A Collection of Dutch East India Company Documents Pertaining to India* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1984).

## The Study of Contrasts across Europe: Interview with Patrick O'Brien

*To most people Patrick O'Brien is known as an author who has written extensively on the Industrial Revolution in Britain and in Europe. Readers of this journal will without any doubt also know him as a scholar who has studied the economic relations between the West and the rest, especially the costs and benefits of European colonialism and imperialism. His other main fields of interest are taxes and state finance. He started his career as an undergraduate at the London School of Economics. His doctorate (written at Oxford) was a thesis on the financing of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars from 1793 to 1815. At present he is Centennial Professor of Economic History at the London School of Economics and Senior Research Fellow and Convenor of the Programme in Global History at the Institute of Historical Research of the University of London. Peer Vries conducted the interview in November 1999.*

*The main interest in your academic life has been the study of industrialisation, and especially British industrialisation. What struck me in reading your books and your many articles is that you describe, analyse and compare the British Industrial Revolution, but hardly ever discuss the causes of this revolution, at least not in a very explicit way.<sup>1</sup> Do you think it not a sensible question to ask about the causes of the Industrial Revolution?*

Economists look for parsimonious explanations concerning the cause, or a set of causes, that promoted British industrialisation ahead of that of the rest of Western Europe. But I think that the important thing is that one should see British industrialisation as part of a broader European process in which, for a number of rather fortuitous geopolitical reasons, Britain took the lead and then the rest followed. I doubt whether there is a primary cause of Britain's industrialisation. I am certainly not in the business of producing monocausal explanations. Marc Bloch told us decades ago that historians can only utilise comparative methods if they wish to converse about causes.<sup>2</sup>

*Of course there is always a big element of contingency in historical processes. On the other hand there must be some reasons one can adduce for the fact*

*that Britain became the first industrial nation. It is not a completely random happening.*

To answer that particular question, I think you would have to position yourself in the mid-seventeenth century and look at possible countries or locations for an industrial revolution. I think in all probability you would select Britain as one of several likely places. You could also have picked Holland or France, Saxony, or one of many proto-industrial regions within Western Europe, which could have generated the major technological innovations behind Britain's early start.

*Granted that all these other regions might have been the region where industrialisation appeared for the first time, what are the conditions that made Britain first?*

I think Britain exemplifies what I have referred to as precocious structural change, or let us call it 'proto-industrialisation' simply because this term is in common usage, despite Donald Coleman's attempt to expunge it from historical discourse.<sup>3</sup> Quite early on, a high proportion of the British workforce was employed in the manufacturing industry and a lot of its output was sold overseas. From this base I can produce something of a probabilistic story as to why industrialisation should have happened in Britain before other places. Into that narrative I would want to bring coal, and also some geopolitical facts that explain why Britain in the mid-eighteenth century obtained a bigger share of world trade and of the profits from servicing the world economy than other European countries, including the Netherlands.

*I can imagine that some readers will be amazed to hear that you want to emphasise the importance of the geopolitical context. After all, among other things you are famous for your thesis that world trade, and especially the role of the periphery, was not that important in moving the process of industrialisation forward. Have you changed your mind?<sup>4</sup>*

That is a pertinent question. Often when I write I am reacting to scholars who produce some sort of grand thesis, a monocausal or exaggerated picture of history I know something about. What I was reacting to in my 1982 article was Immanuel Wallerstein's thesis about why Europe industrialised ahead of the rest the world, and why in particular England industrialised ahead of the rest of Europe.<sup>5</sup> The core of his thesis is about colonisation, foreign trade and imperialism. What he misses out—and this is not just the case with Wallerstein but also with Braudel<sup>6</sup>—is a number of what an economist would call endogenous preconditions. I

like mountaineering metaphors and I will use one here: I think there are a number of conditions that will carry an economy up to a plateau, and there are a number of things that will take it to the peak. If you want to have an explanation as to why somebody climbed a mountain, you have to consider both sets of factors. Thus to miss out British agriculture, British coal, the long involvement of Britain in intra-European trade, the role of London and its geopolitical position is myopic. It gives you only a fraction of the story. Nevertheless, if you repose the question and ask what it was that made Britain leap ahead of the rest (given the fact that in the early eighteenth century there really are a number of candidates for the position of first industrial nation) then I think Wallerstein has a point.<sup>7</sup> I do not want to be too critical. The first volume of his work appeared in 1974. At that time the history of Britain's industrial revolution was Ashtonian.<sup>8</sup> It was very much a story of *laissez-faire*, British capitalism, humble artisans from the north of England, the role of Manchester, and above all of private enterprise. It left out the state, and any story that does that is grossly underspecified. I think I was right to write that article in the way that I did. Although as a Celt I am also fond of hyperbole and may have been exaggerating when, at the end of my article, I called the contribution of the periphery to European industrialisation 'peripheral.'

*From a rhetorical point of view I think that was an excellent phrase.*

Nevertheless, people only remember that sentence and think that is my entire thesis. What I am saying is that there are a series of endogenous factors which led Britain to a certain point, and then beyond that point Wallerstein's story begins. He brought power and the geopolitical context back into our discourse, which was absolutely necessary. For the early phases the question is: where is the extra industrial output being sold? Why does England have such a large cotton industry, as compared to, let us say, the Dutch? Both are trading with the East; they both know about cotton. Why do the Dutch not have a big cotton textile industry?

*People could argue that the Dutch would have been forced to basically sell their cotton to themselves: the English had a larger internal and external market.*

But the United States had become independent in 1783. The Dutch could have sold cotton there. They marketed textiles in South America. They had their own colonies in the Indies. Nevertheless if you want to make a case for the significance of British imperialism, you can only construct it from cotton. Cotton was a very desirable material; it was the nearest thing Europe had to silk, which was a very expensive material. It was used

in the slave trade and to clothe slaves. It was the cloth you could sell all over the Empire. Cotton was the material out of which the major textile innovations actually emerged. All those machines were first used, not in the traditional industries of woollens, not in newer industries like silk or linens, but in cotton. For two or three decades cotton was very important for innovation in textile production. But cotton is not all there is to the Industrial Revolution.

*Personally I think Ken Pomeranz has a point when he emphasises that the British Industrial Revolution could go ahead not only because of coal and iron, and because of the fact that Britain was able to export cotton textiles, but also because it was able to import enormous amounts of cheap cotton.<sup>9</sup> What would have happened if the British had not been able to import this raw material so cheaply and easily? I think this is a point where the role of the periphery (or more generally, of international trade) also becomes highly important. When it comes to the relationship between capitalism—in whatever sense—and industrialisation, I think it was, as Wrigley puts it, more casual than causal.<sup>10</sup> Granted you have a periphery, granted you are a colonial power, and granted you are capitalist (as Wallerstein interprets the word): what then is the direct link of all this to what I would call the ‘essence’ of the Industrial Revolution? By essence I mean using other sources of energy and other materials. Is there a link, or do you think there are two separable trajectories? That Britain industrialised because it was a country that on the one hand had become the centre of a global trading system and that on the other hand, more or less fortuitously, stumbled onto the steam engine?*

I do not think the steam engine is one of those innovations that you simply stumble upon. It emerges from a location with very large deposits of coal, which Britain is exploiting from Tudor times onwards for domestic heat and then for several heat-intensive industries such as glass, salt boiling, soap making, etc. There then arises a problem for those who are mining the coal, namely, how do you pump water out of the mines so you can sink them deeper and obtain more coal from a given amount of investment? That was the problem addressed by the engines of Savery and Newcomen. Out of the Newcomen engine comes the Watt engine, and then the application of steam power to industrialisation. But the extent of the diffusion of the steam engine as late as the 1820s remain rather small. So in its early phase the Industrial Revolution is not a steam-powered revolution. Initially the revolution was an example of unbalanced growth. It took place in just a few industries.

*Might it be more correct to say that because of steam the Revolution could go on? At the beginning it was still largely a form of Smithian growth, then we see something you might call 'Schumpeterian growth.'<sup>11</sup> It is the innovations in the use of energy and iron that allowed the process to go on without running into Malthusian traps.*

I think that is right. To repeat, there are two separate points: what starts something moving towards the peak, and then what sustains it in that last phase of ascent? I think that once the economy is through the 1830s and steam power is spreading from industry to industry and the railways are in place, then you are in another era. But most people date the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in Britain further back. Savery and Newcomen made their inventions in the early decades of the eighteenth century. Major innovations in cotton were all in place in their technological essentials by the 1780s. The steam phase really appeared after the 1830s.

*I can imagine Eric Jones listening to us and observing: 'This is a Little Englander view of industrialization.'<sup>12</sup> Large parts of Europe—Belgium, Switzerland, France and Germany—also went to the plateau and then to the top. Ought we not, for the real explanation, to be looking for common characteristics pertaining to large parts of Europe? Characteristics that made it possible for these regions to catch up, not immediately, but often in less than half a century, whereas it took most of the rest of the world so much longer?*

Indeed. The lags between the advanced countries in Europe are really rather short. They are, however, much longer than anybody in the eighteenth century would have predicted because of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars which devastated, for example, the Dutch economy and the economies of large parts of North-western France. If one looks at Europe in the 1780s, one sees the British moving ahead. But one also observes Catalonia, Saxony, North-western France and the Netherlands being totally aware of these technological developments and poised to take them on board. What gets in their way is a quarter of a century of revolutionary upheaval, massive destruction of capital, and then a series of reactionary governments following the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. It is in that period that the relative position of the British economy really changed.

*But Britain itself was also involved in these wars. It had to finance them. It had to do an awful lot of fighting. It was a very turbulent time for Britain too, not exactly a period in which one would expect an economy to flourish. What*

*exactly is the relationship between the wars and the fact that Britain achieved an advantage over other countries?*

In the absence of the wars I think that the whole of the West-European economy would have moved forward in a much more balanced way. But by the 1820s and 1830s the British economy is clearly the dominant and the rest must catch up. The relative destruction wrought by the wars and the gains that the English made in terms of imperial conquest at the expense of the French, Dutch, the Portuguese and Spaniards implied that after the war there was no serious imperial competitor left. Yes the Dutch colonies were returned, but the English could go into their colonial markets. They had moved that much further ahead. It was a bit like the position of the Americans after the Second World War when there were also large productivity gaps. England in 1815 is equivalent to the United States in 1945.

*But still, what you see in Europe is that even devastated regions such as Belgium, France and Germany were able to catch up rather quickly. Does there not have to be something you might call 'a common European denominator'? What made it easier for most European countries to industrialise than it was for, let us say, China or India? What had Europe in common that made it move ahead as a continent? Looked at from a more long-term and more global perspective, one could say that Europe industrialised and the non-western rest did not. So there must have been fundamental characteristics of Europe as opposed to the rest. Could you give some hint as to what, according to you, these characteristics might be?*

Yes. We do have to think about the characteristics of 'the Rest' and 'the West.' What are the unique characteristics of the West? And what were the problems and unfortunate characteristics of the Rest in the period from, say, the late 1780s right up to the 1840s? What is happening in Asia? First there are a series of exogenous political shocks to which European power contributes. European imperialism is not helpful for preserving the political stability of Asia's great empires. But what we now know is that something called 'capitalism'—a label we should get rid of—was not unique to Europe. The Europeans had markets, credit, entrepreneurial merchants and mercantile networks. But one finds these things in many regions of Asia. Yet the density of populations in these ancient empires was one factor that made it more difficult for them to industrialise on a broad front than for Europe.

*What exactly do you mean by density of population?*

I mean that the industrialised share of the working population in Europe was higher than it was elsewhere. Although in Asia they had proto-industrialisation and many features of 'capitalism', but probably confined to a limited range of maritime areas. In the interior of Asia, where the mass of the population lived, agricultural productivity was not low, but it was not that high. Furthermore the backward linkage effects of Asia's industrialised regions cannot be as strong as they were in Europe. They did not have the overall 'pulling power' because they had many more people to pull up to a high average standard of living. If you have an industrialised set of regions in England, Switzerland or Saxony, they very quickly become *poles de croissance* that actually lift the whole system up. The sheer weight of population in Asia was much larger. Pulling that lot up (however capitalist you are) is going to take a long time.

*I am not an expert on the demographic history of Asia, but there are, for example, figures from Paul Bairoch that indicate that the region in Asia where population was most dense is Japan. At least when we compare the population to the amount of arable land.<sup>13</sup> Still, somehow the Japanese managed to industrialise. If your reasoning is correct then, ceteris paribus, Japan would seem to be a highly improbable candidate for early industrialisation. Would you then say this is because Japan is not such a big country?*

What we need to do now is to compare the Japanese case to certain maritime regions of China and to the maritime ports of South India and look at Asian economies one at the time. There may be some special features about Japanese agriculture and the Japanese taxation system in the eighteenth century or in the level of urbanisation of Japan which were really rather special to Japan. There was a kind of competitive state system in Japan.

*What strikes me in your answer is that you do not seem to have any problems in seeing that some parts of Asia were just as wealthy as Western Europe. People like Pomeranz and Goldstone, and most explicitly of course Andre Gunder Frank, emphasise in their work that the most developed parts of Asia in the early modern period were just as developed, and had a GNP per capita that was not much lower, if indeed it was any lower, than that in the advanced regions of Europe.<sup>14</sup> Do you agree? Do you think the differences were really very small in 1750–1800, just when things started changing rapidly in Britain?*

I think what recent scholarship has done is to raise the question of just how big the gap in productivity, real wages and real income might have

been between certain regions of Asia and the most progressive regions in Europe. Whether there was no gap at all or whether the gap was significant I think we do not know. We need to look very carefully at real wages and calorific levels of consumption. What we cannot see at the descriptive level is a system called ‘capitalism’ or what Smith called ‘commercial society,’ existing only in Western Europe. All the features of Smithian growth were present in large parts of China for centuries, and they were also there in certain parts of India. Whether that led to levels of income that were as high as in Western Europe to me is a question that requires quantified answers.<sup>15</sup>

*This means you support the deconstruction of one of the most cherished narratives about European industrialisation and Asian non-industrialisation: the narrative that capitalism was uniquely European. Furthermore, if, as you are saying, all these capitalist features were present in Asia and still industrialisation did not take off there, then there are two possibilities: Europe frustrated Asian industrialisation, or there was no industrialisation in Asia to be frustrated as capitalism in itself is not a sufficient condition for industrialisation.*

It may be a necessary condition, but it is not a sufficient condition.

*We have without much ado begun to discuss Japan, China and India. I gathered from the discussions we had yesterday and from your answers that you have been studying Asia. Does this mean you have been changing perspective? Would you consider yourself a global historian, or in any case someone who thinks global history is where the interesting things in the field are now happening?*

Yes, I really do. The shift in the last decades in which a number of Western economic historians have started to take Asia into their perspectives is entirely heuristic. I used to think that really significant illumination could be derived from the study of contrast across Europe: why England was first and why Belgium was second, etcetera. Those were the sort of questions you and I were raised on. When we were answering such questions we were not thinking about three-quarters of the world’s population, even if quite early on in my career I spent a decade at the School of Oriental and African Studies, where I learned Arabic. I wrote articles and a book on the Middle East, so I have always been interested in the Third World.<sup>16</sup> In that sense, I am returning to an early interest in populations beyond Europe. The sheer volume of research we now have available in European languages on these economies has grown immensely. When I started working on the

history of underdevelopment there were just three of us actually working on the economic history of Middle Eastern countries. Now there is a huge amount of scholarship available, even if you do not read difficult Asian languages, which take decades to learn. I think Eric Jones was really the first person to perceive that the only way to understand economic growth and to answer questions about gaps in income per capita around the world is to take a very long run and a very wide geographical perspective. He has written two excellent books, which are an example to us all.<sup>17</sup> He has been the major pioneer in global economic history.

*I think it is an indication of the way and the speed in which things are changing in economic world history that the latest fashion has become to claim that the centre of the world economy in early modern times was not in Europe, as was suggested in so many rise of the West stories, but in China. Do you think that is putting too much of an Asian perspective into world history? To be more specific, do you agree with Frank that we should 'ReOrient'?*

When Frank wrote his *ReOrient* book I did write to him to say that this is a book that occupies the commanding heights of the field. He does not like what I say about imperialism and is rather critical of my work. Still, this is a book we have to address.<sup>18</sup> I think he did a lot of reading and he has a very strong thesis and a very polemical style. His thesis that the Chinese economy was a very big element within the world economy as a whole and that things happening in China fed back into world-trade through India and via the Indian Ocean back to Europe is correct. But what is the quantitative significance of all that for the growth of Western European economies? I think for a very long time it was small. He wants to say it was really rather big. Frank also wants to say (and I do not agree with him), that there was already an economic world system way back in time. He has edited a book with Barry Gills with the title, *The World System: Five Hundred Years or Five Thousand?*<sup>19</sup> In it he defends the thesis that for already 5,000 years there has been a world system. There may be 5,000 years of long distance trade, but there was no world system or anything a modern economist would recognise as globalisation. That sort of integration did not exist before the coming of the railways and steamships.

*Let me try and defend Frank. I can imagine him reacting to this by stressing, for example, that all these developments in the British cotton industry which you yourself think are important were a reaction to what was happening in India. So even if, from a purely quantitative point of view, they were not that*

*important, intercontinental contacts were something of a trigger. Does that make sense?*

I think some kind of a case can be made for cotton. But, as I said before, there is much more to the Industrial Revolution than the cotton industry. As late as 1840 cotton was only 7 per cent of GNP. Global contacts do not explain British iron or coal. They also do not explain why the rest of Europe (that also imported Indian cotton) did not make the inventions and innovations the British made. It was the British who went for cotton early on and then produced a series of technological innovations which have to be explained.

*Reading Asia-centric texts like those of Frank or Pomeranz in which especially the Chinese economy is presented as highly developed makes you wonder why the Chinese did not industrialise. Obviously you have given some thought to this question. Do you think China was an improbable place for modern economic growth to arise?*

I do not think so. What is perhaps less probable is that Chinese society and culture in the eighteenth century would have generated a comparable series of technological innovations. This has nothing to do with the Chinese character or anything else that lies very deep in Chinese culture. In previous centuries the Chinese had generated impressive innovations. As Mark Elvin showed more than two decades ago, they invented the equivalent of a very sophisticated spinning machine for hemp, not for cotton.<sup>20</sup> They could do it. They had done it. I think they were locked into an agrarian economy which satisfied the food requirements of the population, and the population grew very rapidly. China was a commercial society. It had a certain level of proto-industrialisation and a very labour-intensive economy. There was no momentum for change, no group of people looking for labour-saving devices or for technologies to do things mechanically in the way that that was occurring in the advanced regions of Europe.

*Does this mean that in the last instance you think Elvin was right in his idea of a high-level equilibrium trap?*

Yes, I think there is a lot to that justly famous thesis, although I tend to think that it is more of a description of where the economy was than an explanation of why China did not have technological innovation. What it does show is why there was no very strong pressure for change. The Chinese were well fed, their economy was not Malthusian. Sometimes innovation can grow out of crisis. Pressure for change can become so intense that you

have to do something. The Chinese were not in a desperate situation. The state, moreover, tried to make sure that nobody was starving.

*But there was no serious crisis in England either. Does this not imply that David Landes has a point in emphasising the role of culture? The British did not need to industrialise. It is not that there were just two possibilities for them: industrialise or perish. If they were both not in a crisis, what then is it that makes the British innovate so much in the eighteenth century and the Chinese so little? Could culture not make some difference—not all the difference as Landes says, but some?*<sup>21</sup>

It depends what we want to do with this 'catch-all' word 'culture.' If it means a desire to better oneself materially and to respond to price signals and markets, then that existed in China as well as in England. In both countries there was a market-oriented population wanting to make profits. I think we may be talking about differences in the level and embodiment of useful technical knowledge and in the number of people who were skilled enough not only to invent these machines, but to also carry them forward to the development state. It may be that the supply of that kind of labour—carpenters, clock makers, skilled metallurgists—in Western Europe was in excess, per capita, of what it was in India or China. For perfectly good reasons, the Chinese and Indians were using labour-intensive technologies and saw no reason to change. They were doing quite nicely with them, while Europe could make higher profits by moving along other technological frontiers. I do not think there is anything deeply deficient in Chinese or Indian culture. Otherwise they would never have changed. I mean what has re-ordered or changed Chinese culture? Why was it so innovative back in the Sung period? In *Growth Recurring* Eric Jones made the point succinctly a decade ago.

*I think it is evident that Sung China was bristling with innovations while Qing China, which definitely was fairly wealthy per capita, was not—Mark Elvin, and even Needham, says so.<sup>22</sup> Qing China may have been rich, but it was not innovative. The 'classical' explanation, apart from references to changes in Confucianism—which I myself do not believe in—that always pop up in the literature is that after the Sung, the Chinese state became more repressive in the sense of repressing innovations. Joel Mokyr in his *The Lever of Riches*, for example, toys with the idea that the state destroyed initiative in China.<sup>23</sup> Do you think that this could be a convincing way of explaining the change?*

I am disinclined to reach for the state in the way that some of my friends in neo-classical economics always do when growth slows up or reverts to a phase of stasis. I am reluctant to do that because we are beginning to get a revisionist view of the Chinese state, and also of the Moghul Empire. Of course these states were predatory when they could be predatory. But they were not particularly powerful states.

*Weak states can be dangerous for growth because they are unpredictable.*

You are right. They can be unpredictable and arbitrary. And they may not have been particularly helpful. But I doubt whether this is the actual cause of a slowdown in Chinese innovation. I do not think that the Chinese state was powerful enough. Ken Deng's recent work on the mercantile classes in China shows that for centuries they just carried on doing their own thing.<sup>24</sup> The notion that they were heavily repressed by the state does not seem to be correct.

*Personally, to some extent because of reading your work I am inclined to take a completely different point of view with regard to the role of the state than the (neo-) classical one.<sup>25</sup> I think in early modern and modern Europe the state was very important not in hindering, but in fostering economic growth. At least in Western Europe it was not an impediment to growth. And on the other hand, the problem with the state in China and India at the end of the early modern period was not so much that it hindered growth, but that it did not do much to promote it either.<sup>26</sup>*

I think at that time Asian governments were worried about their own stability and survival, and they had very good reasons for their anxieties. They were challenged by the Europeans, who by that time were militarily much more powerful. They did not want massive social and economic change. Peasant rebellions in China and in India had long been extensive and frequent. The degree of internal disorder in those two empires is much greater than what governments had to cope with in Western Europe.

*But of course then I could say, as a kind of counter-argument, that if we look at the history of Europe, that was anything but peaceful too. If you take the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we see war after war after war. If you say China was hindered by peasant revolts, then what about this constant destruction and bloodshed in Europe? Moreover, the eighteenth century in China was, at least internally, relatively peaceful, while the wars China waged were all won. I do not think the situation in Europe could be described as more peaceful. Could Sombart with his thesis that war in Europe*

*was to some extent conducive to economic growth in some way be right?*<sup>27</sup> *When we were discussing the Napoleonic Wars, you were hinting at the fact that war is not necessarily bad for economic developments. Of course there are winners and there are losers, but still.*

It goes against the liberal grain to say that war is good for anything. But we are now talking global comparative history. In that context Europe stands apart as a competitive state system to which wars were an integral. In Europe states made wars and wars made states, as Tilly puts it.<sup>28</sup> In that process powerful states emerge that are interested in their fiscal base and in promoting economic development and in attracting people with money and skills from other states. As a result of this internecine war, Europe constructed the most developed armaments industries in the world. This gave the Europeans superior navies and superior weapons when they went to Asia and into the Middle East. This may be a helpful way of comprehending the differences. As a result of this strife, frontiers were carefully drawn and citizens were protected. Insofar as they were powerful governments attracted capital and skills. People fled from weak states to states that could protect them. Thus many Dutchmen in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries took their capital and their skills to where they were best protected: to London, and for very good reasons.

*All in all a completely different view on the rise of the West arises from that of David Landes, who has written the book on the subject that has without any doubt sold best. He says Europe, and especially Britain, was characterised by laissez-faire. I think I would stress that the difference par excellence between the European and the non-European state, and a very important element in fostering European growth, was mercantilism. This was abhorrent to Adam Smith and to many laissez-faire (neo-)classical economists. If I had to indicate whether laissez-faire or mercantilism was the economic policy that helped the West in rising, I would choose mercantilism. Do you think that would be a thesis that makes sense?*

Schmoller said just that, a long time ago.<sup>29</sup> The German Historical School had it right. For some 100 to 130 years Holland was a very successful mercantilist state. Then England from the late seventeenth century right through to 1846, when it went over to laissez-faire, was also a highly effective mercantilist power.

*You can look at it from the opposite side. Ken Pomeranz told me that in the last instance China did not have colonies, no colonial policy and no real foreign economic policy because government had other priorities. It did not*

*bother that people were trading, but on the other hand when Chinese traders were killed in Batavia or Manila, Chinese government did not declare war and did not mobilise its power.*

Yes, the Chinese stayed inside their boundaries, keeping law and order. Ground rules for capitalism and credit were in place for mercantile activity and for moving goods and people around the country. The state maintained a very good network of canals and a very good stabilisation policy against agrarian crises. That is what they wanted: an ordered society. They were not willing to go beyond the borders and take on the foreigners because they knew they did not have the navy to do so.

*But that is because they had not built one: they could have easily afforded to have a navy.*

I am not so sure about that. I think that if one could actually measure the ratio of taxes to GDP collected by these great empires it was very low. Contrary to David Landes I suggest we are talking about weak and strong states, not about laissez-faire.

*But even then, it has always struck me that the Kangxi emperor in China in 1712 declared—and nobody forced him to do so—that by far the most important taxes, the land taxes and the corvée, would be fixed at a certain ‘decent’ level and would never be increased.<sup>30</sup> Of course, there is a rhetorical element in this, but Chinese emperors never formally increased taxes in the eighteenth century, while there would have been a possibility, I think, to raise more money. So there is more to it than just constraints. Is it not the case that in China they had a different view on what governments should do, allow and forbid?*

Their view is much closer to what David Landes implicitly means by a laissez-faire state. They wanted to leave well alone.

*Anyhow, in Europe the history of taxes is the history of tax increases.*

Yes it is. Taxes increase with state building. States became more powerful; law and order were imposed; property rights were being better defined and states were protecting themselves against foreigners.

*China ends up, I think, with the worst of both worlds. Official, central taxation was insufficient to maintain or increase infrastructure and unofficial local charges and downright corruption payments went up steeply, which did not have any positive spin-offs.*

That is a weak state with war-lordism, local predators who do not care about civil society.

*During this interview we have referred to the ideas of some very influential people in the field of world history: Wallerstein, Braudel, Jones, Frank and Landes. You told me you are planning to write a book with an overview of what people have been saying about the idea of economic or material progress. Could you expand a little bit more on that? How does it fit in your whole career? Have you become a historian of ideas?*

Ideas matter, but I haven't become an intellectual historian. Europeans have been thinking about the rest of the world since Herodotus. There is a lot of discussion about economies, as well as of societies, families, customs and culture. There is a very long tradition, which carries on through Christian universal history in the Middle Ages, when for very obvious reasons people were intensely interested in Islam. Then with the voyages of discovery a whole lot of imports come from the East into Europe and you obtain much more data in the form of artefacts, but also of knowledge. People begin to reflect. In the period we call the Enlightenment, the first great school of universal historians emerges, Montesquieu, Voltaire and Hume, interesting remarks from Adam Smith and vast tomes from the Göttingen School in Germany. All that really dies away with the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. Thereafter, with the success of European imperialism the nineteenth-century view appears that these 'other cultures' and these 'other peoples' have *always* been backward. That was not the view of Herodotus who always compared the Greeks with the Persians and very often to the disadvantage of the Greeks.

*It was not the view of Leibniz, or Voltaire, not even of Montesquieu, although he did say some rather strange things about peoples outside Europe.*

Scholars are now beginning to think about material progress down through the centuries in different parts of the world. And in the late twentieth century, as a result of globalisation and as a result of the fact that the world is—in terms of time—small, young people have become very curious about other cultures.

*Do you study this subject to get some ideas you can use in your own work about European Asian and global economic development? Or do you do this from another perspective, that of a historian of ideas who just happens to be interested what European people have been saying about other cultures?*

An increasing number of people have recently been writing (or are at the moment writing) books on the history of material progress. I would like them to be more aware that there is a very long historical tradition of which they are just a recent part and which they should have read. Then they can place their own work within a ‘European vision’ of the rest of the world. The visions of some modern scholars are really Eurocentric, blinkered and ignorant. Had they read the historiography, they might have realised that they have to be very serious about what they were doing in the way Max Weber was.

*Even if he has appeared to be wrong in various ways, he could not have done much better at the time and I think nobody can really blame him for not having done better.*

There are also other historians like Toynbee, Wells, Dawson and Sorokin who made a serious attempt to come to grips with other civilisations. It takes time, and I think a lot of what has been written since the war about the economic history of underdevelopment has been remarkably ignorant of their work. I think the first breakthrough actually comes with Braudel. In Anglo-Saxon economic history he has not been given the place he actually deserves. If you read those three volumes on material life, the market economy and capitalism, there is a serious attempt to understand other civilisations.<sup>31</sup>

*I think he is brilliant in posing the right questions, although I am not quite sure what he thinks the answers are.*

He perhaps started the resurgence in global economic history. Then we get the books of Jones. The first one was good but the second one is excellent.<sup>32</sup> But there have been a number of books in which the attempts have not been scholarly and that do not deserve to be treated very seriously. Some scholars just read sections of Mark Elvin on China and then think that is enough.

*Some people have only read Mark Elvin on China and to cap it do not understand him. I think we have got a fine view of your career: from a Little Englander to an economic historian of Europe to a global historian and now even as somebody who studies the history of global ideas.*

That is what some of my friends call ‘megalomania,’ and others ‘senility’!

*I would call it ‘development.’*

## Notes

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- 2 See for example M. Bloch, 'Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés Européennes', *Revue de Synthèse Historique* 46 (1928) 15–50.
- 3 D.C. Coleman, 'Proto-industrialization: A Concept too Many', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series 36 (1983) 435–448.
- 4 For an overview see P.K. O'Brien, 'European Economic Development: The Contribution of the Periphery', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series 35 (1982) 1–18; P.K. O'Brien, 'The Foundations of European Industrialization: From the Perspective of the World' in: J. Casas Pardo (ed.), *Economic Effects of the European Expansion, 1492–1824* (Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag, 1992) 462–502; P.K. O'Brien and L. Prados de la Escosura, 'Balance Sheets for the Acquisition, Retention and Loss of European Empires Overseas', *Itinerario* 23:3 (1999) 25–52. See also idem (eds.), *The Costs and Benefits of European Imperialism from the Conquest of Ceuta, 1415 to the Treaty of Lusaka, 1974*, special issue, *Revista de Historia Económica* 16 (1980) 1–42, published in Madrid in 1998.
- 5 I.M. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-system I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press Inc., 1974).
- 6 See note 32.
- 7 See for example P.K. O'Brien and S.L. Engerman, 'Exports and the Growth of the British Economy from the Glorious Revolution to the Peace of Amiens' in: B. Solow (ed.), *Slavery and the Rise of the Atlantic System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 177–209.
- 8 T.S. Ashton, *The Industrial Revolution, 1760–1820* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948).

- 9 K. Pomeranz, 'From "Early Modern" to "Modern" and Back Again: Levels, Trends and Economic Transformation in the 18th–19th Century Eurasia', paper presented at the All–U.C. Group in Economic History Conference 'On the Origins of the Modern World: Comparative Perspectives from the Edge of the Millennium', University of California, Davis 15–17 October 1999.
- 10 E.A. Wrigley, *Continuity, Chance and Change: The Character of the Industrial Revolution in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 115.
- 11 For the concepts 'Smithian' and 'Schumpeterian growth' see J. Mokyr, *The Lever of Riches: Technological Creativity and Economic Progress* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 3–16.
- 12 E.L. Jones, *The European Miracle: Environments, Economies and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). The reference to the Little Englander point of view is in the 'Introduction' to the second edition, XVI–XIX.
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- 17 Jones, *The European Miracle*; E.L. Jones, *Growth Recurring: Economic Change in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
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- 22 See Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*, 284–316. For the ideas of Needham see H.F. Cohen, *The Scientific Revolution: A Historiographical Inquiry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 418–482.
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- 24 K. Deng, *Chinese Maritime Activities and Socioeconomic Development* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1997).
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- 26 See for example R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1997) and P.E. Will, 'Développement quantitatif et développement qualitatif en Chine a la fin de l'époque imperiale', *Annales HSS* 49 (1994) 863–902.
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- 29 See for example K. Schmoller, 'Der Merkantilssystem in seiner historischen Bedeutung' in: K. Schmoller, *Umrissen und Untersuchungen zur Verfassungs-, Verwaltungs- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (Leipzig; Duncker, 1898).
- 30 See for this decision I.C.Y. Hsu, *The Rise of Modern China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) 59–61.
- 31 F. Braudel, *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme XVe–XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1979).
- 32 See note 17.



## History is Placing a Man in the Context of his Times: Interview with the Late Ashin Das Gupta (1932–1998)

*One of the finest historians of modern India, Professor Ashin Das Gupta was engaged in teaching and researching for nearly four decades. Born in Calcutta in 1932, he spent his childhood in small towns in West Bengal. He came back to Calcutta to finish school and had lived there ever since. He taught History at the Presidency College, Calcutta University and the Visva Bharati University in India and at St Antony's College (Oxford), the University of Heidelberg and the University of Virginia at Charlottesville, USA. He was also the Director of the National Library and the Administrator of the Asiatic Society, both in Calcutta. Towards the end of his life Das Gupta was suffering from a crippling disease. But his mind was as sharp as ever throughout. Sitting in a wheelchair, he kept on dictating essays, both in Bengali and English, almost until the end. It was shortly before his death that he was asked for an interview by Itinerario, and in spite of the condition of his health, he kindly agreed to it. Itinerario found the issues raised during the interview and the comments of the historian very interesting and wanted to go back to him once more. But unfortunately he passed away before that opportunity came. The views of the late historian on history, social science and Indian politics are still very valid. That is why Itinerario decided to publish this interview as its homage to the memory of Das Gupta. Dr. Mrs. Uma Das Gupta kindly gave us permission to publish the interview.*

*Ashinda, would you tell us something about your childhood and school days? All I remember of my childhood is travelling all over West Bengal. Being a civil servant, my father had a transferable job. I attended small schools in different towns and one school was no different from another. The schools were not rich; they were quite poor. They were no inspiration but I loved some of those small-town schools in Hijli, Burdwan, Katwa, Nalhati, Bishnupur, Bankura and Arambagh. So, I was brought up in rural West Bengal up to Class IX. Then we moved to Calcutta and stayed there.*

*You were a student of Science. When did you choose History as the subject of your study and what made you change the course of your study?*

After I left school, I studied science for two years. I had my aptitude tested in the Science College. They said ‘go and take up Arts (Humanities).’ Then I gave up Science and chose History.

*Many people we know remember you as an ‘Ishan scholar,’ among the most distinguished awards of Calcutta University. It is still considered remarkable that, being a student of History, you scored higher than students of the Science faculty and won this scholarship. You created a record that has not been broken so far. What else did you do besides studying?*

Yes, I was an Ishan scholar. What I did beyond my studies at college was to enjoy debating and writing. Of course, the life of the college was in the Coffee House. I used to write a lot on political issues in the Presidency College Magazine. My near contemporaries were A.K. Sen, Sukhamoy Chakrabarty and Barun De who belonged to the Sushobhan Sarkar school of thinking—they were ‘left’ of Centre... I used to have debates with them... the funny thing about Calcutta is that they remember you as an Ishan scholar and have no idea of what happened afterwards!

*You were a student of Narendra Krishna Sinha...*

In college I remember the teaching of Sushobhan Sarkar. We read a lot of European history with him. He recommended simple textbooks. I liked his lectures immensely. He was very simple and lucid. The thing I did not like about his lectures was that he was asking questions on the subject and answering them himself for the students. What became clear to me much later on, but not at that time, was that these were complete lectures, not unfinished. Then when I studied with Narendra Krishna Sinha at the MA level and heard him asking questions on the subject, I realised the value of asking questions. At the beginning several others joined N.K. Sinha’s class but he discouraged them from staying on. Only I remained in his class and he was delighted with that. He said with a chuckle ‘the others fled’! His class was made up of me asking the questions and him answering them. After completing my Master’s at the Calcutta University, I started research. After one year of research I went to Cambridge on a State Scholarship of the Government of India.

*Did you notice any difference in the method of teaching History in India and in England?*

I was a student of Eric Rich at Cambridge. He was the Vera Hamsworth Professor of Imperial History at Cambridge University and later became Master of St Catherine's college. I also got to know T.G.P. Spear who was at Sellwyn College in Cambridge. I think what I gained from Cambridge was a 'take off' from N. K. Sinha's teaching. That same method was pushed ahead at Cambridge—that was the value of asking my own questions and finding answers to them. That was a proper introduction to research.

*Your favourite historians...?*

At that time my favourite historian was Postan. I thoroughly enjoyed his *Medieval*. Among my contemporary historians I am a great admirer of Arasaratnam. I met him first in The Hague and we became good friends. Among my Gurus I would list first Sushobhan Sarkar, second N.K. Sinha, and third Mrs M. A. P. Meilink-Roelofs. Later two other scholars came very close to this circle—C. R. Boxer and Holden Furber.

*What do you understand by History; how would you define history?*

History is a subject where there is difference of opinion about its definition. History is not written in any one way, in any one manner, so it cannot be said that History should be written in this way or that. Still, for the sake of a better analysis it is necessary to have a definition. In broad outline, History to me is placing a man in the context of his times. If one can do that one becomes a good historian. If one cannot then one should not write.

*Would you mind saying a few words more on this point?*

We can think of a man in different ways, but the contrast between a lone man and a man living in a society is to be noted. History cannot reach a man who is really lonely. An individual has his existence, but no history. A man becomes part of history only when he is part of society. I do not mean that many lonely human beings come to an agreement on a certain date to create society and state and then they become history. The lone man and the man living in society have been related to each other from time immemorial. History only explains the life of the social man. It is acknowledged that history is not just the story of kings and dynasties—it is the story of ordinary people. Those who keep this in mind, in their writing the special individual tends to form part of the larger crowd. It is needless to say that if history is considered to be the story of kings and

dynasties, that story would not explain the life of man as part of society. On the other hand, when the historian is in search of the crowd in order to move away from the history focused on one person, it becomes difficult for him to bring out the human side of that crowd.

*Is that in your view the point where History differs from Social Science?*

Social Scientists do not like this human aspect of History. So far Social Science has not been able to say anything on the special contribution of a particular person. The more there is an emphasis on ‘analysis’ in Social Science and the more History is trying to become the ‘science of the society,’ the more human faces are disappearing from the account of the past. In an attempt to rid History of the people of the upper strata of the society, Social Science in the West is putting more and more emphasis on statistics. In special cases, and depending on the questions being asked, one must have recourse to statistics, but that exercise must be only a part of the total effort to understand the man of the past. The relationship between History and Social Science is complex. Without entering into that large topic, I would only say that it would satisfy no one if the human aspect were removed from the study of the past. I have said that History explains the life of man as part of society; but that man also has a human side, and if we put too much emphasis on statistics that might result in an immense loss. Whatever the historian chooses to write on, and no matter how he writes his story, it is history because it is a reconstruction of the past. Apparently this may sound very simple, but in fact this is a complex statement. One has to know about what is meant by historical past. Past and ‘historical past’ are not the same. Scientists say that man is very young compared to the earth. The coming of man is a very recent development in the history of evolution. Since history deals with the past of man as part of the civilized society, it concerns only a fraction of the past in general. Past, on the other hand, is being created every moment. Yesterday is a thing of the past today; the last moment is also past at this moment. Where will the historian draw the line? So far, historians, even when they have studied modern history, have lagged behind the present. Recently, something called ‘recent or contemporary history’ has come into being. It is more modern compared to modern history. But there are still some doubts about it. The historian dealing with the past has a clear advantage. The results of the events of history are known, and that is why it is possible to analyse those events in a scholarly way. It is known that Siraj was defeated in the battle of Plassey. Since the historian is aware of this fact, while writing on the subject he automatically focuses on the role of Mir Jaffar.

The reader is surprised to note that a detailed analysis of the character of Siraj-ud-daula, the circumstances at that time and the historical role of Clive only leads one to think that it would be more surprising if the battle had ended in a different way. If, suppose, Siraj had been victorious, no doubt historians would have found some qualities in his character, the role of Madanlal would have been more emphasised and poor Clive would have faced strong criticism. History knows everything because history is a thing of the past. Recent history, on the other hand, is not. For that reason it would not be wrong to think that ‘contemporary’ and ‘history,’ these two thoughts, are conflicting with each other. If, suppose, as a result of the forward march of communalism the power of the state rested with some Hindu organisation and a merciless Ramrajatva was established in India, historians would then focus on the role of the Visva Hindu Parishad and modern men like you and me would be considered a failure. But those who are trying to write that history at present would have to combine the roles of journalist and historian. A historian to me is the journalist of the past, and the journalist a historian of the present.

*The historiography of Indian maritime history is a rather recent trend. Together with Tapan Raychaudhuri, Arun Das Gupta and a few others you are one of the pioneers of this trend. Why did you go for the maritime history of India?*

On the day I got my MA degree, N.K Sinha said to me ‘Ashin, get out’—so I went to work on the coast and thus got out of Bengal. My first book was on Kerala (Malabar). But as I worked on the coast, I realised that in order to explain the coast Indian developments were not enough—you have to go out of India. That is the beginning of my move into maritime history. I have studied mainly the period from 1500 to 1800, which I would characterise as the Age of Sail. The Age of Sail can only be written by European historians mainly from the European documents. I am very grateful for the European expansion in the Asian Seas. But the point is that historians always have to challenge the documentation on the subject.

*Would you like to comment on the recent trends in Indian historiography?*

I think this is a very exciting time for Indian History. There is a very definite attempt to break away from the elite and go to the masses in writing history, as also to explore new themes. I would specially single out the study of the Indian mind. Naturally it is not possible to do this from British administrative documents. So there is an effort to stand our history on its own head. There is a determination to explore and use vernacular

sources, but up to now the results have been meagre. This does not mean it is not exciting.

*Could you comment on present day Indian politics?*

No.

*Your classes on Gandhi were famous. Could you say a few words on Gandhi—what do you think of him as a person and a politician and his relevance for the present?*

I think very highly of Gandhi. But I think he was asking for the impossible. India would always admire Gandhi but India would never follow him. This admiration is very important. It makes Gandhi relevant to India for all time.

*As you know, activities on part of the fundamentalists in different parts of India during the last few years have brought the question of communalism to the forefront these days. How would you analyse it in the Indian context? What do you think secularism in India should mean?*

Secularism in India has come to mean a message of unity of all religions. I do not believe this can be changed. Even an atheist can accept this. So let it be. We shall be extremely lucky if we can achieve this much of secularism.

*What are you currently working on?*

I am basically trying to put down my thoughts about India and the Indian Ocean since the days of Vasco Da Gama. I am doing this both in English and in Bengali. I am particularly keen on Bengali because it is a tough challenge to reduce complex thoughts into simple language, which will communicate them directly to those reading in Bengali.

## ‘I didn’t get into history to avoid math or physics’: Interview with Patricia Seed, Professor of Rice University

*Last year, FEEGIs inaugural vice-president, Professor Patricia Seed of Rice University, gave a fascinating lecture for the honours students of the Crayenborgh course at the History Department of Leiden University. After lunch Leonard Blussé and Patricia Seed had a chat about upbringing, maturing and computer games.*

*First of all, how did you get into the field of history? We are talking about the late 1960s, aren’t we?*

I had a charismatic high school history teacher at Scarsdale who collected exotic orchids in South America (a practice since banned). He managed to make Spanish America sound like the most intriguing place on the planet. I was hooked.

*I understand your parents wanted you to go on in the applied sciences. What is the story behind this? Were there ideological issues?*

No, I’m the oldest of three siblings, all of whom are in biology and medicine. Since my father, uncles and grandfather were and are also in medicine, and my mother was a biologist, they have frequently wondered where I came from. Fortunately, if you move my hairline to the back of my head, you would be looking at my father’s face. I don’t have a clue as to where my interests came from either. Anyhow, my parents were horrified that I went into history.

*Where you did you get your academic formation?*

I went to Catholic schools for most of my early schooling, as well as university. First the nuns, then the Jesuits! And then my Master’s degree in history from the University of Texas at Austin and finally a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin.

*That’s quite a jump—from a Jesuit school to Texas.*

I would call it a culture shock.

*What was your motivation for that Great Leap Forward?*

The Latin American Center was very well known. One of my first teachers was the legendary Nettie Lee Benson, for whom the Library in Austin was named. She spoke the most heavily Texas-accented Spanish I had ever heard. But she was passionate about Mexican history of the national period, and her enthusiasm was contagious.

*Who else was teaching in Austin at that time?*

Jim Lockhart was there, Richard Graham, Magnus Mörner...

*Sorry for interrupting, but a Swede, some Yankees... Weren't there any South Americans in that field?*

Yes, there were several, but mostly they were only at Texas temporarily. My most memorable visitor was the late Angel Rosenblatt.

*What was your MA thesis on? Was it on South American history or on anthropology?*

For my MA thesis I reinvented economic anthropology. I didn't know it at the time, but obviously I found out later. It just seemed to be a reasonable way of understanding the data. I used the financial records of a long-operating estate in east-central Mexico. The estate started with sugar and slaves in the sixteenth century, and by the mid-eighteenth it was selling pulque (a locally produced alcoholic beverage from the Agave cactus) in the Mexico City market. These estates were entailed, itself a rarity in Mexico, and belonged to the Counts of the Valley of Orizaba. The valley's name comes from a small volcano just north of the central trade route between the port of Vera Cruz and Mexico City.

*Were you as a student specifically influenced or impressed by anyone?*

Around 1971 Jim Lockhart was a charismatic public lecturer, and his social approach to history was intriguing. I specifically went to Wisconsin, to work with John Phelan, the colonial Latin Americanist, who suffered a massive heart attack less than a month before I was due to arrive in Mexico to start my field work.

*What about Philip Curtin? He was the Godfather of the Wisconsin school, wasn't he?*

Yes, Phil Curtin founded the program that included John Phelan. Latin America was simply a subdivision of the euphemistically named 'Comparative Tropical History.' That's what my diploma from Wisconsin

actually says. Comparative tropical history meant Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia; areas which were also called the 'Underdeveloped World' and now the 'Postcolonial World.'

*And those other great men, Jan Vansina and John Smail...?*

No, I didn't study with either one. I didn't study with Vansina because of the legendary hatred between Curtin and Vansina. They could not stand to be at the University of Wisconsin at the same time. (Mind you, this was a sixty plus person department, so they could have dodged each other.) But if Vansina was teaching, Phil Curtin would be on leave or out of the country. And vice versa. Both were on leave my first year at Wisconsin, and Curtin was around my second year. John Smail was a well-liked teacher; I just didn't see his field as closely linked to Latin America as it was connected to Africa.

*Tell me about your Ph.D. thesis.*

The Ph.D. thesis created the core of what became *To Love, Honor and Obey*, my first book. I didn't go to Mexico intending to study marriage. At the time studies of race and social status were in vogue, so I went there intending to work on the Mexico City census of 1752, and look for allied documents that might illuminate the way census takers categorised individuals according to racial and social categories. Four months into this project, I realised that the kind of information I wanted was organised in such a way that it would take decades to mine the data. I only had a year and a half. What I managed to salvage from the initial project became 'Social Interpretations of Race: Mexico 1752' in the *Hispanic American Historical Review* which people still read and cite.

*Had this any connection with C.R. Boxer's writings about Portuguese race relations?*

No, although I had actually met Boxer in Austin. He came to give a series of lectures, which later became his last book: *Women in Iberian Expansion Overseas, 1415–1815*. I found him a charming, congenial British gentleman of means, a very recognisable social character. But at the time I met him, and read his works after meeting him, I did not take his material into my thesis on Mexico City. Unfortunately, then, as today, scholars of Latin America remain sharply divided between Spanish and Portuguese speakers. Few researchers on Portugal's overseas empire read any of the material on Spain's overseas empire and vice versa. Students of modern Brazil rarely read works on modern Mexico. For most Americans

the linguistic barrier is the greatest—because all too few scholars are familiar with both languages. For the Latin Americans themselves a variety of cultural and national prejudices often deter comparative efforts at scholarship. There are plenty of Argentine jokes about Brazilians, Brazilian jokes about Argentines, and so forth. It's a fairly familiar genre in the international prestige game.

*Why is your article still cited?*

Perhaps because I argued that the category of 'race' is (and was) socially constructed—not in itself an unusual argument—but I employed statistics to analyze how census-takers and priests employed racial categories. Uniting a social constructivist argument with statistical techniques was, and I guess still probably is, fairly uncommon. Another reason might be that I looked at a wider range of potential influences on 'race' than was usual—the employment of women and children and type of residence. Additionally I tracked individuals from the census to marriage, christening and bequests to the church to see how racial categories were assigned differently. This process is often misnamed 'passing' but it works both ways.

*In what year have we arrived by now?*

Phew... 'Social Interpretations of Race?' 1982 perhaps? Anyhow, I think it was very badly written, because I hadn't learned to write for humanities audiences. As a result the text appears very condensed. I actually invented three new statistical techniques that are in the footnotes of that article. I subsequently wrote them up in statistical journals.

*You seem to enjoy applying the exact sciences in your research.*

In 1983 I explored new statistical techniques as well as the then-new approach in mathematical physics called chaos theory to study interracial marriage and religious de-conversion processes. But the opportunities for further dialog with other Latin Americanists on these technical issues were extremely limited so I abandoned the idea of making this a full-scale research project. In short, I didn't get into history to avoid math or physics. I just got in to figure out where cultural, political and social patterns of behavior came from.

*I know you first of all as an anthropological historian. When did you turn anthropologist? Is this after you met George Marcus, your husband?*

Actually, yes. When we met George was putting on the seminar whose papers were later published as *Writing Culture*. He introduced me to a whole series of books that I had never read—or been interested in reading before. When he handed me Susan Handelman's *Slayers of Moses*, I was hooked. I understood religious hermeneutics from my religious schooling, and had gained a smattering of knowledge of Jewish hermeneutical traditions. So everything fell into place.

*When did you two meet?*

In 1983. George was at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton the year I arrived at Rice. He had heard about me because Stuart Schwartz had told him about me. But when he returned to Rice University, he couldn't remember my last name. He knew my name was agricultural. He thought I was Patricia Corn instead of Patricia Seed! Actually people kept pushing us, shoving us, 'oh you should meet, you two should really meet.' And then we finally met and I gave a talk at his department and sparks flew. High drama!

*This was after that first book had come out.*

No, that was in '88. We met in '83. I was doing the revisions on that book then. I was writing a lot of other things at the time, mostly statistical. But I was working my way through a literary and anthropological reading list.

*Your first book—it's about marriage and about ceremony? I'm wondering why you didn't include the gender factor or, for that matter, the ceremonies of marriage, the rites de passage and how these affected this kind of ceremony.* I didn't think that such an idea fit the topic. I wrote about the theological assumptions behind Catholic marriage (before and after the Council of Trent), but not with the ceremony itself. The only political ceremony that you can say is in any way gendered is the English action of possession and it's only gendered because the English thought of their act of possession in gendered terms.

*That is the same as in traditional Dutch Law. The wife is onbekwaam, unfit.* There is much more on this in my new book, *American Pentimento: The Invention of Indians and the Pursuit of Riches*. In the first line of the book I talk about spending ten years browsing through bookstores in Europe and Africa, Asia, Australia and New Zealand and looking for any books on history. I didn't come across American history books or histories by American authors. I found American fiction, books on computers, on

HTML, but not American history books. Even Australian, English and New Zealand bookstores carry few, if any, American historians.

*Do you mean books on America or books by American historians?*

Books by American historians. Books by American historians have an audience solely in America. The US has a very large internal market but it's not the world. So the idea that you do world history for an American audience doesn't mean you're doing it for the rest of the world because other people are going to have different visions as to what constitutes the world.

*Couldn't one make the same point on French historians?*

Yes, I do feel the same way about French history, but the French don't seem to have found it necessary to write the History of the World (from the vantage point of France). They seem to concentrate on histories of their own terrain—and those of their former colonies.

*Would you agree that world history as taught in the US is rather a kind of recipe to deal with issues in the US itself than a really new approach to history. Is not it very ideologically motivated?*

I quite agree. In the United States world history is a ground-up phenomenon, which is why there are no world historians at the Ivy League and similar universities. The course usually replaces the Western Civilization course—the one that began with Greece and Rome and ended with post-World War II United States. That course originated at a few elite universities early in the twentieth century, but never became popular until after the Second World War. 'Western Civ' (the usual name of the course) created a narrative that explained why all children of European immigrants belonged in America—by positively portraying European history up to and including the moments of greatest European immigration. World History, on the other hand, arose because of the dramatic increase in Asian immigrants to the United States. In the 1960s and 1970s South Vietnamese refugees, of Chinese and Taiwanese Nationalists, and Indian and Pakistani physicians and computer programmers all came to the United States. When their children began to be educated in the United States, their past had no place in this Western European narrative, and so when their children began to enter the school system in large numbers they created a demand for the story of their pasts to be included as well. So world history was Western Europe plus China (at least initially).

*I don't mean to shoot my own foot or yours, but aren't most of the American FEEGI members really American colonial history-oriented scholars? What should we do about that?*

I don't really know membership numbers, but in FEEGI's defense I can say that it has successfully drawn Canadian historians into the group. From Europe, this is a minor achievement, but in the hemisphere it remains unusual. All we can do about it is to expose US historians to excellent European scholarship. To achieve that end, it might make sense to have FEEGI meetings every third year in the Netherlands, making it easier to attract European scholars. If we were to do that, I think that it would be vitally important to integrate all the panels, that is, not allow any sessions to be composed strictly of members from a particular nation's education system.

*Take, for instance, the problem of language. I find it very interesting that some teachers in the US say: if students want to study Italian or Spanish, let them study the language in those countries. They will never learn it in the US.*

That's a real problem, compounded by the prevalence of English as an international means of business communication. Perhaps the reason why teachers urge their students to go abroad is that at all levels US schools and universities teach languages very poorly.

*In that sense I find intellectual life at American Universities a bit stifling. People seem often so much taken hostage by ongoing debates, paradigms. This also has its good points because it focuses research, but somehow it also makes it very difficult to carry on new research of one's own, don't you think so? I ask because you seem to be pretty good at setting your own agenda.*

You more kindly characterize what I call 'group-think' as 'paradigms.' Failing to conform to one or more well-understood and well-known paths of inquiry becomes most disabling when securing research funds in the US. If you cannot disguise the originality of your work successfully, you don't get funded. Of course you can do your own research, but you have to be willing to make financial sacrifices in order to do so.

*What have you learned from theoretical or applied techniques or, let me put it differently, are you interested in the work of historians working on cultures in Asia and Africa?*

Absolutely. It's what I call respect for the native point of view—one of the fundamental ethical tenets of anthropology. If you are writing about the Netherlands, for example, you have to read what Dutch historians have to

say about the subject. After all, it's their language, their culture, and their tradition. You need to respect that. The same thing goes for Malaysia, for example. If I want to write about Malay history, I have to understand how Malays write their history and why. And when disagreeing, you need to respect your overseas counterparts. In Europe, I particularly admire Dutch and Portuguese historians. The secondary and higher education systems in both countries have produced extremely able academics in the last twenty years. As you probably know well, their work is underappreciated in the United States, in part because of the lack of knowledge of those languages in this country.

*You are, after all, mainly a Latin Americanist, aren't you?*

Sort of. I've actually become much more involved with the history of cartography and navigation in the years immediately preceding Vasco da Gama's voyage to India. This includes studying Latin America, but also takes me to the Davis Straits (between Canada and Greenland), South Africa, the straits of Malacca and the like. My Latin American interest remains, but I have become more interested in Latin America as part of an integrated, nearly global network. Portuguese and Spaniards overseas might be a better way of phrasing it.

*During the course you gave yesterday you mentioned various games and teaching techniques including your site on the web. Please explain.*

Pedagogy is one of the more interesting arenas of research at the moment, largely because the generation currently enrolled in universities differs greatly from the preceding generations. The revolutions in communication, the internet, cell phones, live-from-the-battlefield pictures have transformed students' preferred means of learning and doing research. While some people made this argument about television, I don't think of that as true. Television was conceived as an entertainment medium; the internet was created by scientist seeking a better means of communicating and sharing knowledge. The printed book's centrality as a source of knowledge has changed greatly. Many professors don't seem to have realised how quickly the world of their students has shifted. I use computer, board and role-playing games as vehicles for teaching an introduction to history because by the time they reach university undergraduates have spent a good part of their lives playing games, dissecting, and criticizing them. In short they arrive with an existing critical apparatus that can be sharpened and refined by showing how narratives, plots and arguments influence the way you re-tell history. Additionally, games allow telling the same story from

different points of view, so students do not receive a monolithic idea of History.

*What's your agenda? Is Ceremonies really the first volume of a series of books? American Pentimento was the second volume in the series—dealing with the persistent images of native peoples. The third volume will deal with narratives of warfare, but in the meantime, I've taken a detour into histories of cartography, navigation and science.*

*You mentioned tensions in the family when you took up history. What about that?*

My family could not understand why someone talented in mathematics and biology would voluntarily go into history. It was (and still is) completely beyond them. But they do understand my interest in the history of science, and are fans of my top-rated website called *Latitude: The Art and Science of Fifteenth-Century Navigation*. Interestingly enough, however, humanities audiences seem unable to make sense of the site because I refuse to adopt a linearly defined narrative. But science teachers, scientists and quite a few major scientific institutions think it's just fine!



## A Sea of Histories, a History of the Seas: Interview with Adrian B. Lopian

*When Prince Claus of the Netherlands visited Indonesia in 1994, he asked Adri Lopian whether it wasn't difficult to describe Indonesia's past—where to start? The answer: 'Just as difficult as Germany's history, should one start with Bavaria, Saxony, Alamannia? Surely not Prussia?' In December 2003, Hendrik Niemeijer interviewed Adri Lopian in a place where they had often met before, the Warung Sate Tegal close to his house at Jalan Haji Sa'abun no. 9 in Pasar Minggu, South Jakarta. Professor Lopian was born in Tegal on 1 September 1929. A year later the Lopian family moved to Manado, in the Minahasa, the northernmost province of Sulawesi, where his father was elected to the 'Minahasa Council.. Until then his father, Bernard W. Lopian, had worked for the Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij (KPM) and he wrote articles for Indonesian newspapers in Batavia and Manado. He even published a short-lived paper of his own, Fadjar Kemadjoean. In 1938 the Minahasa Council elected B.W. Lopian to the Volksraad. As the Volksraad convened only twice a year, the Lopian family continued to live in the Minahasa where Adri attended school in the village (now the town) of Tomohon.*

*The Minahasa is known for its high standards of education at that time. What was your early youth like there?*

In Tomohon there was a good school, the Louwerierschool, established by a Dutch Christian Protestant foundation. The children had to speak Dutch. There were seven classes and this basic school gave access to the MCILO—the highest institute of learning in the Minahasa before World War II. In January 1942, however, when I was in the seventh grade, we were occupied by the Japanese. That meant that I had to go to a Japanese school. We were certainly influenced by the Japanese occupation.

Where we were Dutch-oriented before, the Japanese presence gave us another view of the world outside. But in my case something important happened during my childhood in Tomohon on 31 January 1938, when Princess Beatrix was born. I was playing with the children of our Dutch neighbour, one of the Dutch teachers at the MOLO who rented one of

my grandfather's houses. We used to sing in anticipation of the event, 'Er is een prinsje geboren, Oranje blijft bestaan.' The message reached us by radio while we were playing. It was still night in the Netherlands, and I ran to my grandfather with the news. 'So what?,' he said. 'But she will become our queen,' I replied. I became confused when he remarked: 'Your queen?'

After the war we had to go back to the Dutch education system, from the third grade of the Japanese Chu-gakko to the third grade of the Dutch MULO. It was a difficult time because my father was held prisoner in Java by the Dutch (as a result of the February 1946 revolt when North Sulawesi declared it would join the Republic of Indonesia). I was the eldest in the family, and had attended the AMS from 1947, a year after it was opened. But in December 1949, after the Round Table Conference, my father came back home, just a few months before I finished school. He urged me to go on studying as I was actually planning to look for a job. I chose the Fakultas Teknik Clniversitas Indonesia in Bandung to study to become a civil engineer.

At the time, there were not as many options as there are today. For tertiary/higher study, there were medical, law, agricultural and technical colleges. A faculty of arts and philosophy had been opened in Batavia in 1941, mostly for Dutch children, as they could not go to the Netherlands, and then occupied by the Germans. But at high school I had opted for mathematics and the natural sciences, so the obvious choice was to become either a medical doctor or an engineer. Therefore, I went to Bandung. But this was not a good choice. The theoretical side of it was interesting, but I felt I could never become a good engineer, and I disliked the long periods of standing behind the drawing board. In 1952, I fell ill with severe pneumonia, and in 1953 I decided to leave my studies in Bandung. In the same year my father (1892–1977) was transferred to Jakarta to the Ministry of Home Affairs, and retired shortly afterwards. After his release from prison he had been appointed acting governor of the province of Sulawesi, which at the time comprised the whole island. His transfer made it possible to re-unite the family in Jakarta where I started looking for a job.

First, I worked in the library of the Biro Perancang Negara, the forerunner of Bappenas, the National Planning Agency, on a day-to-day basis for a salary of 14 rupiah per day. A year later this was raised to 15 rupiah and it was clear to me that it offered no prospects at all. So I decided to leave and applied for a number of jobs, until I became a journalist for the *Indonesian Observer* in 1954. That was a completely different kind of

life. In 1955, the Asian-African Conference was held in Bandung, and as a young reporter I could meet great political leaders such as Nasser, Nehru, Ho Chi Minh, King Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia, the Burmese premier CI Nu, and the like. Archbishop Makarios of Cyprus attended as an observer. There was also Zhou Enlai of China, but I couldn't get near him. He was always surrounded by a host of big senior reporters.

*You were 26 at the time. What was your own ideological position?*

The *Indonesian Observer* had as its motto 'independent and objective.' It expressed no preferential sympathies for the World Powers and I agreed with that. Initially assigned to proof-reading, I was then placed at the 'foreign desk' of the newspaper, receiving foreign telegrams from Reuters, Associated Press, United Press, AFP from France, but not from Aneta in the Netherlands. I had to select those news messages that I thought were interesting, for instance, on the Kashmir conflict. Often, when the *Observer* published news about the conflict, the press attachés of either India or Pakistan would come to my office to protest when the news was not in their favour. That stimulated me to read more about the history of the region. Although I had liked the history lessons at school, it had never crossed my mind before to become a professional historian. As for many of my contemporaries at that time, the Faculty of Arts (opened in 1941 mainly for Dutch youngsters) was a luxury for those who did not need to find a practical job. But journalism changed all that.

*How did you come into contact with Sartono Kartodirdjo?*

A rather interesting story. He influenced me even before he became a well-known historian and before I had met him. As I said, my journalistic work forced me to read more about the historical background of current events, so I was toying with the idea of studying history at the Universitas Indonesia. But I was informed that the history department was at the point of closing down. The Dutch professors had left because of the New Guinea conflict, many times lectures had to be cancelled as those who replaced them were working part-time, so the students left and chose other subjects like archaeology, law, sinology, philology and linguistics. Then, while perusing reports from Antara, the Indonesian news agency, I came across the name of Sartono Kartodirdjo among those who graduated from the Fakultas Sastra. At that time new university graduates were newsworthy people, and he was from the history department. So, history was being taught after all.

*Who were the first history teachers at the history department at that time?*

Soon afterwards, in 1956, I was registered as a student, very easily without any selection as is the rule nowadays. I attended courses given by the first generation of Indonesian scholars such as Professor Husein Djajadiningrat who taught the history of Islam and the Middle East and Tjan Tjoe Som, a sinologist from Leiden who not only taught the long story of China's past, but also problems of Chinese historiography. There was also an Italian, Giulio Costantini who had fled from Shanghai after the communists took over the city, and was teaching aspiring diplomats at the ADLN (Akademi Dinas Luar Negeri, the academy of the office of foreign affairs). As one of our part-time professors he gave a course on diplomatic history, but also enlightened us on Italian political history and philosophy, introducing names like Giambattista Vico and Benedetto Croce, and also Machiavelli and Mazzini. The unification of Italy was a relevant topic for Indonesia at the time. Later I learned that Sukarno had also read Mazzini!

*How long were you registered as a student?*

Five years, I graduated in 1961. The time when I had to sit my examinations during the early years often coincided with a busy period at the newspaper. So the editor of the *Observer* wanted me to make a clear choice: history or journalism. I chose the first, although when I enrolled as a student history was only meant to help me in my work. But I had come to know the city of Jakarta, and it was possible to make a living from translation work.

In 1958, I met Pak Sartono for the first time. I had seen him from a distance the previous year at the first National Seminar on History in Yogyakarta, but he was very busy at the time and I wanted to explore the city and its surroundings. He was then working for MIPI (Majelis Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia, the Indonesian Council for Sciences, later LJPI) and was assigned to be co-ordinator of the first National Science Congress (now known as KIPNAS, Kongres Ilmu Pengetahuan Nasional) held in Malang. A friend, Eddy (now Prof.) Masinambow, told me that he was looking for an assistant co-ordinator, so I applied for the job. Afterwards I was offered a part-time job in the MIPI library and later in the public relations section. This involves programmes like the popularisation of science, and I had to lay the groundwork for setting up science clubs, modelled on the Science Clubs of the USA. The director, Dr Watson Davis, came over as a consultant. I also had to assist Dr. Richard Russell, a distinguished American geologist, who came as a consultant on scientific organisations. We had to organise many conferences, national as well as regional. It was the first time that Southeast Asian scholars had worked

together. Before independence, each of them was oriented towards their respective colonial metropolises.

When in 1962 Sartono received a scholarship to Yale University, I became the co-ordinator of the second Science Congress held in Yogyakarta. It was also the time when Taufik Abdullah joined MIPI. It was difficult to organise such an event in the early 1960s. There were not many hotels, and there were many practical problems. For instance, the University of Gadjah Mada did have cars, but all the tyres were completely worn out. As the co-ordinator, I went to the tyre factory in Bogor, only to find that I needed permission from the Department of Industry. We procured a truck full of tyres, but the road from Bogor to Yogya was very unsafe because of robbers. We therefore had to ask for a police escort. Of course I did not have to climb on that truck myself!

As coordinator of the Second Science Congress in Yogyakarta, I had various kinds of responsibilities. President Sukarno had to open it officially. There had been quite a few assaults on his life, and he already suffered from a kidney problem. A special toilet was reserved for him, and we had made sure that nobody had placed a time bomb in there, and so on, and I had to keep the key, which I felt to be an enormous responsibility. Later I helped to organise another conference, the fourth IAHA meeting, held for the first time in Indonesia in 1974, also in Yogyakarta. Sartono was, then, president of IAHA, and I was the secretary-general. Former Vice President Hatta was the keynote speaker. Curiously enough, he also had to go to the toilet and I had to be on guard. I guess I'm the only historian who has guarded the two proclaimers of Indonesian Independence in such a way!

*I guess that is so! How did the first contacts with Dutch historians develop meanwhile?*

That brings me to another anecdote about another conference. The First International Seminar on Southeast Asian History held in Singapore in 1961. There I met Padre Antonio da Silva Rego who was an expert on Portuguese sources about Indonesia. He later helped me find my way in the Portuguese archives. The Indonesian delegation consisted of Sartono, Soetjipto Wirjosuparto and Soekmono. There was also Prof. Slametmulyana who lived in Singapore. And Soedjatmoko—already a well-known figure—had been specially invited. It was a privilege for me to join the group, just a few months before I graduated. The only historian from Holland was Dr H.J. de Graaf who, of course, was very curious about the situation in Indonesia. We had many discussions during coffee breaks. We were the only Dutch-speaking participants. After a full day of

sessions, we had to attend a reception at the palace of the Yang Dipertuan Negara, the head of state. As De Graaf was alone, we shared a taxi, and as we entered the reception hall together, the major-domo announced: ‘The delegates of the Republic of Indonesia and the Kingdom of the Netherlands!’ And that happened during the height of the Irian Barat conflict! Later I met De Graaf very often in the KITLV library in Leiden.

*At that time you also developed an interest in maritime history.*

That began in 1963. I thought I had had enough of organising conferences and looked for a job more in line with my historical interests. Machfudi Mangkudilaga was head of the Historical Section of ALRI, the Indonesian Navy. He invited me to join his staff. He was also the contact person between KITLV and its Indonesian members with the title of *commissaris*. Despite the disruption of political relations with the Netherlands because of New Guinea, we continued to receive the *Bijdragen* via Basel, Switzerland. In 1963, the conflict was resolved and Machfudi received the very first scholarship from the Netherlands. I became head of the historical section, but was at first reluctant also to take over his work as the contact man for KITLV. But Prof. Resink persuaded me to accept: ‘After Machfudi returns you will be given a scholarship, too.’

As staff member and later the head of the historical section of the Navy, I had the opportunity to join several sea expeditions to various places in the archipelago. Even Maluku. This is how I learnt to observe Indonesia from the sea. Moreover, these expeditions often did not follow regular routes. We also had to deliver provisions to faraway places, for instance, lighthouses on remote islands. Once we went to Thailand as the Navy had to procure rice during the hard times of the mid-1960s. That gave me the opportunity to meet Thai historians. I also met the doyen, Phya Anuman Rajadhon at the Siam Society.

*When were you finally invited to the Netherlands?*

In 1967. I was then back at MIPI where research institutes had been established, including the LRKN (Lembaga Research Kebudayaan Nasional), the National Institute for Cultural Studies. I was asked to join this new institute, but got permission to go on study leave, as in 1966 I had already applied for a scholarship in Leiden to study maritime history. When I applied I only had one name, Prof. De Milo, specialist in the history of the sea. But he had passed away, and his forthcoming successor, Jaap Bruijn, was still working on his Ph.D. dissertation with Prof. Kernkamp. I attended Jaap Bruijn’s courses, together with younger

fellow students like Femme Gaastra and the late Frank Broeze. Prof. Bruijn retired this year (2003), after having supervised scores of Ph.D. dissertations.

*What were your initial experiences in the Netherlands?*

I realised that it was not possible to work on a dissertation. There was no supervisor, and the grant was for only one year, later extended for another year. True, Mrs. Meilink-Roelofs who helped me enormously in the Dutch archives, was appointed temporary professor, but that was in 1969 when I had already packed my things. Therefore, besides attending courses, I worked in archives and (mostly) in the KITLV library which was then close to the station. At the time, the archives of the nineteenth century were still kept in a bunker in Schaarsbergen, only to be reached by bus from Arnhem. It was a very cold location in the winter. The keeper saw me shivering, so the next time he lent me his personal electric radiator from his flat. I only consulted the indexes; the documents I needed were sent to Amsterdam, to the municipal archives on the Amsteldijk. I lived in the Lassusstraat, close to De Lairesestraat. I had first lived in the cheapest pension in Leiden, then for six months in Katwijk-aan-zee. I stayed for a year in Amsterdam, and the last six months in Leiden again for library research. It was interesting to work together with Bruijn, reading the ship logs of the VOC.

*Which historian do you admire the most?*

Braudel, of course. As soon as his *La Méditerranée* came out in 1966 (the first edition was published in 1949), I ordered it for the MIPI library, as I could not afford to buy the two volumes myself. Now this French edition is still kept in the library of the Documentation Centre of LIPI, but I am afraid not many students are using it. A revised edition appeared in 1979, and there is now an English translation. The way Braudel dealt with the Mediterranean world was very appealing. I also liked Chinese history, but as I don't know Chinese, I have only learnt about it from French books like those of Rene Grousset, Marcel Granet and later Elyseeff.

As a consequence, I began to divide the Indonesian seas in the Braudellian way: the Java Sea, the Banda Sea, the Sulawesi Sea, etc. This was a liberation from 'traditional' history writing which was completely Java-centric, or as before viewed from a Dutch perspective. History books used to follow the Dutch trail, beginning with the arrival of the first Dutch ships in Banten in 1596, to Maluku, then back to Java, as if the history of Maluku stopped when the Dutch became more interested in

the exploitation of Java and later shifted to the big plantations of Sumatra. As a matter of fact, the Dutch legacy is still being felt today. The study of history begins with the availability of European sources. Indigenous sources should be studied by philologists only, while the ancient monuments belong to the field of archaeology.

*Other historians were also inspired by Braudel, for instance Anthony Reid.* Yes, there is a Fernand Braudel Center in New York, and in 1985 (shortly before he died) many historians and economists gathered at Chateauvallon for the 'Journées Fernand Braudel,' three days of discussion on his three most important works: the Mediterranean, capitalism; and the identity of France. However, Southeast Asia is not like the Mediterranean which is a well-researched and a well-documented area with an abundance of sources. Certainly, I have immense admiration for Anthony Reid's works and always enjoy reading his books and articles. He did much pioneering work, and I like *The Age of Commerce*. It is a much better name than Chinese expansion or Indianisation, the colonial era, or the age of European expansion, or, much less, 'the Vasco da Gama era.' Yet, sometimes I wonder whether there were no other, earlier ages of commerce, during the Sung, Tang or earlier times. Of course, for these periods West European sources are of no use and most indigenous texts do not give chronological data. But trade with East and West Asia has had a long history. And there are still many sites waiting to be excavated. Besides, I don't think that history is linear.

Until very recently most Indonesian archaeologists only looked for ancient monuments. Now they realise that there are more things hidden below the surface. Perhaps they might dig another Sambisari (a temple which was completely buried), but harbour cities like Kota Cina in North Sumatra have also provided interesting material. The work in Bali by I Wayan Ardika, for instance, gives new insights into trade relations in remote periods, and the results of the French team working with our archaeologists in Sumatra and Bangka are improving our knowledge about ancient trade. Excavations in the Mekong delta are still going on, also in other places in Southeast Asia, including the Philippines. Here we should not expect pre-Spanish monumental remains, so excavations are focused on old trading centres. And marine archaeology is here more advanced than in Indonesia.

By the way, I think our Philippine friends are not only well advanced in the study of shipwrecks. They are also much better at finding and exploring new approaches to the study of their past. As you know, I was

teaching Southeast Asian history at the University of Indonesia from 1961 (also at Gadjah Mada University from 1962 to 1966), on and off, not continuously, only as far as my work at the Navy and at LIPI allowed, and I also travelled, including in those days. When I decided to stop teaching as I joined the group of the 70-Ups in 2000, I chose as topic for my last semester ‘New approaches in Philippine historiography.’ For the last sessions, with the help of the SEASREP Council I invited one Filipina and two Filipino historians to give lectures in my course. SEASREP stands for Southeast Asian Studies Regional Exchange Program, set up with generous support from the Toyota Foundation. The chief officers are Shaharil (Malaysia), Charnvit (Thailand), Maris Diokno (the Philippines) and Taufik Abdullah (Indonesia).

Well, for my course I invited (1) Dr Teresita Maceda. She analysed protest songs, an alternative mode of truth-telling under martial law. It was an attempt at rewriting history from the point of view of the rank and file members of social movements; (2) Dr Francis Gealogo, a young demographic historian. The use of parish documents has provided interesting insights into the social history of the country during the Spanish colonial period, while labour statistics reveal historical patterns of labour emigration—most relevant to the Indonesian situation as the number of workers who are finding jobs abroad is growing; (3) Prof. Rey Ileto, a very prominent historian and well known for his Pasyon studies that, he believes, are already quite old. But he also discussed more recent topics such as writing non-linear or non-developmental history and avoiding Orientalist pitfalls.

*It has often been said that during Soeharto's New Order a great deal of historical objectivity was lost in Indonesia. The focus was almost completely on contemporary, national history. How did you deal with that problem in your situation?*

The focus on contemporary history has nothing to do with New Order policy. It is simply a matter of access to Dutch sources. Studying pre-national history requires a good knowledge of the Dutch language. Although Dutch language courses continued to be given to history students (even during the New Guinea conflict when the use of Dutch was discouraged or prohibited—although Soekarno and cabinet ministers spoke Dutch among themselves) results are very poor. A lack of motivation, perseverance or just sheer incompetence? Perhaps because of wrong methods of teaching? I don't know. It is of course very different from my generation who—as the expression goes—imbibed Dutch with

the *paplepel*, the porridge spoon, when we were fed as babies. But I often told my class how Japanese history students manage to obtain a fair and sometimes a very good command of Dutch, although the structure of their language is also very different.

As for objectivity, I must say that any official history is per definition subjective. History from below is a new phenomenon, and there is a distinction between great and little traditions. But indeed, in those days there was much self-censorship in the case of newspapers, books, including history writing. One had to know what to say and what not to say. Certain topics were taboo, like ethnic and race relations and also religious subjects that might cause conflicts. One should not deviate from the government's interpretation of the PancaSila. There was also concern about the style of writing, the choice of words, how to recount things. But, well, lately I have been thinking about those years and have come to the conclusion that we have been conditioned to that kind of situation. Just suppose as a boy of only eight years plus I had run to my Dutch neighbours and told them that, according to grandfather, their queen was not my queen? That would have caused grave consequences for my grandfather. But by instinct I didn't do that. Perhaps I already knew that certain matters should be kept within the family. At the time, I learned to sing Indonesia Raya, taught by an older cousin. In the original version, that is, Indonesia *mulia* (noble) instead of *merdeka* (free). But my parents told me that this must only be sung indoors.

During the so-called New Order, we did say certain things which some people in the government did not like. I don't remember everything, but a few weeks ago at a party I met an old journalist friend whom I had not seen for many years. He reminded me about a statement I had made against the looting of wrecks apparently condoned, if not supported, by top officials. A great deal of important historical information had been lost since the divers were hunting only for treasure and not systematically recording the location and the way the wreck and its contents were found. However, I must say that the Soeharto era was not entirely negative with regard to historical studies. Besides seminars on national history, many workshops on local history were also held. And we—the late Abdurrachman Surjomihardjo, Taufik Abdullah and I—were frequent consultants for projects of the Department of Education and Culture, notably the IDSN (Inventarisasi dan Dokumentasi Sejarah Nasional) and IDKD (Inventarisasi dan Dokumentasi Kebudayaan Daerah), the inventory and documentation of national history and local culture.

Speaking about local history, during that period there began a trend to search for the origins of towns, districts, etc. Some research projects for this purpose were carried out quite scientifically; others less so. But we should see it as a desire to look for one's own roots and identity. And what is interesting is the fact that each wanted a date much older than the others and—more importantly—preferably much older than Jakarta's. We may see it as a counter move, perhaps unconsciously, against the centralising process of the Jakarta government. But, if well researched, the dates could provide options of where to start when writing Indonesian history. As I once wrote, from being in Provence or Okinawa the history of France and Japan is seen from a different perspective.

*Can you tell us more about your Ph.D. thesis? You developed it at a later stage in your career. Was that an advantage?*

In my case it was certainly an advantage. I had read more books, articles, records, and so forth and I didn't have to rush—no worries about career—and my supervisor, Prof. Sartono, I had known for decades. I was then in my late fifties. During the TANAP workshop in Xiamen last October Prof. Zhang Zhiliang from Beijing told me that, according to Confucius, if you are 50 you already know the way to heaven. And when you are 60, you only want to hear pleasant things. At 70 you may do what you like. So, I think there is a good reason to write a thesis at an advanced age! Today, a Ph.D. degree is the first step in a long career, but I belong to a vanishing generation. Many old professors in Japan wrote their theses at a later stage, too. My dissertation deals with the phenomenon of piracy. In the 1960s during one of our sea expeditions, we landed on a tiny island of a group called Taka Bonerate in the Flores Sea, on Dutch maps called the Tiger Islands. We wanted to buy fresh food, chicken or fish. But it was a very sad forlorn sight. Only two days before pirates had raided the small village. They took away everything, including their stock of chickens. We had to give them some rice and canned food instead. It was the first time I witnessed such a terrible scene. Piracy, I thought, was something you only read about in newspapers, history books or novels. You know, of course, the lines of Gilbert and Sullivan, '... and it is, it is a glorious thing to be a pirate king.' And if I remember well, wasn't it Thucydides who wrote that in the old days people were not offended or ashamed if they were called pirates?

The title of my thesis is *Orang laut, bajak laut, raja laut* (Sea-people, Sea-robbers, Sea-lords). The idea is that each can call the other a pirate, depending from whose angle one is looking. But piracy is a concept in

the minds of people with an established government where the state has the monopoly of violence to exert its authority. Until late in the nineteenth century, there were many states in the archipelago with no clear boundaries either on land or at sea. At sea, they were *raja laut* in their own right, but pirates according to the colonial documents. There were also maritime communities with no fixed places of abode, the *orang laut par excellence*, the sea nomads who lived on boats. They were also featured as pirates in reports compiled by colonial authorities. But surely the VOC ships were initially seen by the local people as pirate vessels, too. At least, that can be surmised when reading the old texts. Only at a later stage, notably in the eighteenth century, was the VOC accepted as a ‘local’ power. As I said on another occasion, the VOC was then going native. But the arrival of Daendels changed everything. And with the arrival of steamships the balance of power shifted in their favour. By ‘they’ I mean the Western powers, the superpowers at the time, the *adiraja laut*. Like the superpowers in our time who had the monopoly of nuclear energy, the *adiraja laut* had the monopoly of steam power. Some indigenous raja tried to own steamboats, but the colonial powers only allowed them to order small ships. Well, I can go on and on...

What I wanted to say is that it is certainly worthwhile, if not necessary, to study Indonesian history from a maritime perspective. Van Leur complained that Dutch historiography about Indonesia was written from the decks of VOC ships, but I think that we must go sailing to have a fresh comprehensive look at our past. After all, we call our country *tanah air*—land and water. Therefore, for a balanced picture the study of Indonesian history should be oriented towards both.

## Sympathetic 'Farangi': Interview with Michael N. Pearson

*Michael N. Pearson, Professor Emeritus at the University of New South Wales, Australia, and Adjunct Professor of Humanities at the University of Technology, Sydney, is a renowned scholar of maritime history. His books on Indian history have been pioneering ones, though not without criticism. His range of scholarship has been wide. He began his academic journey with a book on Gujarat, moved on to pilgrims to Mecca and then to East Africa, and finally covered the entire Indian Ocean. On this trajectory, he contributed enormously on the rulers, merchants, pious passengers and many other categories of the people who inhabited a large part of the Indian Ocean littoral. Recently, he was very much engaged in talks about his latest book, The Indian Ocean, which is an ambitious work indeed. On the way to England for a conference, he stopped at Leiden to share his views on history with the TANAP students. This provided a good opportunity for Ghulam Nadri to interview him.*

*Tell us something about your early life and education.*

I was born in 1941 and grew up on a quite remote farm in the North Island of New Zealand, and people claim they can still hear tinges of New Zealand vowels in my speech. This farm was about ten miles from the nearest town, and that was a town of only 2,000 people. The farm was not particularly prosperous, and we lived an almost self-sufficient existence, growing most of our own food, buying very little from town. We lived on lamb; when we had eaten one sheep, my father would kill another and we would eat that, and so on. So, it is probably an unusual background for someone going for higher studies and ultimately becoming a professor of History. Indeed, of all the people I went to primary school with, only one other went on to university. After primary school, I boarded at a high school in Napier, and there did quite well in history. So when I went to university in Auckland I did more history, and did a BA and honours MA there. What was being taught at Auckland University was very traditional history indeed. There was some New Zealand history, a little Australian, and a lot on the history of the 'Mother Country,' Britain. There was a whole

course on the Congress of Vienna that is very old-fashioned diplomatic history. There was a little bit of American history too, but almost no history of Asia or the Third World at all. Actually ironically there was a course on British expansion and there was an Indian component as part of that, and this was traditional Indian history as taught by English people, which talked about the Battle of Plassey, the methods of British administration, the British bringing civilisation to India, and so on. Looking back, it was really shocking. I didn't enjoy the Indian part of the course at all, and I did my MA thesis on an early business firm in Auckland. It was pretty boring really.

My political background was I suppose leftist. I became quite active politically in one of the biggest issues in New Zealand at that time, the early 1960s, that is tours by South African sporting teams, which were selected only from the white South African population. At this time, New Zealand bowed to South African pressure and didn't include any Maoris in their teams going to South Africa, even though about half the rugby union team, ironically called the All Blacks, would usually be Maori. Vietnam was central in my political thinking. I still remember going to a lecture in 1963 where the speaker told us there was a place called Vietnam, and the Americans were getting increasingly involved in the civil war there, and this was going to be a major problem, as indeed it did become. My time in the United States, which I'll get to in a minute, began in 1965, as the Americans began their build-up of troops, and ended in 1975 just after they had all been evacuated and Vietnam was reunited. In terms of political consciousness, Vietnam was absolutely central.

At this same time, I began to have a rather callow and unfocussed interest in India. I had some sort of undergraduate interest in Buddhism, especially Zen, and I suppose my increasing interest in the Vietnamese resistance to colonialism led me to look at earlier examples, and especially India. So I read autobiographies of Gandhi, Nehru, etc. This was while I was finishing my MA, and once I finished that my choice was to become a high school teacher in New Zealand or see if I could manage to go overseas and do a Ph.D. somewhere. At that time, there was still a pronounced 'cultural cringe' in New Zealand. The only place worth going to was an English university, and preferably Oxford or Cambridge. Most of my peer group in the early 1960s went to England, and indeed there was quite a prejudice against American higher education. Nevertheless, I thought the US would be more interesting for me, and I wrote to four or five different American universities who offered Indian history for the Ph.D.. These letters were hand written, which shows how long ago this

was, or maybe how behind the times New Zealand was. One of my letters was to the University of Michigan, and it was read by a person called John Broomfield, who sent back a very positive reply. He turned out to be a fellow New Zealander who was beginning his own career as, at that time, a junior academic. Of course, I hadn't done any of the US qualifying tests such as GRE, so they really had no idea whether or not I would be capable of handling Ph.D. work at a prestigious place like the University of Michigan. So I went on a wing and prayer. They paid my fees, and gave me about \$500 worth of research work, and that was it for the first year. Luckily, I did well enough in the first year to get very generous financial support after that; that is from 1966. I was lucky in another way too. Broomfield was a specialist on modern Bengal, but before I left New Zealand, he told me that the area of modern Indian history was already rather over-populated. He suggested I think of looking at the early modern period, and more specifically think of using the Portuguese archives in Goa. He had been there the year before, that is 1964, just three years after Liberation, and he was sure these archives were a great untapped resource. So he encouraged me to learn Portuguese, and also Persian, so that I could handle whatever material there might be from the Indian side.

My then wife and I left New Zealand in August of 1965, and this was my first maritime experience. We travelled for three weeks from Auckland to Florida on quite a small ship with, I think, about 200 passengers and a lot of cargo. This was in fact just at the end of the time when one travelled by sea rather than air; I've never again done a long voyage by sea. The voyage was interesting in another way too, in that we stopped in Tahiti and Panama on the way. Tahiti was the first time I had been in a non-English-speaking country, and Panama was the first time I had seen real poverty—both places left a profound effect on me.

Once we got to Ann Arbor and the university, I started studying. My Portuguese language was now up to the level of efficient reading at least; Persian was a continuing battle, an enormously difficult language to learn, at least for me. At the time that I did my Ph.D. research I could struggle through a Persian chronicle with very great difficulty and constant reference to a dictionary; I was never able to read contemporary Persian documents. I can't claim any mastery or any competence in Persian. And what modest ability I had acquired in the late 1960s I could not keep up, so that today I would make no attempt to read anything in Persian. It's a language, like all others, where if you don't use it constantly you lose it.

*Did you find Michigan in any way different from your own university at Auckland? Who were the people who looked after your finances and logistics?* My supervisor was John Broomfield, but in fact when I arrived in Ann Arbor he was away in India, and my first teacher of Indian history was Peter Reeves, who filled in for Broomfield for two semesters. I was really lucky to have him as a teacher, and he remains a dear friend to this day, nearly forty years later. This was the American degree system, rather different from the British one that we had at Auckland. I had three years of course work and language training. Most of the course work was history, and I had four fields here: ancient India, modern India, British Empire and Southeast Asia, and at the end of that we had one or two written exams and then a two- or three-hour oral exam. This was an intimidating experience indeed: five professors grilling me orally for about three hours! But I passed, and then had two years overseas doing Ph.D. research and writing a first draft of the thesis. I had support from the University of Michigan and also from the Gulbenkian Foundation in Portugal, which was a very generous foundation indeed. I had a whole year in India, mostly in Goa but also in Baroda where I met Satish C. Misra. He was a wonderful friend and very, very helpful, and he made it possible for me to attend the Indian History Congress in 1968 at Bhagalpur. I did research in Baroda and a little bit in Delhi and I am more or less sure that there I met Om Prakash in 1969.

*What were your personal experiences in the archives in Goa and Lisbon?*

I was very lucky to be working in Goa in 1968–69. At that time, most Indian archives were much bureaucratized and very slow. This wasn't the case in Goa, where for nearly all the time I was the only person doing research. The Director at that time was V.T. Gune, who was a Maharastrian historian and therefore not very well liked by the local pro-Portuguese people. However, he left me alone, and even gave me a cup of tea each week. I was also privileged several times to meet P.S.S. Pissurlencar, who had been archivist under the Portuguese for thirty or forty years. He knew the archives intimately. He had long ago retired, but he gave me some excellent advice. He was dying of cancer at the time, and I had the melancholy privilege of attending his funeral also.

The archives at this time were in a Portuguese bungalow, single storeyed, with a veranda, which was where my desk was, and a garden outside where I used to wander around smoking from time to time. It was still very informal. I more or less had open access to all the bound documents. Then I had time in Baroda and Delhi, and late in 1969 I started eight months in

Lisbon, where I used most of the major Portuguese archives. Portugal at that time was a dictatorship, that is during 1969–70, and that was another new experience for me.

*What were you researching at that time in these archives?*

I was working on my Ph.D., which later became my *Merchants and Rulers in Gujarat* book, which was about Portuguese policies on the west coast of India, trade control and so on, and particularly the reaction of Indian rulers and merchants to Portuguese policies. I wrote a first draft of the thesis in Lisbon, and then had a little time in London. Around the middle of 1970, thanks entirely to my supervisor, John Broomfield, I landed a job at the University of Pennsylvania. My thesis was accepted in 1971, and after revision finally published in 1976. What I was trying to do in this book, and indeed in most of my later work, was to use European, especially Portuguese, documentation to write about the history of India, or indeed other Asian and even African areas in the early modern period. It was the sort of thing Ashin Das Gupta did so well for Surat. I never really considered myself to be a Portuguese colonial historian; rather I wanted to use Portuguese documents to write Indian history.

The central argument in *Merchants and Rulers* was that the Muslim rulers of Gujarat, firstly independent Sultans and then the Mughals, were almost entirely land-oriented and not really concerned about what happened on the sea. The fact that the Portuguese built forts on the coast of Gujarat at Diu, Daman and Bassein and taxed trade coming out of Cambay and Surat was not seen as a threat to the authority of the rulers of Gujarat, because their ethos and their attitudes were almost entirely based on land and what happened at sea was of no interest or concern. And I would certainly today modify this piece of juvenilia. As Om Prakash and also Van Santen have shown, it seems clear that the Mughals derived much more revenue from sea trade and customs duties and also took more interest in what was happening at sea than I allowed for in my first book. Indeed, on my first visit to Leiden, I think in the late 1970s, both Van Santen and Heesterman criticised me along these lines, saying that the disjunction I found between land and sea was drawn far too strictly.

*Did you find the academic atmosphere conducive at Pennsylvania, since Holden Furber was still there, someone who was very much involved in Companies' trade and maritime history, etc?*

Between 1970 and 1975, I taught at the University of Pennsylvania and I was in both the History Department and the South Asian Studies

Department there. The history department at that time was rebuilding and a young competitive department. There were about twelve of us who were assistant professors. This meant we were on fixed three-year contracts. Towards the end of the second contract you were evaluated for tenure by all the tenured professors, and only about one in four made it: a very ruthless system indeed! The South Asian department at that time had a large number of very senior scholars in most of the disciplines. One of them was Norman Brown, the very eminent Sanskritist, but the person with whom I had much more to do with was Holden Furber, and that was a unique privilege for me because I was at the beginning of my career and Holden was nearly at the end of his. He retired I think in 1973, and soon after that he finished his great book *Rival Empires of Trade in the Orient*. He was a very supportive colleague. He read my thesis and provided very useful comments. We taught together sometimes, and it was a real privilege to have such a senior scholar as a colleague, and indeed as a friend too.

*Didn't you seriously consider continuing at Pennsylvania?*

After a few years at Pennsylvania, my then wife and I began to think seriously about where we wanted our two young boys to grow up. Should it be Philadelphia, or would somewhere closer to home be better? We thought that New Zealand might be a bit 'slow' for us after all our travels, so I tried for jobs in Australia and finally got one at the University of South Wales, which I joined in 1975. I retired from there as professor of History in the middle of 2001.

*What were your main academic achievements at the University of South Wales?*

I did a few articles and book chapters which were offshoots from the large amount of research I had done for the thesis. They dealt with topics like piracy, corruption, Hindu seafarers and Indian participation in the Goan economy. Subsequently I revised some of these to make my second book, *Coastal Western India*, and Teotonio de Souza, an old and dear friend, was instrumental in that happening. I then got involved with Ashin Das Gupta in Indian Ocean matters. I first met Ashin when I was in America and he was passing through, as indeed did many others, including Om Prakash, for a great advantage of being at the University of Pennsylvania was that all the best Indian historians visited at one time or another. This was in the early 1970s, and we could see that there was a certain similarity in what we were trying to do, even though he used Dutch sources and

I was using Portuguese. He was beginning to establish Indian Ocean Studies at Vishvabharati University at Shantiniketan, and in the late 1970s he had a few people there to do a seminar on the Indian Ocean. Subsequently we worked together to produce the book called *India and the Indian Ocean from 1500 to 1800*. This was not so much based on new research as an attempt to say, 'Here is what we know about private English trade,' 'Here is what we know about the seventeenth century,' and so on. We hoped to sum up the field and perhaps show what else could be done. We had chronological chapters on the overall sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; we had one on Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean; Southeast Asia; East Africa; East Asia; we had one on the companies; two on private trade; and a charming one by A. Jan Qaisar on life on the sea. It was not purely a maritime history book because it was very much focused on India, and I don't think the book had any sense of the sea in it. It was mostly a book about trade and a large part of the maritime experience was not mentioned at all. In a way, I have subsequently tried to rectify these omissions.

Before that, however, I was asked to contribute to the very large project of the New Cambridge History of India. My brief was of course to write a book called *The Portuguese in India*. This was meant to be a very short book, and in a way, it's an essay, and certainly is not meant to be a complete coverage. I'll say a bit more about my attitudes towards colonialism later.

At about this same time I was asked to present the Heras Lectures at St Xavier's College in what was then Bombay. This invitation came from Fr. John Correia-Afonso, who was one of those courtly, worldly Jesuit scholars. I mentioned that my politics were mildly leftist. I'd read a bit of Marx, just as everyone did, and in particular had become interested in the world-system theories of Immanuel Wallerstein. I liked the way he tried to present a complete account of the recent history of the world from a neo-Marxist standpoint. In the 1970s and 1980s his work was very much on the scholarly agenda, though I suppose more recently the fad is cultural studies rather than Marx. So for the Heras lectures I presented a summary of his theory, and then critiqued it, and discussed how it could apply to the Indian Ocean area. So again I was moving a little closer to the sea! The lectures were published as *Before Colonialism*, a teleological title that I really shouldn't have used.

My next effort was to write a book about people travelling over the ocean for religious reasons, that is the hajj to Mecca. In a way this was a critique of Wallerstein, for I felt he doesn't give enough attention to the way people are not motivated only by economic factors. In one

fundamental way this was not a satisfactory book, as it used almost no Persian, Turkish or Arabic sources, except in translation. It was mostly based on various European sources. My understanding is that in fact there are very few indigenous sources for the early modern hajj, but even so there is a central problem with a book that discusses a matter which is so important and so central for Muslims and yet uses few Muslim sources. My main indigenous source was an unpublished work called *Anis-ul-Hujjaj*, which is a seventeenth-century account by an Indian Muslim pilgrim. Jan Qaisar at Aligarh Muslim University very kindly gave me a transcript and a rough translation of this. The author talks about the journey to Mecca, and what happened on the ship, so this was a very useful source for me. And despite the limitations, one of the reviewers said it was a very nice account from a sympathetic *farangi*, which I consider to be high praise.

This book had a rather strange history. It was called *Pious Passengers* and was published by Sterling in Delhi, but they sold it at the Frankfurt Book Fair to both an English and an American publisher. The English edition was the same as the Indian one, but the American edition was a major disappointment. It was called *Pilgrimage to Mecca: The Indian Experience*. The publisher was Markus Weiner in Princeton, and he insisted that the book be heavily edited. In itself, that was no problem, but there was no acknowledgement in the book that it was substantially the same as the previously published Indian version. The editor also took it upon himself to translate several short passages that I had left in French. He got most of these wrong and distorted the meaning badly. Finally, on the title page ‘Indian’ is spelt ‘Indan.’

*Your area of interest is well diversified, from Portuguese to pilgrims and then to medical practices and so on. What inspired you to write on the exchange of medical practices between Europe and India?*

I entered the medical area quite by chance. In the mid-1980s, I had become friendly with a very eminent paediatric neuro-surgeon in Australia, and he encouraged me to investigate contacts between Indian and Portuguese medicine in Goa. In fact, I have twice spoken at major medical conferences on such topics. In 1989 I was a visiting Professor of early modern history at the University of Minnesota, and one of the things I did there was to give a public lecture that was organised by the John Ford Bell Library, a wonderful library on Europeans in early modern Asia. This lecture was later published, and I’ve maintained, to an extent, my interest in this area. This is partly because my wife is a very experienced nurse and midwife; she is a big help in correcting at least some of my errors in the area of

medicine. I've published four articles or book chapters on aspects of medicine in early modern India, and all of these will be in a collection of my shorter work published in the Variorum series, to be called *The World of the Indian Ocean*. The next thing I worked on was East Africa and the Swahili coast. I must admit that this was partly because I wanted a chance to travel somewhere other than India: not that I will ever get tired of visiting India! Working there was also a chance to enlarge my knowledge of the shores of the Indian Ocean. I had a couple of research trips to the area, met various people there, and accumulated quite a lot of interesting material. Then someone I had known for some time, John Russell-Wood, out of the blue invited me to deliver the Schouler lectures at the Johns Hopkins University. This was really quite an honour, as my predecessors included Le Roy Ladurie, Charles Boxer and lots of other very eminent people. I took the opportunity to write up my African material, and the lectures later were revised and published as *Port Cities and Intruders*—which incidentally was not my choice of a title. The reviews were mixed, some good, others not. I did have a sense that some of the critical ones from established East Africanists were really complaining about my having the temerity to encroach on 'their' turf. In any case, people must have bought it, because to my surprise it had a paperback edition also.

*Your writings are often taken as Indo-centric and written from a very anti-colonial perspective. Why is this so?*

I mentioned in the beginning various things that I suppose in a way politicised me to some extent; white South African sporting tours and in particular the Vietnam war. I suppose this gave me a broad sympathy with anti-colonial struggles, and an opposition to western imperialism. This did flow into a sometimes-critical look at the activities of the Portuguese, though I am never as rough on them as they were themselves in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There are a host of complaints written at that time about corruption and other things. Unfortunately, my writings have sometimes not found favour in Portugal among some of the more traditional scholars, who grew up in the dictatorship period (which ended only in 1974) when the notion of a civilising Portuguese mission was very much part of the prevailing ideology. Even today there still is an attitude among some Portuguese scholars that 'After all, we weren't as bad as the others,' meaning other colonial powers. But I certainly don't include all my Portuguese friends in this category of tacit apologists for their country's history. And if I were to write on any other colonial power I imagine my attitude would be the same!

*Why are you so much interested in the sea and maritime history? Have you often been to sea and been observing the coastlines, that fascinated you so much?*

I've shown as I've been talking how my interest gradually became more and more focused on the sea. A group in Western Australia, especially Peter Reeves and Ken McPherson, and also a Dutch scholar called Frank Broeze, helped this. They organised various conferences, large international ones, and McPherson set up an Indian Ocean Centre, which went through various manifestations and now has been closed down by an unsympathetic university administration. So this kept my interest in maritime history alive. On the other hand, I have very seldom travelled by sea, and I'm certainly no sailor. As I mentioned earlier, my first trip out of New Zealand was by sea to the US. In 1969, I travelled by sea from England to Portugal. I've done the ferry from Mumbai to Panaji several times, and short offshore trips in dhows in East Africa and small boats on the coast of Goa. But this is hardly a nautical experience. The only other first-hand sea experience I have is that I now live north of Sydney in a house right on the beachfront! In short, while I had written on aspects of the Indian Ocean, it was not my central concern. Then yet another invitation appeared.

*Your last book, *The Indian Ocean*, is an ambitious work and has been received largely with applause, but also with criticism. I think it deserves a rather detailed introduction here.*

There is a series from Routledge called *Seas in History*. Its general editor is Geoffrey Scammell, a retired early modern historian at Cambridge whom I've met at various Portuguese-oriented seminars and conferences. Before mine two volumes in this series had been published, one on the Atlantic, and one on the Baltic and North Seas. Geoffrey asked Ashin Das Gupta to undertake the Indian Ocean book, but soon after that Ashin was struck by a very debilitating disease, which he died of, and that was the tragic end of a good friend and a wonderful historian. Scammell then asked me to consider taking it up. I did not have anything really important on my desk at that time, and I also realised that a lot of my publications had a strong maritime element anyway, as I've already mentioned. The requirement was to do a very broad overview with a text limit of about 150,000 words. I felt that I had a good background in the early modern period, particularly on the Arabian Sea side. For the earlier period, and the period after 1800, I read very widely in secondary work. I also read masses of first-hand travel accounts. I was lucky here, as in the Fall of 2000 I was Vasco da Gama

professor at Brown University. I had almost no teaching, so I could use excellent libraries at Brown, and also at Yale University and New York. I quoted these travellers extensively in the book, partly to make it more readable, but more because that way I hoped to get a bit of ozone into my work, to give some sense of what it was like to travel by sea at different times. The other guiding principle was to try and write an amphibious history, one that moved easily between land and sea.

I felt that most of the more recent books on the Indian Ocean were far too much concerned with trade, to the exclusion of other matters, and especially religion. And I felt they gave no impression of an actual nautical experience. Certainly, I would include the book Ashin Das Gupta and I edited in this category, as well as the very fine work by another dear friend, Sinnappah Arasaratnam. As to earlier histories of the ocean, the French scholar Toussaint's book seemed to me rather jumbled, and with far too much attention to land matters which had nothing to do with the ocean. Ken McPherson's book on the Indian Ocean was a fine synthesis, showing an impressive command of the secondary literature. But it was a bit pedestrian, with no hint of the actual maritime experience, as people have lived it over history.

The Indian Ocean is a vast and old body of water and, obviously, I could not hope to be comprehensive. My original text was about 240,000 words, but the publishers quite correctly insisted it be cut down to the specified word limit. This does mean there are gaps, especially on the Bay of Bengal side, and for the earliest period. Some of the reviews have pointed to important matters which I either ignored or covered cursorily; sometimes I have to plead my word limit, but at other times I have to admit ignorance.

I started the book with a discussion of maritime history in general, and deep structural elements in the Indian Ocean. My debt to Braudel, and to another, recent, book on the Mediterranean by Horden and Purcell, is clear. One of the themes, which is scattered through the book, is a discussion of whether in fact there is such a thing as an Indian Ocean, something that can be treated as some sort of unit, which is capable of being analysed historically, just like, say, the history of a town or a modern state. I tried to show how people on the coasts related to the ocean, and the extent to which affairs in the hinterland affected sea matters. And I spent probably more time on people travelling over the ocean for religious reasons than I did on traders. Naval battles got very minimal coverage indeed.

One of my themes is that for about 1,000 years, from say 750 to 1750, one of the strongest connections across the ocean was Islam. Most of the people on the coasts, who were my main interest, were converted. Conversion itself is a major theme in the book, for I see it as a process rather than an event. It takes time, maybe generations, for a person to reach close to normative Islam. And travelling Muslim scholars were important here, both in making the initial change, and then reinforcing it and trying to get rid of pre-Islamic practice. Ibn Battuta, whose wonderful travel account I used extensively, is a good example of this. He had done the hajj, he had met great *ulema* in Mecca and Medina and elsewhere, and this meant he felt capable of commenting on Muslim practice around the shores of the ocean.

The book is also really an attempt at writing World History, that is a history which is not bounded by states and political borders. In fact, this sort of history now has more appeal to me than does World-System theory, even though I still very much admire Wallerstein's totalising ambitions. The book has had a few reviews already. There is a Roundtable discussion in the *International Journal of Maritime History*, with a reply by me. It is disappointing that most of the reviews have not really addressed my discussions of maritime history as a field, but rather have commented on gaps related to their own specialties. However, I may sometime later attempt to write more specifically about the problems of writing a history of an ocean, and if I do this I will also address some of the criticisms of my book.

*Apart from research, in which you made enormous contributions to the academia of the Indian Ocean world, what other engagements did you have?*

I retired from the University of New South Wales in the middle of 2001, and I really had thought that once I finished the Indian Ocean book I would find completely non-academic ways to spend my time. However, instead I became part of a research project called 'Culture and Commerce in the Indian Ocean' with two colleagues from the University of Technology in Sydney. This means I am working more or less half time on scholarly matters, and spend the rest of my time in various community activities in the little coastal village where I live. The research grant means I can travel a little, to conferences and for research. It's an ideal life really, as I don't have to do the parts of an academic job that I had got tired of: committee meetings, marking vast quantities of undergraduate essays etc.

*What is your message to the young scholars who are working not exactly on maritime history but on trade history?*

The VOC archives I don't know at all but I am sure they have not been exhausted. The Australian scholar Bob Elson said he was the first person to use many of the documents he found in The Hague, when he was researching his excellent book on the Cultivation System. My impression is that a large amount of work is still to be done in the archives here (in The Hague) and most of the Portuguese archives. There is a mass of material in different libraries and archives in Portugal. The big gap probably is the eighteenth century that has not been that much worked on, and I know there is massive Portuguese documentation both in Lisbon and in Goa.

I would certainly expect people to be asking the right kinds of questions of the documents and not just summarising what these have to say about the past. It's best to go in with a problem, and use the documents to solve it. The Indian Ocean Project, which I am part of, is concerned to use a Cultural Studies approach to the history of the Indian Ocean. Here is the official description: the project examines trade cultures in a region which was the hub of the major world economic system in the pre-colonial period, and is now restrengthening. It thus links the earliest global system with current globalisation studies, giving those analyses historical depth. It is the first cultural studies project in Indian Ocean studies, and it aims to match new theory to the empirical diversity of the region, analysing the way cultural forces add value to commodities, while creating diverse forms of transnational culture and identity. The project will make major contributions to cultural/historical and post-colonial thought, with the potential to create a new field of study. The project has room for new researchers, and is in partnership with the Asia Research Institute in Singapore for the planning of an international conference in 2006.

So far my own work has not been in this sort of area at all, but I am sure that this approach could provide new, exciting and very different work on colonial history as well as maritime history.

*Which aspects of history do you think can be unearthed from these documents?*

It seems to me that there is still a lot to be done on the social history of the Europeans in Batavia, in Goa and in many other places also. Urban history has also been largely ignored, and researchers here could work with historical archaeologists to establish site plans and so on. I think conversion is constantly interesting, that is especially to see it as a process rather than an event, as I mentioned above. Comparison would be interesting here too: both between, say, the Portuguese and the Dutch,

and then looking at different successes in different areas. There is a huge ongoing series called 'Asia in the Making of Europe' and I imagine that it would be very interesting to do a variant of this and write on the influence the returned VOC people had on life in the Netherlands: what was the life style of the people who returned to their mother country after a few years' service in Asia, what role did they play in politics, society, the economy, and things like that.

I think it would also be very useful, especially for doing social history, to have some background in social anthropology and in the theoretical work that talks about clashes of culture, and culture contact generally. There is a very good collection from a conference at the University of Minnesota called *Clashes of Culture*, edited by Stuart Schwartz, and this gives some idea of what can be done. There is material in the Goa archives in an early version of Konkani, and in theory at least I think it would be possible to take an area of land in Goa, just a few hectares, and trace its history and possibly even its use, over even five centuries. This would be an incredible thing to do. As for diplomatic history, I am not really interested in this, but that is not to say that people could not do some interesting work on this. I think the interaction between Dutch, English and Portuguese in, say, the Gulf of Aden or Mocha or Jedda or with the Ottomans could be very interesting.

We still don't know much about Portuguese activities in Southeast Asia, in Thailand, Vietnam, Burma, etc. Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Luis Filipe Thomaz put forward the idea that the Portuguese had grandiose ideas of conquering large parts of Southeast Asia, which I find very improbable, but that is something that probably could be investigated more. There were some thousands of Portuguese adventurers or mercenaries operating in the Bay of Bengal. Most of them were peaceful traders, but some of them for a while became successful pirates and even were able to establish quite large areas of influence. We need to know much more about these people. However, Sanjay Subrahmanyam and George Winius to the contrary, their presence did not in any sense constitute an 'empire.'

I envy younger people starting off to do research on the early period of interaction between Europeans and Asians. We have some benchmarks now, or what could be called 'foundational studies,' but there are endless possibilities to do new and innovative work. It's challenging no doubt, both in terms of the language skills needed (which of course should include European and Asian languages where appropriate) and the need to use 'theory' of one sort or another to avoid writing history which is antiquarian, or which does not address general historical processes which

are of interest to our discipline generally. We need to be able to talk to scholars working in related, but different, areas. I read lots of histories of oceans and seas as I prepared to write my Indian Ocean book; similarly, we must avoid being parochial, and rather try to look at related work from other areas. Just one example of this would be the series by Jonathan Hart on imperialism. I would like to close by wishing all those embarking on research in either the colonial or maritime field: 'Bon Voyage.'



## Why Is China So Big? And Other Big Questions: Interview with John E. Wills, Jr.

*John E. Wills, Jr., Jack Wills to all his friends and colleagues, was born in 1936. He completed a BA in Philosophy at the University of Illinois in 1956, and went on for an MA in East Asian Regional Studies, 1960, and a Ph.D. in History and Far Eastern Languages in 1967, both at Harvard University. He taught history at the University of Southern California from 1965 to 2004, and now is Professor Emeritus. He lives in the Los Angeles area and has five grown-up children, seven grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren. This academic year he is a Visiting Scholar at Leiden University. Hendrik Niemeijer and Frans-Paul van der Putten met him in Amsterdam.*

So how did I come out of the Midwest, 1,000 miles from salt water, and get involved in maritime history and the history of China? My particular slice of middle America had a number of kinds of latent cosmopolitanism. Our big state universities were and are very open-ended mixes of different kinds of education: business, the arts, the humanities, technology. The one that shaped me, the University of Illinois, was the dominant presence in a small city—30,000 students in a town of 70,000. My father was a professor of agricultural economics. After World War II the world came to America, especially to the applied faculties of our universities, in search of the secrets of modernization, very much including their agricultural sectors. My father had graduate students from India, Iran and South Africa. In the general conformism of 1950s America, my high school was remarkably tolerant and hospitable to creativity and intellectual ambition. I was an undergraduate philosophy major at Illinois, and have never stopped reading philosophy, but never had the right temperament for professional philosophy. At Illinois I met my future wife, a history major, whose links to history now are a fascination with vernacular architecture, especially in the old Dutch towns, and real involvement in genealogical research, which has led to a lot of volunteer library work.

In 1956–58 I did my military service in San Antonio, Texas. I found in an Army post library Harold Isaacs' *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*, about the Communists and the Kuomintang in the 1920s. Then I found

a not very good translation of the Analects of Confucius. Certainly I was moved by Isaacs' passionate account of terrible events obviously important in the shaping of our world, but I think the impact of Confucius was more fundamental. I could not have spent my adult life studying a people whose high culture was obsessed by God or life after death. I had been raised in an environment where organized religion was an option but not central to the way you thought and lived your life.

So how could I go on to learn more about China? The answer came from the American foreign policy establishment. The attacks of McCarthy and his allies on experts on China had the effect that few people wanted to go into the field, and the country was short of specialists on almost every area of Asia. First the Ford Foundation and then the federal government offered fellowships to anyone who would study Chinese, Japanese, Arabic or a few other weird languages in graduate school. In 1958 we got married and I enrolled in an MA program in East Asian Regional Studies at Harvard.

*So China was an attraction because of a more secular mind-set?*

Confucius has said, 'We don't yet know about life, how can we know about death?' [*Analects*, XI, 12]. That doesn't mean that there is no hereafter, but that how to live is more important. In the longer run, I can't think of a better starting point than China for thinking about the transformations of our own times and contributing to this strange new trend we call 'world history.'

*Talking about Confucius, at your age you must have heard and submitted already to the Decree of Heaven. At 70, Confucius said, you can follow your heart's desire without overstepping the bounds [*Analects*, II, 4]. Was it your academic heart's desire to compose such an original work as 1688: A Global History?*

My dissertation on the Dutch East India Company and China, finished in 1967, ran to over 700 pages. In the US we don't publish dissertations as accepted as you do in the Netherlands, but spend years improving and revising the darn things and then finding a press, hopefully a good university press, that will publish the monograph. It was at that point that my doctoral mentor, John King Fairbank, told me that Harvard University Press wasn't looking at 700-page typescripts any more, and asked me to give them no more than 450. So I knocked out the 1680s and the two embassies to Beijing, and the rest became my first book. I published the embassy studies together with two Portuguese embassies in

1984 as *Embassies and Illusions*. This left a third book on the 1680s still to be published. Things I had to know something about for the 1680s book—not just China but the British in India, the Dutch in what is now Indonesia, Jesuits pretty much everywhere—started me accumulating notes on different parts of the world all in one year. I really wanted to do 1687 or 1689 so that I wouldn't have to try to write something sensible about the Glorious Revolution of 1688 in England, but there were a few stories, perhaps most of all the fall of Constantine Phaulkon in Siam, that made 1688 irresistible. My original title was *1688: A World History*. Steve Forman, my excellent editor at W.W. Norton, suggested 'global' in place of 'world.' This nicely raises the flag for all our talk pro and con about globalization. Many of the short pieces in the book are about surprising connections among different parts of the world. There also is an implicit comparative theme, which I'm not terribly surprised that no one has noticed, of the different modes of state-making and political culture within Europe—Golden Age Holland, Restoration England, the France of Louis XIV—and outside, especially in the great empires, Qing, Mughal and Ottoman, and in Japan. The chapters about the Dutch East India Company even fit in here, as one of the more international, highly developed examples of mercantilist state-building. And your work [Niemeijer, *Batavia: Een Koloniale Samenleving in the 17e Eeuw*, 2005] fits in here wonderfully, showing from above and below the transformations of Batavia and its environs by commerce and capitalist agriculture.

*Who stimulated you to study seventeenth-century China?*

Beats me. The whole ethos of the Fairbank Ph.D. program was that there were so many important things to figure out about China that each of us ought to find something that no one had really worked on before. But both there and in the study of pre-modern foreign relations it got pretty lonely with no one to talk to. Part of what interested me was the theme of center-regional relations and the ways in which the possibilities of the regions to mobilize themselves and pull away from the center were limited. The Ming–Qing transition of course was the last great case of this in pre-modern China. Here I finally found people to talk to, at a wonderful conference that led to the publication of *From Ming to Ch'ing*, which I edited with Jonathan Spence and for which I wrote an article taking maritime Fujian as my case study. I still find people to talk to in the new millennium, have a follow-up essay out in a conference volume edited by Lynn Struve, and am finding ways to link this emphasis on the

center and periphery back to my studies of foreign relations; it makes a huge difference to those relations that China is so big.

*So what were the forces at work in the Ming–Qing transition?*

What I show in both my essays is that in many ways, not all of them obvious, the Manchus made a difference. We can see interactions among different provincial power holders, such as princes of the imperial house, adventurers and people who rose through the examination system—and that example, by the way, comes right out of the Dutch Company archives and is in my first book! Within the existing Qing structure people found ways to promote themselves, and continued to work within it. I'm still happy to spend a lot of time on the history of political action. I know there are lots of other important things to study, but I think human commitment and contingency come through in such dramatic ways here.

*Does that connect to another one of your books, *Mountain of Fame*? Why did you decide to write a collection of biographies on major Chinese historical figures covering a period of more than 4,000 years?*

The book is the result of the worries about political culture we've been discussing and of teaching. The thread of political culture that runs all through the book is the many transformations of the ruler-minister relation, and the moral mystique of the ministerial role. This already is apparent in the traditional life story of Confucius. Then it's enormously helpful for our understanding of the wrenching changes of twentieth century China to see, about 1898–1911, a lot of very smart people saying 'Look, this isn't working any more,' and seeking instead some form of the solidarity of the citizens of a nation. The concept of the book is very Chinese, with its focus on stories of ordinary mortals, heroes, sages, villains. Chinese friends jump right into the discussion when you ask them, for example, whom they would take as a representative figure from the Northern Song (960–1125).

*Is there one person you feel particularly attracted to?*

Su Dongpo, from the Northern Song. He had a great deal of interest in Buddhism, especially when he was convicted for opposing the emperor's policies and sent into internal exile. But more fundamentally he was interested in human feelings and connections as they're expressed in literature, and also how to be a good and effective person who accomplished something. When he was the magistrate at Hangzhou he supervised the

building of dikes along one side of West Lake to control the flood waters; you still can walk on 'Mr. Su's Dike.'

*But here we are interviewing you not for a Chinese studies journal but for Itinerario. You have also been very much involved in the 'overseas history' field.*

Yes, and here early and late there has been a thin but world-wide network of wonderful human connections. I first met Charles Boxer in 1963 or 1964 when he gave some lectures at Harvard, and my wife and I saw him one last time in 1994, when he had just passed 90, was very frail but still full of ideas and books read. Bailey Diffie taught off and on in the USC Department after his retirement, and I visited him and his wife at the lovely country house at Santiago de Cacem south of Lisbon. Ts'ao Yung-ho befriended me and advised me in Taipei when he was still a librarian and not yet a famous Academician. But the first memories are of the morning and afternoon coffee gang in the canteen of the old Algemeen Rijksarchief on the Bleijenburg in 1963–64: Om Prakash, Kwame Daaku, John Fynn. Each of us, I think, saw a specialist or two about our eyestrain problems reading the old Dutch manuscripts in the imperfect light of the reading room. But we also shared our sense of amazed discovery; I remember John Fynn looking up in amazement from a map that gave unique clues to the locations of some peoples in the interior of West Africa. And of course upstairs, doing her work and always accessible for our questions, was Prof. M.A.P. Meilink-Roelofs. I saw Om again in Delhi, at a Vasco da Gama quincentennial conference in Australia, and at the VOC conference in 2003. Kwame, I understand, died young in the service of Clio, promoting oral history in odd and septic corners of Africa. When I finally got a chance to go to Ghana and see Castle Elmina in 1999, I spent a few very pleasant hours with John Fynn.

And then there was the very tall, skinny young Dutchman who turned up on our fourth-floor doorstep in Taipei in 1972, waving an air letter and saying 'Boxer said I have to come find you': Leonard Blussé. I can't count the intersections on several continents or in several fields of common interest. It also was on a Sunday sail on Leonard's extremely slow boat in 1980 that I met Dhiravat na Pombeira, who in 1999 dropped everything and took me to Lopburi, making an important contribution to 1688, and in 2004 helped me identify a Siamese seal on a photo of a document from the Beijing archives. And this year I have an office on the corridor in the Leiden Department that is the world vortex of 'overseas history.' Pieter Emmer, Femme Gaastra, Henk den Heijer, Henk Niemeijer and Peer

Vries, perhaps not quite in the field but very important for its interpretative challenges.

The coffee gang of 1963–64 were glad to find each other to talk to, but we didn't have much sense that we were part of something bigger. *Itinerario* was part of the growth of the field, and you can trace a lot of it in its pages. In the late 1980s I saw a lot happening, and a lot of historians not being aware of it. A first draft of a review article had three books listed at its head. Several years later, after quite a bit of fumbling and development, my 'Maritime Asia' review article appeared in the *American Historical Review* with over twenty books listed at the head. Things certainly haven't slowed down since then. It's quite an experience to be around the TANAP students, where everyone is as convinced as I am of the importance of the history of maritime Asia!

*You mentioned trips to Ghana, Thailand, and Australia. Is visiting places important for your work as an historian?*

Certainly, and a key personal pleasure as well. I didn't travel outside the US as I was growing up, but saw a lot of the American west with my parents, and have always had an itchy foot. Most of my traveling has been more or less 'in line of duty', surveying archives and sightseeing on the weekends. A first set of Asian adventures in 1973 took me to the Dominican archives in Manila, the Arsip Nasional in Jakarta, the Tamil Nadu Archives, the Historical Archive in Goa, and others. I have learned a lot from archives and personal connections in Portugal, and my wife and I are very fond of Lisbon. In 1979, after 21 years in Chinese studies, I finally got to mainland China with a delegation of Ming-Qing historians led by Frederic Wakeman. In 1997 my visit to Australia led to 1688-related visits to the Dampier Peninsula in the far northwest of the country and to Bali and Ambon in Indonesia. And in 2004 I had a first visit to Vietnam, with some work in the excellent Han Norn Institute and a chance to get a sense of a society very much on the move despite the authoritarian government; Hanoi reminded me a lot of Taipei in the 1970s.

*Did you ever get into disputes with other historians?*

Not really. For a long time no one was much interested in pre-modern foreign relations. I've written my share of negative reviews of second- and third-rate books, but I don't think I've ever had a counter-blast from an author.

*What do you think of today's academic climate?*

It has gotten much too hard to get started as a young historian. Universities are over-producing Ph.D.s without a shred of worry about whether the degree opens up a door to an academic career. Even if you get a 'real job,' the requirements before tenure are ever more rigid: a book published, and often more signs of continuing 'productivity,' while the university presses are cutting back on publishing monographs. Do we go to too many conferences? Probably, but Chinese studies have profited a great deal from them. Interaction at article length can get synergies going among scholars a lot faster than waiting for each other's books.

One of the reasons I'm glad to be retired is that I was increasingly uneasy about recruiting young people into a Ph.D. program in the face of the uncertain futures even for the best of them. Another was that I was fed up with the status anxiety that is so prevalent in American academe. About a hundred American universities aspire to be in the inner circle, the top twenty. A few do improve their relative standing, but at the cost of not doing anything different from those who already are in the circle. But the Dutch, British and German systems now strike me as no better, and as in some ways having deeper systematic problems. A few days ago I saw Peer Vries doing a pile of photocopying. Knowing the range of his interests, imagine how much of this he has to do! In the US the Department has work-study students who help with such things. The American system doesn't give an almost free ride to the upper-class student whose parents could afford to pay for his or her education. Students who do need financial assistance get a package—a grant, a loan, a job as one of those work-study students. So getting stuff copied becomes a small example of a system that is more equitable than the European. The European low-cost higher education on balance often is a net income transfer to the more affluent.

*Do you see any similarities in Sino-Western relations today and in the seventeenth century?*

I think there is a tendency among European and American policy-makers, especially American and especially the current batch, to think that there ought to be clear and straightforward basic principles in foreign policy. That is what made some of them so optimistic about the transition from dictatorship in Iraq. There's no such straightforwardness in relations with China. Human rights and the rights of minority nationalities will remain issues. But in fact we all seem to take a many-sided approach. It's right that Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and the Free Tibet movement keep the pressure on China, but there also are excellent reasons

for maintaining positive relations with the Chinese government. A stable China that sees its interest in stable relations with the rest of the world is in everyone's interest.

The Chinese elite is changing in ways that make such relations possible. Thirty years ago the old guys never really retired, but remained the ultimate decision makers. Now you see ambitious and pragmatic younger people leading many organizations and calling the shots on many issues. But not on Taiwan. No one can get very far from 'Taiwan is part of China.' There is little realistic sense of how Taiwan has grown away from China. It helps to go there, and see how people, whether of Taiwanese or 'mainlander' origin, have become comfortable with being there. Who knows what will happen if and when more mainland officials and opinion-shapers get to visit Taiwan? China is trying to lure Taiwan with opportunities to invest, and is having some success. But the Taiwan political establishment isn't very mature, and politicians tend to seek votes by making strong statements that they know will offend the Chinese leaders. So the whole darn thing remains very dangerous.

I'm still trying to make a contribution to some of this discussion of China's foreign relations by looking at pre-modern Chinese foreign relations and asking if there may be echoes or structural similarities in the way China deals with the world today. For many years I've been trying to argue that the 'tribute system' is not a very useful master concept for understanding pre-modern Chinese foreign relations. But one of my best statements on this was in my book about Dutch and Portuguese tribute embassies, and no one seems to have noticed very much. More recently I've been interested in the eighteenth-century relations between the Qing and Annam, which got the name Vietnam in the course of these relations; very interesting stuff, in which the institution of the tribute embassy really was quite useful. But in trying to build a broader framework I turn back to my ideas about Chinese political culture and why China is so big. Maintaining internal unity was the main goal of China's rulers. Foreign adventures or entanglements with foreigners could threaten that unity. So there was a wariness of foreign contacts, a general tendency to defensiveness. Does that persist in any way today? I really don't know, and the specialists on contemporary Chinese foreign relations don't agree. But certainly China's bigness continues to shape its relations with the rest of us, sometimes in confidence in their ability to take a long view, sometimes in frustration at the limits of their power.

*You seem pretty busy for someone who's retired. What brought you to the Netherlands this year?*

Leonard Blussé had been after me for years to come talk to the TANAP students or get more involved in some way. When he knew that I had retired and that he and his wife Madelon de Keizer were going to Harvard this year, he made me an offer I couldn't refuse: a loose visiting association with the Leiden History Department, helping out where I could with the TANAP Ph.D. students, and a place to live, their house in Amsterdam with Leonard's amazing private library. Then I added a short course for Leiden MA level students on the new big books in 'world history'. This was a very impressive group of students, and their responses to the books were very instructive. They were particularly taken with John R. McNeill's *Something New Under the Sun*, an environmental history of the twentieth-century world. Clearly they see these big environmental problems as the policy challenges of their adult lives. I literally sat there open-mouthed as they all jumped in to argue about all the issues.

And I've been very much impressed with the TANAP students and with the way the program has developed dialogues among young historians whose homes range from Japan to South Africa, who if they were ordinary members of the historical profession in their home countries would never have much to do with each other. This became especially clear to me at one of our Wednesday evening seminars when a student from Vietnam talked about the geography of the port area from Hanoi down to the river mouth; pretty soon everyone was jumping in wanting to talk about the rivers of Gujarat, of Siam, and so on.

*And you have some research, projects for this year? What's all this about opium?*

For thousands of years people had taken opium by mouth. Around 1670 they started smoking the stuff, at first mixed with tobacco; you have some of the key citations in your Batavia. The greater addictiveness of inhaling makes this a change of world-historical importance. But it's a long way from smoking opium mixed with tobacco to the vaporizing and inhaling of pure opium, and at the moment I'm not getting very far with that project. The one that is getting somewhere is a study of a batch of seventeenth-century Dutch books about distant areas of the world all by one author, Olfert Dapper. I'm interested both in their contribution to a European sense of a wider world and in the information they contain, some of which can be found nowhere else. And working on this in the superb libraries of Amsterdam and Leiden and picking the brains of the experts on book history and Golden Age Amsterdam are great fun.

*So you certainly seem to be enjoying your work as a historian. Do you have any advice for young people who might be attracted by the intellectual rewards despite what you say about the difficulties of getting started?*

Actually I think in some crucial personal dimensions young scholars today are making more sensible decisions than most of my generation did. Many of us married young, had children early, and struggled forever after with the competing demands of marriage, parenthood and ‘my beautiful career.’ Now I see in general later marriages and very frequently first a book and tenure and then a baby; I just learned of another case last week. I’m less sure about the commitment of a younger generation to contributing to the nonacademic cultural life or the ‘public sphere.’ My mentor John Fairbank devoted a great deal of time to writing for the general public, as did quite a few of the Harvard faculty of that generation. So did Erik Zürcher at Leiden. Perhaps my generation was more content to seek academic success and to assume that somehow the knowledge we elaborated would ‘trickle down’ to the general public. Now? I don’t know. Some younger scholars are deeply involved in some pretty esoteric sub-discourses in Chinese studies and in history in general. But there also is a lot of extra-academic political and cultural involvement in the younger generation. All I can say is we have to worry about the public sphere; it’s a big mess in the US, and only marginally better in Western Europe.

# Slavery, Migration and the Atlantic World: Interview with Piet Emmer

*Professor P.C. (Piet) Emmer studied history, and earned his Ph.D. at the University of Amsterdam in 1974. He has written and edited several books on the history of the Atlantic world, Dutch colonial slavery and migration history, including The Dutch Slave Trade, 1500–1850 (2000), The Dutch in the Atlantic Economy (1998) and The General History of the Caribbean (1999). Professor Emmer has held a chair in the History of European Expansion and Migration History at Leiden University since 1991, has served as a visiting professor at the University of Texas at Austin, and was appointed a member of the European Academy of Sciences (Academia Europaea) in 2004. This semester Damian Alan Pargas caught up with him in his office in Leiden.*

*Professor Emmer, you've had a long and distinguished career as a historian of the Atlantic world, colonial slavery and global migration. How did you become interested in these interrelated fields?*

First of all, I think I should object to the word 'distinguished.' It has been a long career, but whether or not it's distinguished remains to be seen! Anyway, the answer to your question is very simple, banal really. As a graduate student, I was asked by my advisor to write a Master's thesis on a Dutch slaving voyage, and it all started from there. There is a wonderful archive on the Dutch trade, and more specifically the slave trade, in the Atlantic in Middleburg, Zeeland. The archive of a Middleburg-based trading and slaving company has remained complete, and you could actually follow the actions of the individual captains, of the Company's directors, etc, from year to year. And studying the slave trade, it was virtually impossible not to look into what happened with the slaves—and that led to the study of slavery itself. Then, after the abolition of the slave trade and the abolition of slavery, other migration streams take over. All that followed from this one MA thesis on the history of the last official Dutch slaving voyage.

*Your Ph.D. research was also on the Dutch slave trade?*

Well, it was more specifically on the ending of the Dutch slave trade, and the effects of the ending of the slave trade on the economy of the Netherlands, as well as those sections of the African coast where the Dutch had the most contact, and of course the effects on the receiving end—the Dutch colonies in the Caribbean.<sup>1</sup>

*Why do you think there was no large abolition movement in the Netherlands, like there was in Britain or the United States?*

I think we should rephrase the question and ask ourselves why was the abolition movement in the UK and in the US so popular. My feeling is that the Dutch case was much more normal. In the Netherlands, the experts mainly discussed colonial matters. What's remarkable is that in Britain the ending of the slave trade and slave emancipation became a hotly debated issue, among people who'd never seen a slave, never seen the slave trade in operation. It's possible that they'd seen empty slave ships in port, but what happened on the Middle Passage and on the plantations was something that most abolitionists only learned about by reading pamphlets and other literature. I think the amazing thing is that people became interested in this topic and that they united their indignation on a social basis, and that this resulted in a mass movement that became instrumental in abolishing the slave trade and slavery—both of which were still very viable economic institutions.

Obviously, if the slave trade and slavery had not been profitable, it would have been far easier to abolish them. Normal practice at the time dictated that the market would take care of everything. If the slave trade and slavery were losing propositions, private entrepreneurs would stop investing in it, and that would be the end of it. And, of course, that is not what happened. Even at the height of the abolition debate, the slave trade was still growing and so were the number of slaves. And in spite of all the evidence suggesting that it was profitable, in spite of the fact that slave prices kept rising—which is an excellent indicator of the viability of the slave trade and of slavery—in spite of those indications, it was abolished for political and ethical reasons. Only after Britain had abolished the slave trade and slavery in its own colonies did economics dictated the interest of Britain in abolishing the slave trade and slavery elsewhere in order to prevent unfair competition with its own ex-slaveholding colonies.

*Your book, *The Dutch Slave Trade (De Nederlandse Slavenhandel, 1500–1850)*, was published in 2000 and received a lot of publicity.<sup>2</sup> What was your*

*motivation in undertaking that research and how did your interpretations compare with earlier works on the slave trade?*

Well, in fact that book was the result of many years of research and study, in addition to reading the works of other historians of the slave trade and slavery in the Anglo-Saxon world, France, Spain and Portugal. During the past forty years, there has been no historical field with so many rapid developments in quantitative, social, economic and anthropological approaches as the study of the slave trade and slavery. I tried to do justice to these studies, and in many ways my book reflects the international debates and the results of the international research providing more accurate data. I combined that with my own research on the Dutch slave trade and on slavery and abolition in the Dutch colonial world.

The fact that there was so much upheaval when the book was published had to do with the fact that, of course, the Dutch readership at large had not been aware of these international developments and of the course that the international debate was taking. I think that one of the issues that sparked a lot of interest—and sometimes indignation—was my insistence on the fact that the ending of both the slave trade and slavery was not caused by economic factors, but by ethical motives. That is not always easy to accept. Another issue was the fact that slaves taken from Africa and sent to any of the plantation sectors of the Americas—particularly North America but also the Caribbean or Brazil—were not necessarily worse off in economic terms than if they had remained in Africa. Actually, it seems that all immigrants who went to the New World, be they forced or free, were usually able to increase their standard of living. That was important in a world where people were chronically undernourished and frequently died of starvation in Europe, Africa and Asia. Those results—which were not of my own research alone, but of that of a whole range of researchers—seem to have come as something of a shock to some readers in the Netherlands.

*What were the prevailing views on Dutch slavery and colonial history when you began your career?*

Well, in many ways, because of the limited number of monographs and articles on the volume of the Dutch slave trade and on the nature of slavery in the Dutch colonies, there was very much the same feeling here that prevailed in the Anglo-Saxon world—especially before the 1970s, when Fogel and Engerman's *Time on the Cross* sparked a revolution in slavery studies.<sup>3</sup> And that was that slavery and the slave trade were institutions that were not very economically sound, that these were institutions designed

to degrade Africans, and that the tremendous profits that had been made by the slave trade and slavery were instrumental in making the West rich. Those were the prevailing views in the 1950s and 1960s, and in Holland they continued to exist much longer than in the Anglo-Saxon world.

And in Holland the larger debate about whether colonialism was good or bad also continued much longer than in the neighbouring ex-colonial powers such as the UK or France. When I first started to specialise in this field of history, the general view was still that colonialism was ‘a good thing.’ That view was mainly advanced by former colonial civil servants and, I guess you could say, the ‘colonial lobby’ in the Netherlands. In spite of the difficult decolonisation of the Dutch East Indies, they continued to insist that colonialism was beneficial for all concerned. In the same period, however, the public aversion against the Dutch colonial past increased and in the late 1960s and 1970s the advocates of decolonisation and independence were becoming much more vocal. I personally think that it is a stifling debate, and not very conducive to historical research, but that was the state of affairs when I finished my Ph.D. dissertation. After my book was published, I received some letters from both sides; some congratulating me on my objective view of the Dutch slave trade, but also of course there were letters of protest and indignation.

*Why do you think especially the descendants of former slaves reacted with indignation?*

It’s a very complicated issue to explain. In general, you could say that black people whose ancestors were forcibly moved from Africa to the New World have better and sometimes even much better chances of economic improvement than the descendants of the slaves who remained in Africa. However, the descendants of slaves sold into the Atlantic slave trade have been robbed of their cultural roots. And in the long run they haven’t done as well as some other immigrant groups in the New World, such as Europeans and Asians. In order to explain that many blacks in the New World look at the past. There is no doubt that their ancestors arrived in the New World on a different footing from those who are now doing better. So obviously the two must be connected. That, I think, is what has stimulated many blacks, particularly in the US, to take an interest in the history of slavery, in the hope of finding reasons to explain the discrimination and low economic and social status that they face.

By the way, the interest in the history of slavery differs considerably among the various ex-slaveholding areas of the New World. It is most pronounced in North America. Among blacks in the Caribbean and in

Brazil there seems to be less of an urge to blame the past for the problems of today. It's really ironic that among blacks in the US, where the advancement of the descendants of the slave population has been most pronounced, the indignation about what brought them there, and how they were used as slaves, is strongest. In fact, there is no black population in the world with such a high average income as that of the blacks in the US. Of course, compared to other immigrant groups within the US the situation looks different, and it is that perspective that has sparked the public interest in the history of the slave trade and of slavery, and has led to a whole new ethnic industry with 'black studies' departments at universities, travel agencies specialising in study tours to the roots in Africa, and films and TV serials about these historical topics.

*How did the Dutch colonial experience in general in the New World compare to that of other European powers, such as the British and Iberians?*

I would argue that the British and Iberian experience in the Atlantic was different from that of the Dutch and the French. The Dutch did not establish very large settlement colonies, and I think that made all the difference. The Dutch mainly concentrated on the exploitation of the tropical sections of the Atlantic (and of Asia for that matter), and that explains to a certain extent why the lasting impact of the Dutch Atlantic was more limited than that of the British. In the British Atlantic, we see in the eighteenth century a growing market in the settlement sections of British America. In the second half of the eighteenth century, the Atlantic market became increasingly important to Britain as she was losing markets on the Continent. Certainly, part of that increase was not only caused by more buyers in North America, but also due to the booming economies of the plantation colonies in the Caribbean. The economic importance of the markets in the New World was far less to the Dutch. The Dutch slaveholding colonies were not nearly as dynamic as those of Britain. However, the combination of having a settlement colony in the North with a growing market consisting of people who are on average wealthier than most European consumers, in addition to a dynamic set of slaveholding colonies in the Caribbean, was absent in the Dutch case. And that's why I think the impact on the Dutch economy of the Dutch colonies in the New World was only very limited.<sup>4</sup>

*Why do you think there was no large-scale migration from the Netherlands to its colonies in the New World, like there was from Britain to North America?* That's an excellent question and a very difficult one to answer. The propensity to migrate among Europeans in the various countries differs widely, even today. And we only have some vague indications why this is so. First, one of the explanations is that the internal mobility in a country is related to the external mobility. In other words, the number of emigrants is larger when the internal mobility in a country is high. The internal mobility in Holland was not very high, and when regional shortages in the labour markets occurred the Dutch resorted to importing labour from outside the Netherlands—much more so than was the case in Britain. The Dutch were not alone in this. France was a country with less internal mobility and certainly less emigration than the UK. So, again, the British were unique in having both a high internal mobility and a high emigration rate. Secondly, the Dutch were able to send many young, unmarried, poor males abroad, but they were used as sailors and soldiers in the tropical sections of the world rather than as colonists. In the Atlantic, the Dutch trade was directed mostly towards the tropical zones, and less towards the non-tropical ones. In Asia the Dutch did the same. The Dutch-Asiatic shipping project at Leiden University revealed that the Dutch East India Company sent about one million men to tropical Asia, half of them non-Dutch. Less than half eventually returned to Europe. So my feeling is that the Dutch obviously felt that it was more to their commercial advantage to explore and exploit that dangerous, lethal niche of tropical colonial trade, rather than to send large numbers of colonists overseas as the British did. In Britain, small planting companies financed by a couple of merchants succeeded in bringing the colonists to North America, and those small companies did not exist in the Netherlands, or in France for that matter.

*In a chapter you wrote for the recently published volume, *A Deus ex Machina Revisited: Atlantic Colonial Trade and European Economic Development* (2006), you opened with the sentence: “Globalization” is a term coined by journalists in order to impress people who don't know history.<sup>5</sup> What did you mean by that?*

I think there is a strange idea that the world during the last ten or fifteen years has become more globalised than before. In fact, the peak of the development towards globalisation is far behind us. If you look at the percentage of goods not produced in your own country, but produced elsewhere, it was higher in the period of the 1500s, 1600s. Then the national economies started growing much more rapidly than the international

economy. Now, of course, it's increasing again. But compared to the goods and services produced either domestically, or in neighbouring countries, or on the same continent, we're still dealing with a small percentage of really global trade. More products are now produced in countries that were traditional importers, and it has always been attractive to import cheaper goods from outside, provided they have a similar quality to the goods produced at home. But if you look at the trade of those countries with a small domestic economy such as the Netherlands, Norway and, say, Luxembourg—and there are few countries in the world where trade makes up such a large share of the GDP—you will see that first of all most of the trade is domestic, then second in size is the trade with neighbouring countries, third in size is the trade within the developed countries of the Western world, and the trade with the Third World is smallest in size. So the whole idea of globalisation is, I think, a straw man.

*The reasons for European global expansion in the first place are the source of much debate among historians. What do you think was responsible for stimulating European expansion?*

Obviously, there is a combination of motives. Some of it, in my view, can be attributed to a spirit of pure inquisitiveness. To try and sail around Africa, not really thinking about trade or penetrating the interior, but more just to see what the world looked like, I think that is typically European. Obviously that spirit was lacking elsewhere, because sailing round the globe was technologically not impossible for others. The Chinese, the Indians or the Arabs could have done the same thing. It's a myth that Europeans expanded because they were technologically superior. Research has shown that the 'big divide' between European technology and that of the rest of the world is something that came later. So Europeans were inquisitive about what the world looked like, what other people were doing and not doing. In addition, there were also private investors in Europe who felt that they could make money by sending ships and sometimes colonists to non-European parts of the world. That financial drive is also something that is lacking elsewhere. The Chinese could have done the same, and they did send colonists to other sections of Asia, but not further away. And eventually they closed up the country, and that would have been impossible to do in multi-nation Europe. Europeans were always in competition with one another. Trying to conquer overseas possessions outside Europe became a sign of political prestige in Europe. That was another reason for European expansion. Another point that is perhaps sometimes overlooked is the fact that Europe was the only continent, I think, where it was

possible to migrate freely. In other words, in Western Europe migration was an individual decision. You could move 200 or 300 miles away in the hope of improving your standard of living. That was very difficult to do in, say, Africa. Lone travellers on any road in Africa were like walking bags of money for the slave traders. I'm not so sure what the situation was in Asia. It could be that it was possible there to move—protected—to another place. But I think Europe was unique in the sense that in many parts of Europe it was possible to make an individual decision to migrate, and that an individual could travel safely over long distances. In Germany and elsewhere in the centre of Europe, people had a choice whether to move eastward or westward. Most people in Germany moved eastward, towards what are now Russia and the Balkans, while a smaller percentage moved westward. In view of the geographical location of Britain, of course, it stands to reason that long-distance migrants from Britain moved to the New World.

*Contemporary migration, especially from developing nations to Europe and North America, has become a much-debated issue, both within the Netherlands and abroad. Elsewhere you've advocated an 'open door' immigration policy.<sup>6</sup> Would you mind explaining this theory?*

Well, the argument is very simple. If people are allowed to move where they want, we'll have unrivalled economic growth. People will then settle where they feel they can use their talents best. And they will be able to compare their income before and afterwards, and thus be able to detect whether or not they've made the right decision in choosing to migrate. In an ideal world, that is the best possible procedure. People should be allowed to move freely and settle wherever they want to. In the real world, it's more difficult. The history of economic growth in the United States during the past two centuries can only be explained by open immigration. If there is a developed country with an open door policy, then the United States certainly comes very close. Everything is relative, of course, and I know all the hassle you now have to go through when you want to migrate to the US officially. I've been a victim of that bureaucracy there myself. Yet, it's a country that makes it possible, legally or illegally, for large numbers of people to come in. Anybody with a drive to earn money and do an honest job is accepted in the US. Whether you do it illegally by climbing over a fence at night or whether you do it by the book, anyone who enters the US with the intent to work and try to improve his status, legally or illegally, can stay, and will meet with a lot of understanding, if not sympathy. That is something that is ingrained in American society.

Now let's look at Europe. First of all within their continent, Europeans are not nearly as mobile as the population of the US. Today, if you're a farmer in Sicily you earn just one-third of what a labourer in Munich earns, and yet you see virtually no migration any more between Sicily and Munich. Also, migration out of Europe has been drastically reduced since the economic growth of Western Europe started to pick up after the ravages of the Second World War. That means that to Europeans migration became a strange phenomenon, something for a limited number of refugees from the communist block who managed to slip through the Iron Curtain.

Migration had become something for losers. And because Western Europe had become static, it could construct a welfare state that is unique in the world. The solidarity in that welfare state—the financial solidarity and the social solidarity—is extremely high. That welfare state is very generous for those living in that state, but hostile to immigrants, particularly if they threaten to take more from the welfare state than they give. That explains the present attitude in Europe, and that's why I think that advocating an open door policy is now mostly an academic undertaking in Western Europe. Because in Western Europe you can only be an advocate of the free movement of people if at the same time you advocate abolishing the welfare state.

*The European Union has implemented an open door policy of sorts, albeit on a smaller, continental scale. What do you think will be the consequences of opening national borders within Europe for individual welfare states?*

I think what we want to do is have the best of two worlds. We want to keep the welfare state, but open the borders within Europe. At the same time we realise that nowhere is the population ageing as rapidly as in Western and Eastern Europe. Migration movements from Eastern to Western Europe, from the new member states of the EU, are declining and will never be substantial and permanent. In the past, a similar mechanism operated between Southern Europe and Western Europe, when Spain, Portugal and Italy had become members of the EU. And as soon as these new member states began to experience a higher economic growth than the old, industrial heartland of Europe, like the UK, the Netherlands and France, migration stopped and the Spanish, Portuguese and Italians stayed put. Actually, Spain is now the country with the largest immigration of all EU member states. Emigration can change into immigration very rapidly. That is now happening with migration flows from the Ukraine, Russia and Belarus to Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland. And

after Bulgaria and Romania become member states you will again see an upsurge in emigration and then a decline again as soon as the economies of these new members grow more rapidly than those of the older EU states. You do not need absolute equality of wages in order to stop people from migrating, but long before that point migration will decline as long as the growth rate at home is increasing. And after the migration from Rumania and Bulgaria has levelled off, the EU needs to consider the immigration from non-western countries. That will not be an easy decision as the non-EU immigrants from Turkey, Morocco and the Caribbean have done very poorly in the past. Brussels could perhaps set standards for that, in designing a green card system for example, or a points system. At this very moment, most European countries are designing new immigration laws using very selective criteria. So if you admit people into your welfare state you make sure that in the end they will contribute more than they take out, or at least not become a burden on the welfare system, as some previous groups of immigrants have been.

*Would an open door immigration policy benefit only the West, or would the sending nations also benefit?*

Both. We should not exaggerate the negative impact of emigration on poor countries, but studies have shown that emigrants—particularly the first generation—do actually send a lot of money back home. Some of that money is used for conspicuous consumption, for example to build houses that stand empty most of the year or buy big cars. It has also been shown that in very poor sending countries money is often used to enable the family of the emigrants to buy extra food and clothing. However, there is a whole range of countries where family members use that money to set up small businesses. For the US, it's Mexico. For the Netherlands, it's Turkey, Morocco and Suriname. In contrast to the official developing aid, it's very unlikely that that money sent home by emigrants will wind up in some under-the-counter deal or in a numbered Swiss bank account. So remittances can be beneficial and stimulate development, although if you look at the numbers you would need a very small sending country with a very high percentage of emigrants to really make it work. Yet the Philippines obtain 6 per cent of their foreign earnings by way of money sent home from emigrants. But, say for India, it's important but it's very small in relation to the economy as a whole. It goes for all countries, though, that official developing aid amounts to only half, or one-third, or even a quarter of what is sent home by emigrants. So I think that private remittances are really the way forward.

The other side of the debate is the problem of brain drain, because the emigrants who are educated in the countries where they are born are some of the most attractive immigrants in the rich West. In most poor countries the education of students is paid for by the public purse, and that makes emigration similar to a loss of investment, detrimental to the sending country. But you could argue first of all that that is an internal problem in the developing country. If they offer free education to those who are most likely to emigrate, they should change that system by taxing those who leave or by charging tuition for university education. Provide free education only for those who remain in the country. Anyway, developing countries could have devised a system to make it work, but the ruling elite likes to provide its children with an education that is paid for by tax money. And secondly, you could argue that educated emigrants can sell their expertise and skills at much higher prices in the West than at home. ‘Brains’ are an excellent export item. If you can’t sell your products on the world market, sell your brains. And that’s what’s happening at the moment.

*Studies on migration have increased substantially in the past decade. Do you notice any general patterns in the direction that new historical research on migration is taking?*

Yes. We’re learning more about the reasons why people decide to migrate, both economic and non-economic reasons. We’re learning more about the migration policies of the migrants themselves—stock migration, family migration. We’re learning more about the sexual divisions among migrants: for example why it is that unmarried men migrate more than women, and whether there has been a change over time. So I think migration research is important and is changing. But there is still too much of a divide, I feel, between the study of European migrants in the western world and of non-European migrants in the rest of the world, such as slaves and indentured labourers. In the case of the migration to the New World, European and African migrants have traditionally been seen as so very different that scholars did not even dare to think about making such comparisons. While you must keep in mind the differences between free and unfree migration, in some cases a comparison can be fruitful. For instance, we always thought that racism was behind the terrible conditions aboard slave ships. Hundreds of slaves were confined to a very small space, and suffered high mortality rates *en route* to their destination. But research on European migrants to North America in the eighteenth century has actually revealed that in some instances the space

on board allotted to German migrants in the eighteenth century might have been even smaller than that of the slaves. So if you want to explain the higher mortality rates on the slave ships, the allotment of space might not have been as important as the difference in disease environment or different conditions before boarding. That's one example of how fruitful a comparison between free and unfree migrants can be, and the study of these two groups has been separated for too long. So, there's still a long way to go.

*What are you working on now?*

At this very moment, I'm working on a book summarising the history of the Caribbean. I think we have learned a lot lately from different perspectives on the slave trade and slavery, compared to what we used to know about it fifty years ago. And those new views have not yet penetrated the existing overviews of Caribbean history. My feeling is that we need to reconsider the historical stereotype of the Caribbean as a region equal to a hell on earth. A region where none of the immigrants actually wanted to be. The slaves would rather have stayed in Africa; the Europeans had come out only in order to make some money and to return; and the Asians were offered a free return passage before they left Asia. However, when we look at the material conditions of the immigrants, we should realise that the region acted as a life buoy to many. That is what I would like to point out. I realise that the Caribbean has never been able to offer the opportunities and economic growth rates that North America was able to offer, but to many it was far better than the opportunities they had at home. The historiography regarding the immigration of Asians into the Caribbean is a case in point. Traditionally indentured labour from Asia has been seen as a new type of slavery. On the other hand, of course, it's remarkable to see how many people actually tried to migrate as indentured laborers to the ex-slaveholding colonies in the West Indies and how many decided to stay and not use the free return passage. How do we explain that dichotomy? Western historians see a continuation of slavery, and at the same time historians of Asia are trying to explain the huge supply of mobile labour in India, Java, China, Japan and the Philippines. How could an ex-slave society in the New World be attractive to migrants? Was the standard of living there higher than in Asia? That is one of my projects.

The second project is to keep writing on present-day migration problems, and to try and arouse public interest in the wider view of migration. We need to do away with the narrow and negative view that

many people in Europe now have of migration, and I think that's where historians can play a role.

## Notes

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- 5 P.C. Emmer, O. Petre-Grenouilleau, and J.V. Roitman (eds.), *A Deus ex Machina Revisited: Atlantic Colonial Trade and European Economic Development* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).
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## ‘I am not going to call myself a global historian’: Interview with C.A. Bayly

*Binu M. John, at the time of the interview a Ph.D. Candidate in the TANAP program at Leiden University, interviewed Chris Bayly in his office in late 2006.*

*You have already given a short account of your entry into the field of South Asian studies in your work, *Origins of Nationality in South Asia*. There you mentioned your first overland travels to North India as an experience that triggered your interest in Indian history. To what degree have such ‘field experiences’ influenced your writings?*

Very much so, I think, and from the very beginning. On my first trip to India I went to Gwalior with a friend who had spent a year teaching in the Sindhia School there. We travelled around the city and environs, met people with memories of the past and began to get a sense of what Gwalior and its fort might have been like in eighteenth-century India. From then on I remained interested in late-Mughal India and the very early British period, though it was nearly twenty years later that I published *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*, a book about India in that period. In fact, I had originally intended to write a thesis on the eighteenth century. At that time, Dr. Ashin Das Gupta was teaching in Oxford and he confirmed my interest in the period. He taught a specified course on Warren Hastings and India, and I remember him saying: ‘I am not interested in Warren Hastings. I am interested in India in the eighteenth century.’ This was shortly after I came back from the trip to Gwalior. The reason I didn’t study eighteenth-century India for my Ph.D. was that Ashin Das Gupta soon left the University and S. Gopal replaced him as Reader in Indian History at Oxford. Gopal was just beginning to work on his biography of Jawaharlal Nehru and he obviously wanted some background to Nehru’s early life. So he suggested that I write a thesis on Nehru’s home city, Allahabad. It was only later that I came to know why he made this suggestion. But I think he was probably right. At that time, there was developing interest, particularly in Cambridge but also in India, in the nationalist movement. Going to one Indian city and hinterland, working on it quite intensively

for three to four years was actually a good way of getting into the subject. At that time, they didn't really teach Indian History as such at Oxford. It was really Colonial History and Indian history was simply tacked on to it. So, for me, the path into the proper study of Indian history was living in Allahabad and seeing the complexity of the city. I moved round different areas, looking at the central part of the city where the merchant community resided and examining the links between the inner city and the people who lived in the Civil Lines and Cantonment. That was the time when I became interested in the local politics and commerce of north Indian cities and I moved on from that over the following decade.

*You also mentioned your travels in the south. What were the differences you perceived between North and South India? Are they differences in the perception of historians or are they based on actual historical facts?*

In order to answer this question one thing we have to consider is the Mughal state. Of course, the Mughal state itself was based upon a series of underlying political segments. So the distinction between 'north' and 'south' should not be made too great. But it does seem to me that the state, and particularly the Indo-Islamic state, did have a kind of presence in North India that it didn't have in quite same way in the south. For example, take the case of the kingdom of Arcot in the eighteenth century. This was formally an Indo-Muslim state with features in common with the Mughal provinces of the North. But it had a very small revenue base and little more than a vague claim to local political authority. Of course, it's possible to exaggerate the power of the Mughal state even at its centre. The Aligarh historians probably wanted to see the Mughals as a kind of precursor to the British, as a very strong, centralised state. While Irfan Habib himself sometimes viewed the Mughal state as a shifting system, Athar Ali, in particular, emphasised its character as a centralised, highly rational empire. As a comparative assessment alone, this is partly correct. Quite apart from language and cultural differences, South India had much less experience of the extractive pre-colonial state than did the North. At the same time, I don't want to go to the extreme of saying that history is simply constructed by historians. Otherwise, we would be out of a job!

*Colonialism is the recurrent theme in your books. Are you somewhat 'sympathetic' to colonial rule, as you have been concerned with discerning the 'co-operative' and somewhat weak structure of colonial administration—giving enough room for the local elites to exploit the condition in India—than with its destructive impact on the colonized society?*

I think there is a certain degree of misunderstanding here. To say that the impact of colonial rule was elusive and often weak, as some historians including myself have suggested, does not mean that it was not very destructive at some times and in some places. I have suggested that North India in the early nineteenth century was still in a state of war, and not just in 1857–59. There were constant peasant movements and landholder rebellions going on in all parts of the country. Company troops were constantly shooting ‘dacoits,’ burning villages and hanging headmen. To say that the Company state was weak doesn’t mean that it wasn’t destructive. It was an intrusive force, but a very uneven one with only limited means. There is an assumption in much of the historiography that the strong and effective colonial state that people saw in the 1930s and 1940s was typical of the whole period right back to 1757. That wasn’t the case. As for ‘cooperation’ or ‘collaboration,’ the British Empire in India couldn’t have functioned without a considerable degree of Indian cooperation, even if it was unwilling. The British wanted to rule India without paying for it. They needed a ‘free army’ in the form of the presidency armies, and later the Indian Army. Indian troops, like Indian merchants and Indian writers and scribes, were central to the operation of empire.

*Do you also entertain the view that the collapse of the Mughal Empire had a decisive impact on Indian society or not?*

My point is that it would be wrong to say that the period of the Mughal Empire saw complete centralised rule and social harmony. Equally, it would be wrong to see the eighteenth century as a period of total warfare and anarchy. Later, when we see once again the appearance of a more centralised form of rule under the East India Company, it doesn’t mean there aren’t local factional conflicts and rebellions, as I just said. What I wanted to do in *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars* was to get away from the perception of universal decline and anarchy in the eighteenth century. There were new forms emerging: new political forms, new forms of trading relationships and new relations between town and country. Mughal elites migrated from the old centres such as Delhi and Agra and re-established themselves in new centres where they fostered relations with existing power-holders. Another helpful thing about this perspective is that it diminishes the difference between the North and the South. Hyderabad, Arcot, even Madras, were places to which groups from North India migrated and where they built new social forms.

*In that case, do you think that it is a sort of replacement of the existing power(s) by a new emerging power rather than the emergence of a new system after the decline of the earlier ones?*

Yes, that is right. Obviously, British rule by 1820s was much stronger and much more intrusive, certainly taking more taxation than the previous eighteenth-century rulers. But, in some respects at least, the post-Mughal kingdoms anticipated the form of the British provinces.

*You have mentioned in an earlier interview that ‘modernity’ did not have an entirely ‘Western’ origin, and you favour the concept of ‘multiple modernities,’ some of which had their roots in Asia. Then how do you explain ‘the rise of the West’ in the nineteenth century and the comparative decline of the East? Do you think that colonial rule did not play an important role in this decline in India? Or was it the inherent inability of Indian society to modernise itself that resulted in its decline?*

The key phrase is ‘comparative decline.’ My book, *The Birth of the Modern World*, tries to show that western dominance did not completely wipe out movements of progressive change in the rest of the world. Clearly ‘the West’ was dominant during much of the nineteenth century for certain reasons: its military strength, the vibrancy of its ‘civil society,’ the accumulation of knowledge, the worldwide projection of power, and so on. However, this doesn’t mean there were no developments elsewhere. There were changes and, in fact, positive changes, progressive changes in non-European societies, and some of those, I think, had their origins in the period before that of European dominance. If we take the form of government in late Qing China and of the type of evolving economic system in nineteenth-century Japan, these were not simply the products of Western domination, but the consequences of its people striving against Western domination, using resources drawn from the earlier histories of their own societies. So, what I am suggesting is a halfway position between those who still stress the ‘triumph of the West,’ on the one hand, and writers such as Andre Gunder Frank, on the other, who seem to suggest that there wasn’t anything particular about the West, and the dominance of the West happened almost by chance and as a consequence of the ‘collapse of the others.’ I think that the truth is somewhere in the middle. I have always been interested in the non-Western origins of the modern world. I pointed out, for instance, how Asian merchant communities survived Western domination and re-emerged as powerful forces in the post-colonial world. I am not just thinking about inland Indian merchants here, but I am also

referring to the overseas Chinese diaspora, the Indian Ocean Hadrami traders, and so on.

*You also paid due attention to the role of religions in world history. Do you think that the revival of 'world religions' in the nineteenth century changed the character of what you call the 'pre-history of communalism' in India from an earlier period?*

Many scholars have failed to notice that there is a question mark in the title of my article 'The Pre-history of Communalism?'. Certainly, there were many pre-colonial religious conflicts. Sanjay Subrahmanyam has recently confirmed this, using many more sources than I can read. But the type of religious conflict that occurred before colonial rule did not have the effect of breaking up society into competing communal blocs. Even in the twentieth century many of the 'religious conflicts' that we observe were quite local. They did not result in the collapse of social relations between the various religious communities. I think this argument is perfectly compatible with the argument that in the nineteenth century religion began to take on a new form. Religions began to mimic or imitate each other. All religious leaderships by the late nineteenth century felt that they had to have history, that they needed a creed and rules for certain forms of deportment. One begins to see what one could call 'Islamisation' or 'Hinduisation.' Religion did, in fact, become something rather different, increasing the sense of competing communities that colonial political arrangements helped to foster. That is not to say that much of society didn't still operate on the older pattern of religious interaction. I would argue that there was a pre-history of religious conflict in India and that it involved the generation of competing ideologies and some degree of social conflict. But 'communalism,' the breaking of society into huge, mutually hostile blocs, was very much a feature of the 1930s and 1940s. It was part of the civil war to appropriate the colonial state.

*How much has the contemporary religious revival around the world influenced your thought process while writing about the significance of religion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? Is it a kind of 'projection' from the present to the past?*

My interest in religion pre-dates the emergence of what people now call Hindutva and 'Islamic fundamentalism,' because they are really a feature of the period after Ajodhya or 9/11, when a real debate about religion began, in particular about Islam. My interest in religion in India actually goes back to my first visits there. I don't think that I am simply projecting

backward contemporary situations, but certainly my views have become stronger in recent years. Many historians—and I'm not only referring to secular Indian historians, but also to western social historians—underestimated the significance of religion in their works of the 1970s and 1980s. There was a general belief that religion had declined in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was a terrible shock for them when Islamists, Hindutva ideologues or American born-again Christians suddenly came into view. My position explains the persistence and even growth of religious belief and practice much more effectively.

*You believe in the emergence of a 'modern period' by the end of the eighteenth century when many people began to believe that they were living in a 'modern world'. Then do you also believe in a 'post-modern' period in history?*

What I wanted to get away from was the idea that there was some kind of essence of modernity that took hold, either in the sixteenth century or in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. My point is twofold. Modernity was not one thing, but many things that came to be intertwined especially after 1750. So modern forms of economic management combined with a modern state and with new forms of warfare. It was the interaction of all these forces at a very rapid pace that created what we call modernity. But there's still an essential element lacking from that formulation, which is that people need to feel that there is a concept of 'modernity' and I think really from the eighteenth century that concept of modernity became much stronger and much more reflective. At about this time, people began to justify their thoughts and actions in terms of what was modern rather than by calling on the past to provide legitimacy. This was true in some Asian societies as well. People began to write 'histories of the moderns' in the Islamic Middle East and South Asia, for instance.

*What about 'post-modernism'?*

What I see is that the processes of 'modernity' continue to speed up at a transnational or global level. However, I don't believe the argument that the state is falling apart and everything in social or economic life is now fluid. On the contrary, it seems to me that there was a short period towards the end of the twentieth century when the state was in trouble. But this was only a tremor. If anything, the nation state has become more powerful again since the 1990s. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have written in their book *Empire* that there is something above the state which is created by the interaction between super-states and capitalism. But I don't think that either in volume or in form this is very different from what we

earlier called 'modernity.' I don't mind if you want to call this period 'late modernity.' But I don't think we are in an age of 'post-modernity.' Today's increasingly multi-centred and fluid world is in some senses no more than a return to the conditions of the eighteenth century.

*Have 'post-colonial' writings influenced your approach towards history?*

To some extent one can't help but be influenced by them. But I suspect that the post-modernist emphasis on 'fragments' or the subaltern school's emphasis on resistance is actually a continuation of earlier trends in historical writing. The French *Annales* school made the real breakthrough long ago. The emphasis on the history of experience and on the autonomy of localities or individual actors goes right back to Marc Bloch in the 1930s. Again, subaltern history was anticipated by the writing of E.P. Thompson and Christopher Hill in their emphasis on resistance and the 'world turned upside down.' Post-modern and post-colonial history always comes back to the history of elites and the state in order to understand why things change. Post-colonialism is more a 'brand name' than a new way of doing history or the social sciences.

*How far has your 'local' knowledge of South Asian history helped you to write or influenced your writing of a 'world' history?*

Well, very much. My book, *Birth of the Modern World*, came out of undergraduate teaching. When I was lecturing to students on the very broad canvas of the 'Expansion of Europe' or 'The West and the Third World,' I always had in mind the experience of South Asia. Though I am sure that historians born in South Asia would have written it differently, I was attempting to go beyond the bounds of Western historiography. I didn't want to write just another story of the 'rise of the West,' as I said earlier. I have always remained a local historian and a regional historian as well as writing world history, and I am not going to call myself simply a 'global historian.' Historians have a tendency to become very parochial and privilege their own method. There is great resistance to transnational or world history in some quarters today. Thirty years ago some historians said that I was wasting my time by writing a study of only one city, Allahabad. My position is that global history, when done well, can explain connections and bring up valuable comparisons that would otherwise be invisible. But this is in no way to diminish urban history, local history, national history or regional history. All these methods continue to throw up important arguments and findings and can be employed simultaneously.

*Tell me about the Cambridge–Delhi–Leiden–Yogya programme of the comparative history of India and Indonesia in the 1980s and whether you found that a stimulating experience when later writing a ‘world history’?*

I think international comparisons and connections are very valuable even if they don't necessarily produce immediate published work. They do put us in touch with other scholars and other intellectual traditions. I have always been very interested in the differing views of Asian history coming out of Delhi, Yogyakarta, Leiden, Cambridge and Oxford. Meeting historians such as Andre Wink, Henk Wesseling, Dharma Kumar, Om Prakash and Dirk Kolff through this scheme was quite fascinating. Some of the published work that came out of these meetings was very interesting. But it was the long-term effects of informal contacts and discussions with scholars in different fields, who were working in different ways, that really mattered.

*There is a widespread belief among academics that the new generation is turning away from the social sciences. Peter van der Veer in a recent symposium [2006] and John Wills in an earlier interview with Itinerario mentioned this. The latter particularly noted the increasing uncertainty that even the best students face in pursuing a career after getting their degree. What are your thoughts on this?*

Actually, I think that the number of jobs available to the younger generation has increased massively since I first came into the profession. But the supply has gone up even faster. Therefore, even some of the best students can't easily find jobs and go into other professions. In my view this is not necessarily a bad thing. Some of my recent graduate students have left the teaching profession. Some of them have gone into business, overseas aid work and some have been recruited by 'think tanks.' One of my recent Ph.D. students, who wrote on the British campaigns in the Middle East during the First World War, is now working for a Middle East 'think tank.' It's not a bad thing to spread academic knowledge in this way because thinking critically about history may stimulate critical thinking about the contemporary world. We badly need this. There may be differences between European academia and some very specialised academic systems, such as the American one, where people are 35 by the time they finish their Ph.D.s. In our system, where people finish their Ph.D. by the age of 26, they can contemplate a life outside academia. On the other hand, the crisis of the social sciences can be exaggerated. New centres of excellence are emerging even while some older ones face trouble. I was in Warsaw a couple of weeks ago for a conference and there

is a flourishing history department at Warsaw University. There are people studying a wide range of historical topics, from Ottoman history through Russian history to the history of Latin America.

*As a scholar particularly interested in the Indian subcontinent, what is your scholarly interaction with Indian academia?*

There must be about twenty-five of my Ph.D. students working in Indian universities or Indian students who have gone to British, European or North American universities. So I have many Indian colleagues and friends. In India, my connections with Jawaharlal Nehru University and Delhi University are particularly strong. Though I have begun to return to the subcontinent, I haven't gone to India so much recently, mainly because I have been working on a Southeast Asian project. My colleague Tim Harper and I have published two books on the region: *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941–1945* and *Forgotten Wars: Freedom and Revolution in Southeast Asia*. So in recent years I have been to Myanmar, Singapore and Malaysia. But I'm about to return to the full-time study of Indian history and I am working on Indian liberalism in the nineteenth century, or what we might mean by Indian liberalism in the nineteenth century. The first results of this will be in a volume of the journal *Modern Intellectual History* to be published in April 2007. Eight of us, from India, Britain and the USA, have tried to suggest ways we might develop an intellectual history of modern South Asia.

*What is the current situation of South Asian studies at Cambridge University and in the UK in general? Is it comparable to the conditions at the start of your studies at Oxford, which you referred to earlier?*

When I was at Oxford you could study only one document-based subject, which had some Indian history inserted into it. You couldn't study Indian history as such. Modern history, as it was called, was the history of Western Europe, especially France, Germany and southern England. Well, that has changed. There are courses on South Asian studies, even in Oxford and certainly in Cambridge and London. So it is possible to study South Asian history. Of course, the other point is that graduate studies have expanded very greatly over this period. There were very few people before the 1960s taking history Ph.D.s at all. Now my own South Asian and imperial history Ph.D. group has fifteen or more students, including five Indians, several continental Europeans, two or three British students, and several North Americans. It is a very diverse and international group and my colleagues all have similarly large groups. However, there is a

crisis, I would say, in the study of early India in Britain, and to some extent elsewhere. Cambridge has decided that it can't afford to keep the Sanskrit undergraduate course, though the subject will be taught at the graduate level. My job in the next year or so will be to try to create a postgraduate course in both modern South Asian studies and classical South Asian studies. Still, there is tremendous general interest in modern Indian or South Asian history, and in Indian development economics, anthropology and geography, partly, of course, because of the growth of the Indian economy. I remain hopeful about the future.

# The Retreat of the Elephants: Interview with Mark Elvin

*Mark Elvin is currently visiting fellow at the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at the Australian National University. His research interests in Chinese history include environment, economy, demography, proto-science, geography and emotions. He has published extensively on these subjects. Among his key publications are The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China (2004), The Pattern of the Chinese Past (1973), Cultural Atlas of China (edited with C. Blunden, 1998), Another History (1996), Changing Stories in the Chinese World (1997), and Sediments of Time: Environment and Society in Chinese History (edited with Liu Ts'ui-jung, 1998). Frans-Paul van der Putten and Bede Moore met him when he was in Leiden for the Crayenborgh Lecture.*

*Mark, perhaps you could start by telling us how you first became interested in China?*

Well, there's a background and there's a foreground. The background is that my earliest years of remembered life were in San Francisco. So I never knew a world where there weren't Chinese people around. In other words, they were never particularly strange or exotic. China was just part of the Pacific world. That's the background. Then, much later, when I was doing history at Cambridge, I got interested in the work of two people. One was Joseph Needham, whom I soon got to know, on the history of science and technology in China. The other was Max Weber—so I got interested in the comparative method. And it struck me, even though now it seems very obvious, that the nearest miss from self-generated modernity, when put in comparison with Europe, was China.

So I thought I would look at the economic reasons for this, as I was basically an economic historian in my impulses. It then happened that I needed to do the doctorate. In the Yen-ching Library at Harvard I found a rare book containing 1,020 documents from the Chinese Municipal Council at Shanghai, which turned out, when looked at, to be the world's first Chinese-run democracy; it had everything that was necessary. So I wrote a thesis on that, and it showed me that what was then the

completely conventional view that the Chinese were not culturally suited to democracy was just rubbish, at least at a low level in the hierarchy of political institutions. My ideas were extremely unpopular and the thesis was read by hardly anybody until much later.

*Can you say something about the Shanghai Council? How did it originate?*

Yes, that was an interesting question and it led to a huge argument in private with John Fairbank. It seemed to me that there were many roots, one of which involved the much-neglected institution of the episodic gentry-assembly at local levels in China. It also turned out that a number of the guilds in the past two or three centuries had had quasi-elections, which I called ‘public selections.’ The general opinion of the members was vital to installing people in leadership positions. The idea of it is clear enough. There was a lot of local commitment by members of the gentry and the leading merchants to various forms of things that were on the edge of a kind of corporate democracy.

Elements of limited democracy came together quite rapidly, and people knew what they were doing. They started in 1905, and by 1908 they had a lot of fairly respectable organograms—separating policy formulation from its execution, for example—a lot of specialised services. They were promoting primary education for girls, as well as of course for boys; they were running originally a municipal hospital where treatment was meant to be free—they couldn’t get funds enough for this so they went commercial, but they had the ideal of doing this.

My reaction at that time to the general wisdom of sociologists writing on China in that epoch was that it was 50 per cent rubbish. So I became for a short time a very unpopular political historian, being accused of being a romantic reactionary. I said the best course for China would have been to have a Japanese-style semi-constitutional monarchy, which allowed these local and provincial experiments at democracy to get some real roots, which they never did. I justified it afterwards by saying this is also part of modernity; and this is a very interesting example of the difficult Chinese case: there’s a lot more there than you think. They never quite achieved what we would call self-generated modernity, but it came incredibly close.

*You have named a number of fields in which you’ve worked in history. I’m wondering how it is that you have jumped from political history to writing environmental history, and beyond?*

It's all a little mixed up together, generally speaking. The political history was actually a sheer accident. I shifted away after a while from it because I suppose I regarded it as not really my strength, but it was interesting and I remain interested in it. I was really an economic historian by instinct. How do people make things, sell them, use them seemed to me at that time to be the foundation of modern life. It was too simple because I was leaving out two of the other things, the science, which in the nineteenth century became critical to the continued development of the technology of production; and the environment, which led back very deep. It was very much later that I realised you can't put the economy out in a world of its own. By the end of the 1960s it was obvious to me that the environment had to be taken into account.

Then I became interested in science and China. Becoming a personal friend of Joseph Needham was a very important part of this process. There had been a very odd bifurcation between those who knew a bit about the economic history (as I thought I did by then) and those who really knew about scientific and technological history, as Joseph did, while having a much less sure grasp of the economic side; China was becoming a large field and taking it all into one's consciousness was even then becoming extremely difficult, and not only for the comparative historian. It's so easy to get it wrong. At any rate, both agreeing with and arguing with Needham was a very critical point in getting me involved in the history of science. I went for a long time to the history of science seminars given at Oxford by my late friend Alastair Crombie. In fact, I built very much on Crombie's own work in trying to look at China's science more sensibly. Forget the word 'science,' use 'different styles of scientific thinking.' Crombie found six basic styles of Western European scientific thinking which were critical, and you can show that all of them—except probably 'probabilistic' thinking—were found to a significant degree in premodern China. In other words, you have the same phenomenon I mentioned earlier. The Chinese had managed to be impressive, but they never got across the line and to a self-sustaining, self-generating situation. Comparison with China remains indispensable for sharpening up the thinking of slightly Euro-chauvinistic historians. They're quite right, Europe was special. For how much longer we don't know, but it is, or has been, special. And I thought it was worth taking real trouble to get away from the clichés and work out what is the real nature of this country.

*Can you tell us what you think the role of the environment in Chinese history is?*

Let me say, I don't think you can actually do any Chinese economic history, or at least not anything large- or middle-scale, without being constantly aware of certain environmental factors. You must, for example, take the 'environmental buffer' into account, and its eventual near-disappearance, which made intermittent shortages much harder to handle. Historically, the real crisis came very late for China, above all in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, since at that point so much of the vulnerable subtropical temperate soil was being stripped of trees. You get enormous erosion problems, and again you need to be aware of this. I mean, for example, the costs of irrigation maintenance exploded. Obviously, that's economically important to consider. And it becomes a huge cost on labour when they have to start doing much more dredging, and it's going on all over the place. This is just a small example, but it shows how you must remain conscious of the environment. It's really best taken not as an independent subject, but as something that a historian must always bear in mind.

*What about today? What role does the environment play in contemporary China?*

The simple answer is water. Nothing matters as much as water. Clearly, Chinese environmental pollution has led to enormous health problems that are connected not just with water but with other things. But to focus on just one thing: northern China is going to run out of water. It's been relying for some time on supplies of ground water, which have been falling more than a metre a year in some places. The Yellow River has basically stopped reaching the sea, and the quality of water is spectacularly awful. The water problem, particularly in north China, is completely critical and there's just nothing else that compares with it. There simply is not enough water in the north. There is enough in the Yangzi, but it will have to be used properly.

As an issue, environmental conservation is both taken very seriously and completely ignored. Chinese environmental law, for example, is some of the best in the world, or at least last time I looked at it. The trouble is that enforcement is usually handed over to the local authorities, who are getting large incomes from the local industries, and are therefore extremely unwilling to prosecute. Essentially, fines for infractions have become a form of local government income. In other words, they do not take enforcement at all seriously. The only exception is modern, hi-tech joint

venture operations with foreign firms, where often very high standards are applied. So I think the problem with conservation and other desirable outcomes is that the law is great, the rules are great, but the enforcement has fallen completely foul of a desire to increase local government income. The thing that will probably eventually make a difference to political motivation is concern with health.

*To go back to the history of science in China, one of the topics on everybody's lips is the 'Great Divergence,' to borrow from Kenneth Pomeranz. What do you think about arguments based on coal, or the New World, or even culture? Where does science play a role?*

There's a lot of coal in China and if they'd developed anything like the British mining techniques, which they had the elements for in terms of drainage and ventilation, they could have done much better. Basically, we don't really know how much coal they could have got out. They were using coal enthusiastically in some places. It's hard to tell because, certainly looking at the maps, there is an awful lot of it in China. The notion that they couldn't have produced a lot more if they'd wanted to badly enough using accessible techniques is a little hard to believe. I don't agree with Pomeranz, although I have a great regard for him and think everyone should buy his book, as I said in my review. But I don't think he's got the key point, which in my view was science, or, rather, the near-absence in China of its modern form before it was imported from the West.

Culture is elusive, and of course it is critical when you come to the point I was making. Why, when you can produce people like Zhu Zaiyu, with good mathematics and good experimental technique, and some correct results—why can't you get a community going, within which a critical number of participants will interact? So clearly there is a cultural block, but it lies in a very, very special area. They could produce a number of extremely acute thinkers, who paralleled many of the contemporary European thinkers up to sometime in the seventeenth century, but there was an insufficient density of interest. They were mostly somewhat isolated individuals (the field of historical phonetics excepted) and they could not, it seems, find or at least concentrate enough of them to get an interacting community going. So there was something missing in the collective operation, which wasn't quite absolute (as the exception of phonetics shows), but which I think was completely crucial.

*So what happened to Chinese science after, let's say, the 1800s?*

They basically began to slowly translate and read Western textbooks. And then by the beginning of the twentieth century there were a number of reasonable scientists mostly in practical areas like geology. It took a bit longer than it did in the case of Japan. The Japanese had got there a generation or two earlier, and China was a little bit slower. What actually matters is that the density of contact creates a continuous process of criticism, transmission, communication, and that is why things start moving. The heart of it is this interaction, and it failed for a long time to take off in China.

*How about today, is there only one type of modern science?*

Ultimately, yes. People need to be educated in the right environment because everything depends on this interaction I've talked about; that's what really matters. I mean it's striking that virtually no Chinese scientist who was brought up in China, educated in China and stayed in China has got anywhere near a Nobel Prize, whereas you only need to compare that with Chinese scientists who went to America and got their Ph.D.s there. There's a barrier here, and it comes back to what I've been saying with interaction. In this, I don't think there are any deep, distinctive cultural barriers. You've only got to look at the list of authors' names in publications like *Nature* and *Science*; you find Indian, East European, Chinese, and so on. On the whole, the only major absence is Africa, which is probably just a reflection of the desperately difficult situation and the obstacles in the way of most people there getting a proper education. If you've experienced training within the tradition, that's what is critical. And I don't think there is anything much that's come up in later times, say, the nineteenth century on, which really suggests that there is another way to get good results outside this tradition.

*Do you think there can ever be a world-divide again, like the China–Western Europe divide we saw prior to the nineteenth century, or do you think the world is just too globalised now?*

I think the world is generally too globalised. Although, there are some very weird counter-trends. It is astonishing that the credibility of evolution is accepted by the overwhelming majority of the Chinese but barely by a majority of Americans (depending on how you set up the definitions). The role of religion is also quite interesting. For example, Zhu Zaiyu, whose work cast implicit doubt on the 'correctness' of the tuning used by

the Ming dynasty—which was seriously subversive—was never put under house arrest by the authorities as Galileo was.

China has work to do before it really competes internationally. It is still not quite like Japan, and the Chinese are not able within their own borders to fully reach the heart of Westernisation. It's still on the surface and they're prodigiously clever at it. But it's commercially and profit-driven stuff, motives by which scientists ultimately of any value are not driven. Of course, there's no reason at all why Chinese scientists who go to America shouldn't become world leaders, and many of them are. But inside China something in the system works against the 'right' ways of thinking. The same is said by John Clark at Sydney University, a specialist in Asian art, who says that originality really only takes off when Chinese artists migrate to Paris or somewhere else. There's some kind of liberating effect, which still holds good at the moment.

There's some element that allows the Chinese to produce professionally competent imitations, but it does not quite tend to spur highly original invention, and yet the capacity for highly original invention can be liberated if the right people get abroad for long enough. I think it's something in the political culture. Look what's happening with the internet in China at the moment. There's an enormous effort to limit access. These sorts of things slow down globalisation, and I would expect this to disintegrate after some while, but at the moment it's quite striking.

*The Chinese limited international trade for a long time. Why did they do this, and was it related to the same reasons the Chinese never really sought to expand?*

The blockage on international trade was indeed at one time a very clear-cut political factor. The legitimate ports of points of commerce with the West were limited by the early Qing to four places, and then in the middle of the eighteenth century to one place in the South and one in the North (for Russia). It was not quite absolute, because if you disguised yourself nobody worried, but it was very strange. There was even a ban on teaching Chinese to foreigners, while Chinese who went abroad were not meant to come back because they were seen as being traitors and were punished if they did. Of course, a lot of trade still went on.

It's a very difficult question to answer. It was felt very strongly in the government of China that the contacts made at the boundaries through trade were extremely likely to turn politically dangerous. It was believed that the resources and the techniques coming from the outside would be in the hands of people who were on the periphery and who could supply

and help rebellions. So it was very much a form of conscious political control for that reason. And it really goes back to the ideas of the founder of the Ming dynasty, who, with effects that lasted for a long time, closed things down because he was frightened of Muslims. He actually moved large numbers of the northwestern Muslims to the area around Tianjin by the coast to separate them from contacts with Muslims in the Islamic regions just outside the country. It was felt that these people were not naturally submissive subjects.

So the consciousness of the need to stop foreigners of any kind from communicating ideological or political positions that might endanger the state was part of the conventional political toolkit. But don't forget that in the later nineteenth century the Chinese themselves were still being imperialists in re-conquering Turkistan, and even while being subjected at the same time by the west to a form of what might be described as 'negative political acupuncture' on the other side of their country. There was, though, some high-level hesitation about this northwestern reconquest, as it was rightly thought the main threat came from the sea, from the Westerners. And in the end, of course, it became impossible to keep the façade needed for the political prestige-structure intact, and cracks began to open.

The problem for China is not really the West to the degree they often say it is. There never was a conquest of China the way there was a conquest of India. There never was a British Governor General in a white hat sitting in Nanjing. In fact, the Chinese would never have allowed that to happen; there would have been an extraordinary resistance. The Chinese were not occupied, except for a short, horrible experience under the Japanese. The process operated on China was not conquest, it wasn't even a general economic domination; it was what I have just called 'negative acupuncture': foreign powers put a number of 'needles' (so to speak) into key places in China, which did a lot of damage, above all psychologically. The fascinating question is why did it bring the culture down? Why did this process hurt China so severely?

*Were there any ideological ramifications because of this 'negative acupuncture'?*

Well, the Westerners were able to induce a movement within the Chinese intellectual world such that by the middle of the 1890s the traditional culture was strategically dead. Most Confucian beliefs, more or less the whole of what might be called 'scriptural Confucianism,' as opposed to generally more or less 'Confucian' attitudes, had strategically collapsed. This was critical. No other major civilisation had ever lost its system

of basic beliefs so fast. It was mostly undermined by distinguished Chinese intellectuals in the period indicated. The destruction left China increasingly without a generally believed-in set of values, over a period of about two generations, as finally became evident by the 1890s. That is, scriptural Confucianism disappeared as a self-renewing force.

And then it happened again! Maoism was in many ways a set of props of a psychological nature, which gave the Chinese a new self-respect, a sense of place in history again, and a sense of mission, a sense of what they were doing. They adapted a crude form of Stalinism, and once the Chinese had begun to guess what that really involved it was rejected. Nobody really believes in it today. I call it the 'double disavowal.' China lost a dominant ideology, not once, but twice, chronologically speaking roughly in my own long-lived father's lifetime. What does this mean for a society? Certainly, for a society of this size and sophistication it's surprising. I mean, Europe never had a collapse like this. Maybe the process of secularisation, but that's still far from complete. But China's 'double disavowal,' that's close to the heart of the country's problems, whether one sees it as a symptom or a cause.

*You've talked about a 'crisis of absurdity'.*

Yes, I believe that China after the first quarter of the twentieth century suffered a crisis of absurdity, both patent and latent. This type of crisis typically arises when the surface level of socially accepted ideals manifestly differs from what people themselves increasingly know to be the case. There is a visible gap—but a mostly unacknowledged one. And this has happened in other places in the world, the German-speaking world between the wars, for example; even America could be struggling with this right now. So this is another point that needs to be thought about, as the crisis of absurdity is still very deep in China. Importantly, the literature is finally beginning to express it again as some of it did in the 1930s. This is now coming back, and there are various works stating, in effect: 'This is an absurd world we're living in.' So I think the critical question for China may very well be, 'what do we do about this crisis of absurdity?' It will particularly be the case if there is an economic downturn. No bubble of economic growth lasts forever, no boom lasts forever. And how will they make sense of things then? There are probably inadequate psychological and spiritual resources in China to deal with anything like this. In the West there were and are more, whether adequate or not in the longer run is unclear. I don't think this dimension has been looked at enough—*as yet.*



## Wanting to know everything in a complex world: Interview with Allison Blakely

*In the fall semester of 2007 Professor Allison Blakely visited the Netherlands, a country that he studied extensively for his acclaimed book on racial imagery, Blacks in the Dutch World: The Evolution of Racial Imagery in a Modern Society (Indiana University Press, 1994). His other work on the black experience in Europe, Russia and the Negro: Blacks in Russian History and Thought (Howard University Press, 1986), won the American Book Award in 1988. Professor Blakely published numerous articles in a myriad of national and international journals. Blakely is currently Professor of European and Comparative History and George and Joyce Wein Professor of African-American Studies at Boston University. In 2006 he was elected president of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, and in the spring of 2008 he will be a visiting fellow at Harvard University's W.E.B. Du Bois Institute. On 6 November, Suzanne de Graaf had the opportunity to attend his seminar, 'The Other Culture Clash: Is colour prejudice a thing of the past?', at Leiden University. During these two hours, we discussed the evolution of racial imagery in the United States and Europe from early modern times to the present, as well as the increasingly complex questions that surround the formation of identity in a multicultural society. This proved to be a good starting point for the following interview, in which she was able to ask Professor Blakely not only more about these issues, but also about his career, his current research and his experiences in the Netherlands, which ultimately led to Blacks in the Dutch World. And so a conversation followed about the appeal of history, the development of a career, the joy of researching new subjects and the challenges of investigating an ever more complex world—all with a slight Dutch flavour.*

*How did your interest in history begin?*

It began seriously when I was a teenager in Portland, Oregon. I cannot really explain it in logical terms, but I trace it back to one experience that I had while riding on a bus in the early 1950s. It was one of these buses with electronic attachments to a cable. Somehow the cable became disconnected, and the bus had to stop. While I was sitting there all of a sudden I started wondering, 'Where do I fit in all of this?'. As I grew older

I became a really passionate reader. I spent a lot of time in the library. It was a good way—from my mother's perspective—to keep me off the streets and stop me from getting into trouble with some of the other boys in my neighborhood. So I made her happy, and it made me happy when I was not in school to spend a lot of time in the public library. I became very interested in academic subjects and I enjoyed school. When I went to college at the University of Oregon I did not know what I wanted to major in for certain. I thought I wanted to become an engineer, so I began thinking of engineering as my chosen profession. But I discovered there were very few electives in terms of choices of subjects for classes to take in an engineering program. So I became more interested in the liberal arts—history, philosophy, literature and the life sciences. I wanted to learn a lot about a lot of different things, and when I came to a choice in the advanced years of college I discovered that history seemed to be the one formal discipline that included a lot of my interests. So history for me was a way to not make a choice of specializing. By the time I decided to go on to graduate training you had to choose some specialty; I decided I would specialize in Comparative History or something broader than just US history. At that time there was no formal field in comparative history or world history, so, because I am an American, and because I had taken almost exclusively American history in my undergraduate training, I decided to specialize in European history.

*Because you had not covered that previously?*

I had taken one course. I decided deliberately to specialize in a broader kind of historical area. By studying something beyond what I mistakenly thought I would naturally know because I was an American, I would have a more comprehensive kind of competence in terms of understanding history when I got a degree. I thought I could know American history on my own, but if I wanted to understand the world I should specialize in that broader framework and then I would have more at the end. And not only that, I decided to specialize in Russian history because I was very interested in revolution. I was very interested in Russian literature—that was one of the things I had begun to read as a teenager. And I have been very happy with the way it turned out. My doctorate is in modern European history with a specialization in Russia, but once I had the degree I could finally pursue that dream of doing comparative studies, and that is what I have done with my career. I started with a focus on Russia, but I branched out in a way that made me more of a scholar of the history of democracy. Even in Russian history my specialty was the Russian revolutionary movement,

but focusing on popular democracy, which that movement was aiming at. I have always been fascinated with that. It was only later in my career that I developed this interest in European dimensions of the African diaspora. And of course that was an outgrowth of my own background, being of black African descent and noticing, as I progressed in my studies, that this was a neglected area of history. So it was some place where I thought I could make a contribution, because in the meantime I had gained a number of foreign language competencies so I could do formal research in five languages. I could go deeper in trying to piece together some of this history of the African diaspora than a person who had the interest, but didn't have the tools to be able to do primary research.

*What made you study so many languages? Did you study them out of interest, or did you need them for your research?*

Initially I started with Russian in high school because I wanted to read Russian literature in the original. And then I discovered I enjoyed learning the languages so I added German (at least the reading knowledge). For my doctoral degree [at the University of California, Berkeley] I had to be able to conduct research in at least two foreign languages, and then in the course of the actual research I wanted to pursue, I had to learn French and Dutch because of my chosen areas to explore.

*Was there a specific event that triggered your interest in the history of the Netherlands?*

There was a specific event. I was actually in the Netherlands conducting research in Russian history at the International Institute for Social History (IISG) in Amsterdam. I was looking at archives that were not yet officially open containing the original documents from one of the Russian revolutionary parties, the socialist revolutionaries. I made a couple of visits to the Netherlands to explore those materials just in summer research trips. And I happened to be in the Netherlands in the mid-1970s, when Suriname became independent [in 1975]. And what triggered my interest in actually studying Dutch history was experiencing a certain amount of racism after the sudden increase in the black population in the Netherlands itself. I had no warning that there would be this kind of experience because I had found the Netherlands so different from the United States up until that point. But then all of a sudden, because I began to speak a little Dutch in the shops and on the street, I began to be treated as if I was a Surinamer. And to my surprise, that was not very pleasant in those days. And that was such a surprise that I wanted to know: what were the

historical reasons that something like this could occur in the Netherlands, which had a reputation for tolerance.

*That's very interesting! Originally we wanted to ask you if you had found any differences between the Dutch self-image of tolerance and your own research. Now it turns out you did not even have to do research, because you experienced it yourself..*

That's right, it was not about reading other people's accounts. But I had the positive image also from my own experience because I had been treated so well during those first visits in the mid-1970s. I just thought this place that had sheltered the American Pilgrims and Jews from Iberia, that had sheltered Huguenot refugees from persecution in France, and was a major place to give asylum to people suffering various late-twentieth-century kinds of turmoil in their own countries, was a safe haven. Then I was brought down to earth by this realization that even here you could have these changes in public attitudes. I think it was mainly because of the sudden appearance of the new population in the late 1970s, which put a certain pressure on housing, or maybe the job market. It is not clear to me whether it was really competition for jobs or just the perception of competition. Maybe the perception is more important than the reality. I think there was a perception among the Dutch population that there was this unwanted sudden influx of outsiders who looked and acted differently. Maybe this was just too much of a shock to take without some kind of backlash. I did not really understand it because I had just assumed that these kinds of things were not there at all. I just thought this was such a wonderful, peaceful, civil society. Don't get me wrong, I still recognized that the Dutch laws and the Dutch social system were some of the most advanced and inclusive in the world. I still realized that, but I was just surprised at what I perceived as nevertheless the presence of some of the same kinds of negative attitudes that I was so familiar with in other societies. The Netherlands, France and Scandinavia had a reputation for being places that especially African-Americans, musicians and just ordinary people, had often found to be a relief from the racism they routinely experienced.

*You mentioned that around this time you were starting to speak some Dutch. Did you encounter these negative new attitudes when talking to people, or just walking on the streets?*

In a way, I think both. In the shops I was looked at more suspiciously than before. I was accustomed to that at home but not in the Netherlands. And

then when I started to speak Dutch, little did I know that would make it worse! I should have spoken English and then I suppose there would have been a sigh of relief from the shopkeeper and I could have perhaps experienced my earlier kind of reception. But I was not yet sophisticated enough to realize that. The other way that I experienced it in public without verbal communication was in the public transport. The seat next to me would always be the last one to be occupied, if at all. I felt that this had changed. I felt there was more apprehensiveness from the Dutch. Still, if I had to put my reception and my experience in the Netherlands on a scale of one to ten, it was still somewhere around a seven. But it had been a ten, and I didn't understand why. And then, after all, I was a historian and so it just tweaked my curiosity. I asked myself: 'Is there a reason for this? Is there something that I can identify that might be useful, that could help people to understand better that we have got to learn how to get along?' It was probably pretty naïve in itself, but that was my motivation.

*Do you still feel that your research can contribute something to the way people interact with each other?*

I am less confident now than I was before that I can contribute something that will be useful. I have a sense that it has all become much more complex now, with this new element of the clash between Islam and the West. I think my concerns have been somewhat overshadowed in some ways, and it is more complex because part of the Islamic population is also black. In France for example, they estimated that about 30 percent of those youths in the *banlieux*, the people at the heart of the disturbance, were black as well as Muslim. And then there were blacks living in these poor areas who were not Muslim as well. So it is a very complex kind of social dynamic that I had not bargained on when I started doing this kind of research over twenty years ago. I never realized how complicated it could get. So I am also not certain how helpful the products of my investigation will be or how much attention they will be given, because so many people have their attention riveted on violence and other kinds of more conspicuous clashes. What I'm talking about may just be a little bit too subtle and too academic. Or it could be that, with things swirling at such a pace, people just do not have time to even think about these issues so much as simply responding to crises. I hope I am not being too pessimistic... I am still not pessimistic enough to just stop what I am doing and try to take Voltaire's advice and just go tend my own garden, stick my head in the ground.

*You could also be researching for the sake of knowledge.*

There are certain kinds of intellectual activity that I enjoy just because I enjoy it. I enjoy translation of certain kinds of materials, poetry, for example. I enjoy trying to write a little poetry. I enjoy trying to write music and to play a little bit. So I do those kinds of things just because I enjoy it. Most of my more academic kinds of efforts have been pragmatically motivated. I started out thinking—and again, perhaps naïvely—that a lot of what is wrong with the world is a lack of understanding, both in terms of race relations and in terms of other kinds of societal problems. I thought that all I had to do was become a good teacher, and perhaps influence the next generation of leaders in society. I thought that everything could become better with education and understanding. Yet the longer I have lived and the longer I have taught, the less optimistic I am that people learn from history. And it's not because we can't learn from history. What I have learned is that we don't. It is not that the history does not teach us useful lessons that might be applied beneficially. It is because the will is not there among key elements of society to put into practice the lessons we have learned from history. If you look at what is taking place at this moment for example in the Middle East, it is not for lack of knowledge—at least not for the lack of knowledge being out there about what could be done to improve things. It is the lack of will by those who are in power, who are in positions to actually enact policies, to bring about what is desirable. So what I have learned is that the critical points of intervention into world affairs—to the extent that human beings can influence world affairs—are often not under the control of those with the knowledge and with the values that I would prefer. And so that has given me a whole different perspective on how effective anything I teach can be in influencing the way of the world.

*Coming to your book, Blacks in the Dutch World. What kind of effect do you think that raising awareness about racial imagery will have? Will it be beneficial in some way?*

My hope has always been that there are enough people of goodwill out there who, even if they might be unconscious racists, might be influenced enough to be brought into an awareness that might do some good. But of course this is the kind of hope that you can never actually confirm whether it has been realized or not. It will often happen out there without feedback. One encouraging thing is that I have seen an increase in the number of people actually engaging in related research of their own, which tells me that at least my efforts have been reinforced, projected

further, by the energy of others. And sometimes into areas that I would not have tried to explore. So that is one of the kinds of things I think that university professors hope for; but you can never really plan on it. So I guess that is the brightest kind of result that I have ever achieved. But I am continually reminded how unhappy a story I have gotten myself into. There are so few happy endings along the trails that I try to follow and in the different aspects of this research.

*Can you give some examples of what scholars elaborating on your research are working on?*

One current example in the Netherlands that immediately comes to mind is Esther Schreuder, who a few years ago completed a Master's thesis at the University of Amsterdam in art history. She says she was initially inspired by my book *Blacks in the Dutch World* and is at the moment hard at work on a major exhibit on Africans in Dutch and Flemish art, to be mounted next summer at the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam. A recent example of some influence from my book, *Russia and the Negro: Blacks in Russian History and Thought*, can be seen in an anthology on Russian literature by several authors who are mostly unknown to me; yet a number of them cite my book in their chapters.<sup>1</sup>

*Several times in your research you have written about the Dutch tradition in which Saint Nick (Sinterklaas) is accompanied by a black figure whom the Dutch call 'Black Pete' (Zwarte Piet). As you note in your book, this figure has been highly controversial for years.<sup>2</sup> Recently, Dutch television has consciously tried to alter the image of Pete as a black man by introducing Petes who are blue, orange, lilac or shocking pink, explaining to the children that this happened when Pete sailed through a rainbow. Nowadays, there are also more St. Nicholas figures made out of brown chocolate and Pete figures made out of white chocolate. What do you think about these developments?*

It is very complicated and obviously associated with this whole broader identity question. It strikes me that the Sinterklaas tradition is very closely associated with traditional Dutch culture. And I suppose the ideal would be to come up with some resolution that would still allow a certain amount of distinctive character to this tradition, but at the same time remove its offensive character. That's why I thought the solution I came up with in an unpublished, rejected essay, was not a bad one. And that is to have Zwarte Piet be *zwart* but not in the old negative, highly derogatory stereotypical forms. Have Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet as companions, and have them as a symbol of national unity, rather than one being a saint and the other

being a devil that hauls bad children away. This has been a more complex question since I wrote that essay because now increasingly the issue of Islam and the Muslim community has surfaced. The question is, if it is going to be a unified Netherlands how do you prioritize the white saint and the black companion, leaving out the other groups? So perhaps there might be some way of honoring the multicultural nature of twenty-first-century Dutch society without totally renouncing what was bicultural and now could be multicultural.

*You have mentioned the complexity one encounters when asking questions about racial identity in Europe. Did this complexity make it harder to research black history in a European context than it would have been in an African-American context?*

What I have always found about research in the Netherlands is accessibility to sources that I think is actually freer than what I find at home. It may be in part because there had not been this kind of research before when I was working on the topic between 1982 and 1993. If only I could come up with the right questions to ask I could find sources that were not viewed as in any way questionable by the bibliographers, or the establishment if you will. I was able to find a lot because I had done enough initial investigation to know where to look for sources, and because I found a considerable amount of assistance from people who knew about this kind of source material but did not want to deal with it themselves. In the United States I could not have found out very much about this kind of subject matter; there is that kind of distance.

*I can also imagine that it was not the kind of topic that was researched at the time.*

Well, not at all! That's why it was waiting there for me. It was a sensitive subject for Dutch scholars—and I found the same thing in France. I don't think they would have wanted to be the ones to write about this. Maybe now that is more possible than before because now you have a society that is more multicultural and so there is a greater interest in these kinds of subjects as legitimate scholarly subjects. But they were not thought of as important earlier within the established academic circles in Europe. And the people who would logically have pursued this kind of research of course would be people of predominantly black African descent from the former colonies; but very few of them were highly educated. Very few of them had doctoral degrees or were in a position to do this. And if they did have such credentials and if they wanted to advance in the profession

they might have been very hesitant to pursue subject areas that might be considered embarrassing.

*Do you feel your findings and those of your colleagues who have researched the history of blacks in the European diaspora have challenged prevailing views among historians?*

Yes, absolutely so. I think the main achievement in that regard is the extent to which we have revealed the actual presence, and at times significance, of blacks in European societies. I have found that once this presence and significance is known, other scholars in various disciplines have become attracted to the subject area. There are literally countless works with interests related to mine that have been published over the past several years.<sup>3</sup>

*What are you working on now?*

What I am trying to do is to look at the respective histories of blacks in different European societies and do a comparative overview of those narratives. There is more of a history in, let's say, England, France or The Netherlands than there is in the rest, but I want to do a comparative overview of all of those histories, coming down from the Middle Ages to now and see what that history is. Then I want to see how those respective histories are converging with the present, in which you have a larger actual black population in Europe than ever before. And the kind of negative stereotypes that I was sharing with you today, and that can be found in my books, illustrate how history can clash with the present. Even the controversial nature of *Zwarte Piet* now is a case of history clashing with the present. But you can also see a similar kind of clash in terms of other aspects of the social interaction of Europeans with these groups that were formerly part of their empires—but not actually people you had to live with at home. You could live with them in the colonies, where you dominated them, but now, living with them at home, sometimes in the same neighborhoods, in the same jobs, without the hierarchical earlier structure, that is an interesting kind of dynamic to try to sort out: how are the histories melding with the present?

*Do you think that the results of this research will yield new viewpoints that could also be useful for African history or African-American history?*

I'm counting on it! You could look at my frame of exploration as sort of circum-Atlantic. We are talking about the African–American–European exchange, because that is what has been going on in terms of this African

diaspora history and my interest in the European dimensions of it. And so I think there should be an audience in all these different parts of the world that should be interested in what I have to say. Especially with the new interest now in the new immigration to Europe, only a small part of which is this black population.

## Notes

- 1 C.T. Nepomnyashchy, et al. (eds.), *Under the Sky of My Africa: Alexander Pushkin and Blackness* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006).
- 2 The figure of Zwarte Piet has always had a somewhat ambiguous role. Descended from a devil hauled through the streets by St. Nicholas on horseback on 5 December, he has evolved into a black- or brown-skinned man who acts as a servant to St. Nicholas and is both a clown and a bogeyman to children. His ambiguity also shows in the way he is depicted: he carries both a sack full of sweets and toys to reward obedient children with, and a bundle of birch twigs to punish disobedient ones. Zwarte Piet is also said to put especially disobedient children into his sack and take them to Spain, where he and St. Nicholas reside during the year. The bogeyman aspect has been softened over the decades, but Zwarte Piet still shares traits that have been used to stereotype blacks, both in appearance and in behaviour: he has thick, black, curly hair, full red lips, brown skin and he wears big golden earrings; he is dressed in the attire of a sixteenth-century page; he is a servant more than a companion; and often acts clownish and childlike. For more information on the Dutch St. Nicholas tradition, see Allison Blakely, *Blacks in the Dutch World: The Evolution of Racial Imagery in a Modern Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 39–49.
- 3 For fairly recent examples see: David Dabydeen, John Gilmore and Cecily Jones (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Black British History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Peter Martin and Christine Alonzo (eds.), *Zwischen Charleston und Stechschritt: Schwarze im Nationalsozialismus* (Hamburg: Dolling und Qalitz Verlag, 2004); Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996); and Maxim Matusevich (ed.), *Africa in Russia, Russia in Africa: Three Centuries of Encounters* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2006).

# Transoceanic Trade: The Reconstruction of Al-Mukhâ through VOC Records: Interview with C.G. Brouwer

*After climbing the steep steps of their town house along Amsterdam's busy Ceintuurbaan, Carolien Stolte and Leonard Blussé are warmly greeted by Kees Brouwer and his wife Rie. As soon as we are seated, we are served original Yemeni coffee. In a spacious living room that contains without doubt the largest library on Yemen in the Netherlands if not Western Europe, and is decorated with several Yemeni oil paintings, this sets a fitting scene for an interview that will focus on South Arabian trade and the larger Middle East. However, as we remark, Brouwer's recent study of Yemen's overseas trade makes the point that in the seventeenth century coffee was not at all the prime export commodity of Al-Mukhâ, the trading emporium that Brouwer has studied in such detail. He cheerfully affirms this, saying that it is not sufficiently realised that coffee was really a by-product in the early days of Al-Mukhâ's trade. His experiences with (and in) this port would be the pièce de résistance of our interview with him—but first we must go back to earlier years.*

*Could you tell us something about your background?*

My experience as a boy both at home and at school has to such an extent given shape to my later research that I perhaps should speak in some detail about it. I was born in 1936 in Amsterdam, where my father was a metal worker at a shipyard. But that term is an understatement: he was actually an incredibly dexterous and skilled craftsman who, for instance, made cylinders, piston rods and propeller shafts for ships' engines. He could repair anything and as a result we often had lots of fish to eat from grateful fishermen whom he had helped out, repairing their engines even in the dead of night. The city that most people see nowadays is not my Amsterdam. I can still say that I was brought up in an Amsterdam that really was a port city of old, with businesses and workshops connected to shipping everywhere around us.

Since the 1930s, my in-laws had owned a little cabin near the village of Ransdorp, in the Waterland region north-east of Amsterdam. This is an extremely idyllic part of the Dutch countryside that has remained

basically unspoiled since the seventeenth century. Ransdorp is famous for its truncated church tower, which you see depicted on numerous seventeenth- or eighteenth-century drawings or etchings of the IJ estuary of Amsterdam—for instance, Rembrandt van Rijn's drawing of 'The church at Ransdorp.' Legend has it that the top of the tower was chipped off by the bowsprit of an East Indiaman that was not able to tack in time. The cabin, which Rie and I still own, is amidst meadows, pools and lakes where we sail our little boat and live in complete harmony with nature during the summer period. The popular name for Ransdorp used to be 'Rarup' or 'Rarob,' and that was exactly the name of the flute ship aboard which Pieter van den Broecke, the hero of my research on early seventeenth-century Yemen, made an explorative voyage to the Red Sea in 1638. Hence I have attached the name of 'D'Fluyte Rarob' to my private publishing house, about which I presently hope to tell you more.

*What about your school years?*

In the early 1950s, I had the kind of excellent Jesuit education that just does not exist anymore. My teachers at the Ignatius College in Amsterdam all had doctoral degrees and were well-known scholars. It is touching how completely devoted they were to bringing out the best in all of us boys. Apart from languages, mathematics and sciences—the usual curriculum—we were taught music, singing in the school choir and playing in its orchestra. I played the cello passionately; even today I cherish a great love of that instrument, admiring composers such as Witold Lutoslavski, Rodion Shchedrin and Tigran Manssurjan. We read Jean Racine as 14-year-olds in the second form, translating his French alexandrines into Dutch ones, and of course we had to learn by heart the verses of that great Dutch playwright, Joost van den Vondel, townsman and contemporary of Rembrandt. We were literally immersed in the arts, in music, in literature, and painting. It was in those years that I became a worshipper of modern Dutch poets like Adriaan Roland Holst, and most of all the incomparable Jan Hendrik Leopold, whose translations of Omar Khayyam are truly gems of literature that made me aware of Persian mysticism. As a schoolboy, I wrote two theatre pieces myself, one of which, in the fashion of Roland Holst's 'heathen ideas,' was promptly banned from performance by my teachers.

After secondary school, I first attended teacher training college (*kweekschool*) where I met Rie, and ever since then we have been inseparable. Not quite ready to take up teaching, I decided to finish my studies with an academic degree in Dutch language and literature at the *Gemeente*

*Universiteit van Amsterdam* (now Amsterdam University). Here too, it was a great privilege to be taught by capable professors. Although I do not think this will be of great concern to *Itinerario's* non-Dutch readers, I have to add that I was taught by impressive figures, among whom was the authoritarian philologist W.G. Hellinga, a famous Vondel specialist, who introduced both the codicological approach to medieval manuscripts and the bibliological analysis of the printed book into academia at that time. C. van de Kieft, in charge of medieval history and auxiliary sciences, showed me how to decipher charters and documents with the help of palaeographical and linguistic skills. Jacques Presser, specialising in modern Dutch history, a sparkling successor to Jan Romein, taught me to pose challenging questions about the past. Later on their teachings turned out to be of great importance for my research on manuscripts, books and documents related to Yemeni history. I feel grateful to them all.

*You seem to have had a very dedicated approach to your studies right from the beginning.*

Well, you are jumping the gun here so to say, because I was just going to tell you that after two years of university I was thoroughly fed up with the academic world, and so in 1962 Rie and I decided that we were going to make a *Bildungsreise* of one or two years with a donkey through Yugoslavia. But since it turned out that we were not exactly welcomed by the bureaucracy of Marshal Tito's paradise we continued our trip through Macedonia and Greece and walked down south through the valley of Thessalia and the Pindos Mountains all the way to Athens. We slept in a tent or in the open air, and everywhere we were treated with the hospitality that Greece has been famous for since antiquity. Once a week we bought, or simply received, a five kilo loaf of bread from farmers or shepherds; and they fed our donkey too, with the notable exception of the monks of one of the Meteora monasteries who refused to do so. That still bothers me!

From Piraeus, an exciting port, we took the boat to Alexandria and settled in Cairo for a while. We then travelled up the Nile aboard the Sudanese postal boat—mind you, the Aswan dam was not yet in operation—and visited a number of Nubian villages, admiring Byzantine churches and Pharaonic temples alike, which now, unfortunately, have been swallowed up by the river or moved elsewhere—such as Abu Simbel. I should emphasise that although we did visit many monuments, Rie and I were much more fascinated by Islamic architecture and contemporary Egyptian life than by the remnants of antiquity. A life-long passion for

the Arab world was born on this trip, and in that sense it really was a formative experience.

Via the Red Sea littoral—with its oil-derricks and aquariums—we returned to Suez and Cairo, sailed to Beirut and witnessed the tragedies of the Palestinian camps. Shortly after we arrived in Damascus, in March 1963, the revolution broke out and Assad came to power. Thus we had to flee to Jordan where we again faced the hopeless situation in the Palestinian camps and the understandable outrage of their inhabitants against Israel. Back in Holland, finally, I not only again picked up my Dutch studies but also started with Arabic, which I had learned to speak on our wanderings.

In the 1960s, the IMNO, the ‘Institute of the Modern Near East’ in Amsterdam, was an organisation consisting of two completely divergent tribal groups of staff members: those who had graduated in Leiden and were basically philologists and linguists—formidable scholars in their own right but strangely distant from today’s Middle East—and the other group, with people like myself and Rudolph Peters—nowadays professor of Islamic law at the institute mentioned, who wrote a Ph.D. on the role of ‘jihād’ in colonial times—who were deeply involved in what was going on in present-day Arabistan. One other such adventurer was Nikolaos van Dam, now Her Majesty’s Ambassador in Jakarta, but then a student of tribal factions within the Syrian army. His Ph.D. thesis, rendered into Arabic, is still being studied today in Syria and only available within army circles!

*How did your own academic career henceforth progress?*

In 1969, I got my degree in Dutch studies, with a subsidiary degree in Arabic. At about the same time, I was appointed staff member in the Dutch Department, teaching medieval literature and codicology. Among my colleagues were eminent scholars such as Eddie Grootes, Bert Paasman—since 2002 in charge of the colonial and post-colonial history of culture and literature<sup>1</sup>—and Herman Pleij. A few words about my BA and MA theses may be called for. The former focused on Willem Godschalck van Focquenbroch, the latter on Aernout van Overbeke, both of whom lived in the seventeenth century. Focquenbroch, a physician and burlesque poet, served in the West Indian Company (WIC), whereas Van Overbeke, a lawyer and poet, was an employee of the East India Company (VOC). My investigations brought me into contact with the VOC archivist, *Mevrouw* [Mrs.] M.A.P. Meilink-Roelofs, as we all piously named her, with whom I would work later on. Already close to her retirement at the General State Archives in The Hague, she had finished her impressive

Ph.D. thesis,<sup>2</sup> a reply to Job van Leur's pioneering work,<sup>3</sup> and had also completed the inventory of the VOC deposit at the *Algemeen Rijksarchief*.<sup>4</sup> She was thus both an eminent archivist and a formidable scholar who in the next decade sired a new generation of VOC historians. I myself was not yet ready for all that.

As far as my Arab studies are concerned, I had chosen medieval Arab history as my field of study. So I wrote an elaborate essay on Ibn al-Athîr and his famous *Al-Kâmil fî al-Târikh* ('The Complete History'), checking whether his account of Salâh al-Dîn's reconquest of Palestine in 1187, causing the fall of the Crusaders' kingdom, can be considered faithful to the events, especially when compared to the authoritative relations of contemporary biographers such as Ibn Shaddâd, Abû Shâma and 'Imâd al-Dîn.

Well, let me now continue my story. I soon observed, while lecturing on [Middle] Eastern themes or motives in Dutch medieval literature that few students were interested, even though I tried to carefully select attractive research subjects such as pilgrims' travelogues to Jerusalem, Jacob van Maerlant's representation of Muslims and Hein van Aken's call for a new Crusade.<sup>5</sup> I did not always have, moreover, the freedom to treat Oriental influences in the Department of Dutch Studies. So I felt increasingly limited by these institutional boundaries, and I noticed that I was slowly but surely drifting away from my Dutch-oriented comrades: I had a strong Arab perspective.

*How about the 'academic climate' in Amsterdam in those years?*

I was quite devoted to leftist ideas in those years—perhaps even more so than my own students—and deeply involved in the democratisation movement at Amsterdam University. But I became increasingly disillusioned: all those reforms did not lead to more capable, autonomous or proactive students; all they really accomplished was slowing down the decision-making processes by endless arguments and squabbles. We did not discuss the nature of academic teaching, or anything relating to the content of our work, but we did pull all-nighters discussing policy with regard to less urbane topics such as the right to smoke during the courses, grade evaluations etc. Still, I found Leiden University scarier in those days—there the students addressed each other by surname, and everyone seemed very conservative, students and teachers alike. I did take Persian classes in Leiden, but I generally felt more at home in Amsterdam, even though I realised I could not tolerate the situation even there for much longer either.

All these considerations together led to the conclusion that I did not want to continue on the path I was on. In 1973, I gave up my safe position at the Dutch Department of the University of Amsterdam. This immediately created an enormous sense of freedom, enabling me to pursue my second love: the study of Middle Eastern history. A year later, I finished my degree in Arabic, with Persian and Turkish as subsidiary [subjects]. Now I looked for a suitable subject in which I could put all my different capabilities together. Having re-discovered the wealth of Dutch archival sources, I resolved to focus on the maritime economic past of South Arabia, of Al-Mukhâ in particular, during the early decades of the seventeenth century, when the Ottoman occupying forces were driven out by the Qâsimid imâms. Contemporary Yemeni chronicles and biographies would be explored for political and military developments; Dutch records preserved in the archives of the VOC—the Dutch East India Company maintained a semi-permanent factory in the Tihâma port for 150 years—for economic data. In this project, actually, my passion for both Dutch and Arab history, my competence in the source languages involved, my philological, codicological, archival and palaeographical skills and, not least, my various experiences in Near Eastern countries merged. This was, so to say, my axial experience.

*Who were the leading scholars in this field at the time?*

As far as the Middle Ages and early modern history are concerned, Middle Eastern historiography, I discovered, was (and still is) based mainly on annalistic chronicles and biographical accounts providing for the most part dynastic and military information. In the area of socio-economic history, reconstructed on the evidence of a multitude of documents, there was (and still is) a lot less activity. But that was exactly the area I wanted to work in! Let me give some examples. In his Ph.D. thesis, Lein Oebele Schuman, my first professor in Arabic, focuses on the *Qilâdat al-Nabr*, a chronicle written by Abû Makhrama (±1540), dealing *inter alia* with the Portuguese arrival in Southern Arabia from 1513 onwards.<sup>6</sup> Basically, this is a photomechanical edition of a handwritten Arabic text version, supplemented with a translation into modern English and a limited number of mainly philological comments. This type of research exemplifies an age-old tradition. To Schuman's family belong European scholars like Oscar Löfgren<sup>7</sup> and Gentwell R. Smith,<sup>8</sup> and Yemeni historians such as 'Abd Allâh Muhammad al-Hibshî<sup>9</sup> and Sa'id 'Abd al-Fattâh 'Âshûr.<sup>10</sup> In fact, these researchers are philologists rather than historians.

Robert B. Serjeant, on the other hand, a top Arabist and anthropologist who had lived in Aden when it was still a British protectorate, collected in his *The Portuguese off the South Arabian Coast* extensive quotations from various Hadramî manuscripts.<sup>11</sup> He does not aim at a synthesis, but simply juxtaposes different accounts, leaving it to his readers to construct a chain of events. But worse, long-lasting patterns are far more important to him than ever-changing facts. Situations in one century can be clarified by situations from another one. So he is not a historian either. Then there were the writings of the pre-war Company historian Heerd Terpstra. His study on the *Westerkwartieren* or ‘Western Districts’ of the VOC,<sup>12</sup> based on dozens of records, was very useful, although it concentrated on political and military events, and was thoroughly eurocentric. Whereas Van Leur, Niels Steensgaard<sup>13</sup> and Meilink-Roelofs rightfully drew attention to economic issues, they treated Yemen and its main port only in passing, deriving their insights or paradigms, moreover, from a very limited number of (mainly edited) documents.

And before I forget: every Wednesday Margot van Opstall, Marius Roessingh (both archivists working at the Algemeen Rijksarchief) and you, Leonard, used to organise the so-called Loempia lunch at a Chinese restaurant around the corner for visiting VOC researchers from all over the world who happened to be visiting the archive. During those lunches we would exchange information about our recent discoveries. Together with monthly Saturday morning meetings at the Amsterdam Historical Museum where enthusiastic historians of overseas history used to present their latest research in a more formal manner, these get-togethers were very inspiring and useful, not only for a lone wolf like me but surely for everybody. Margot and Marius both sadly passed away in 1986 and not long after their death these meetings came to an end.

In conclusion, I put a lot of time into getting to know the field, and I established that the economic history of Yemen was both important and understudied. The Dutch presence in South Arabia, moreover, was almost a ‘blind spot’ in the historiography of the Company. In 1975, I approached Mrs Meilink-Roelofs—recently appointed extraordinary professor of the history of European expansion at Leiden University—who accepted me as a Ph.D. student, even though my plan of using a ‘double perspective’ by treating Western as well as Arabic sources did not appeal to her much. I visited her regularly in The Hague. We had conflicting worldviews, but we got along quite well. She was supervising some promising Ph.D.s at the time: Jurrien van Goor, Hugo K. s’ Jacob, Christiaan Jörg and Frank Lequin, to name just a few.

*How did your first book progress from there?*

Personally, I wanted to leave the Netherlands again, and I was adamant about going to Cairo—the Egyptian capital being the location for some of the more important Yemeni codices, kept in the *Dâr al-Kutub* or ‘National Library.’ Professor Meilink agreed, and I left in 1976 with a generous scholarship from ZWO,<sup>14</sup> which covered my expenses for living and working in Cairo. It also allowed Rie and our two young children to accompany me.

We lived on Zamâlek, an island in the Nile, and right across from us the new library building was under construction. The island itself was very picturesque. Soldiers swam by all the time—it was part of their training to cross the Suez Canal I suppose. Feluccas charged with all types of earthenware jars sailed along. In the light of the moon touching love scenes were shot by film directors supported by their crew. Peasants had won small plots of land from the river to cultivate their crops, and they fished with little lanterns at night. Peasants, fishermen and other creatures, this whole shady underworld lived in cabins along the riverside. I became acquainted with them, and Rie and I actually got to know them well as friends. I was able to arrange that every morning one of the boys from these huts would row me to the library in his little fishing boat—arriving on the opposite side, I had to plough through the mud a bit in order to get ashore, it’s true, but it was so much shorter and more agreeable than taking the long route over the bridge by bus in the murderous heat! You can imagine that the other less enterprising (mostly very proper) scholars working in the *Dâr al-Kutub* thought that this bearded giant who emerged from the Nile River did not quite fit the description of a real scholar. No doubt they thought I was insane, or at least highly eccentric. But, needless to say, in Cairo (and Alexandria) I also made several friends among scholars studying South Arabian history such as Ayman Fu’âd Sayyid—who composed an impressive repertory of Yemeni manuscripts<sup>15</sup>—Muhammad ‘Abd al-‘Âl Ahmad,<sup>16</sup> Fârûk ‘Uthmân Abâza<sup>17</sup> and Jâd Tâhâ.<sup>18</sup>

After having lived in Egypt for about a year, Rie and I went to North Yemen for the very first time. We had sent the children to Rie’s parents in the Netherlands, because we felt it would be better for them. We immersed ourselves in Yemeni life, which turned out to be totally different from the Egyptian way of doing things. Yemen may have been a republic since 1967, but in fact it was still very much a tribal area of which large parts had not really been brought under any kind of government control. However, this was already changing right then—Yemen is so strategically located that many countries were more than willing to reform and develop

its age-old infrastructure. Foreign companies, from Chinese to Dutch and German firms, were building asphalt roads at an incredible pace. Asphalt notwithstanding, it was still a beautiful country. The Red Sea coast or *Tihâma*, unbearably hot with a 100 per cent humidity rate, has a partly African population and culture, whereas the mountainous hinterland with its green terraces is inhabited by pure Arabs.

What about Al-Mukhâ, the main subject of my research? On a memorable day, after a tiring journey all the way down from Ta'izz through the burning plain of the Tihâma, we approached that legendary city. Then we saw a heap of ruins in the sand. It seemed like a still from an old western movie. We drove into this deathly quiet village with a jeep full of heavily armed tribesmen. We asked where the city centre was—and we were told that we had already reached it. Al-Mukhâ was, in fact, a most desolate place. A handful of three- to four-storeyed ramshackle houses, reminiscent of the once busy trading port, stood amidst a vast number of poor fishermen's reed huts, within a wide mud wall that had for the most part collapsed. A few rusty carcasses lay scattered on the beach. The lighthouse, once a beacon for cargo vessels, had gone out of use.

After two to three months we returned to the Netherlands. I now had the feel of both local historiographical sources offering a wealth of written data and a lot of local experience under my belt. I was now eager to study the relevant VOC records in The Hague. It was wonderful to work in the old Archives building at Bleijenburg, but very time-consuming. As few documents relate exclusively to Yemen, I always had to comb through caseloads of files to find even a mention of Al-Mukhâ. But whenever I did, it held a great sense of discovery. During a two-day interdisciplinary symposium at Bamberg held in October 1977, I expressed my opinion that the Dutch records are of paramount importance to the study of South Arabia's economic past. The printed version of this lecture, dating from 1978, was the first one of a long series of separate essays published since in a variety of languages and in a wide range of scholarly journals. Of course, getting to know eminent Yemen researchers of German and Swiss origin such as Prof. Hans Becker, Horst Kopp, Volker Höhfeld, Klaus Kreiser, Hans Steffen, Barbara Finster and Armin Schopen personally mattered greatly to me. Some of them became friends for life!<sup>19</sup>

In those days I switched from Prof. Meilink-Roelofs to the maritime historian Prof. Jaap R. Bruijn, Mrs Meilink having become increasingly disenchanted with me because I devoted so much time to minute research without presenting her with any results or, to put it bluntly, chapters of my thesis. Prof. Bruijn was more sympathetic to my 'currycomb' approach

to the archival data, although he did not want to supervise me without a scholar who would look at the Arabian side of things. Prof. Stefan Wild, successor to Schuman in Amsterdam, was willing to take up that part, and then I really had two great guiding lights with both a wealth of knowledge and a passion for the subject matter.

In the years that followed I completed my archival explorations, but for reasons of a personal nature that I shall not enter into here I was no longer in a hurry to finish. First of all, in 1988 I published with Brill in Leiden, in close cooperation with my Palestinian friend Avo Kaplanian, a bulky book including a variety of VOC documents of a socio-economic nature concerning early seventeenth-century Southern Arabia translated into Arabic with historical annotations.<sup>20</sup> Then, after a serious copyright war with Brill, I established my own publishing house, called *D'Fluyte Rarob*. A second edition of the Arabic book was successfully launched, and in the end 'Ubâdî Publishers in Sana'a even distributed a third one at Yemeni prices which is, to my great pleasure, still available. At about the same time, 1988–89, a large travelling exhibition on Yemen visited the Netherlands, and I was asked by the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam to arrange the section on Dutch–Yemeni relations through the ages. It had to be done within three months, so I put all my contacts into the project, both Dutch and foreign ones. And we succeeded in getting the job done! I even managed to publish an accompanying book on the activities displayed by the VOC in South Arabian waters during the 1614–55 period, containing a wealth of hitherto unknown data.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, in order to distance myself temporarily from matters Yemeni, I edited six original Dutch tragedies, in three volumes, dealing with decisive episodes in Islamic—read Timurid, Persian-Afghan and Turkish—history, dating from the Golden and Silver Age.<sup>22</sup> In three subsequent seasons, from 1992 to 1994, they were officially presented in the national *Theaterfestival* at The Hague. One of them, Johannes Serwouters' *Tamerlan* (1657), was staged and broadcast; transformed into an opera by Klaas ten Holt it is still awaiting performance. Another one, Abraham Kemp's *Osman* (1623)—featuring the gifted Sultan who in 1618 granted the Dutch permission to conduct commerce in the Red Sea area—was played twice in Beograd. It should be remarked here that, tracing the patron of Frans van Steenwyk's *Koelikan* (1745), the Afghan conqueror of Persia and India, Nâdir Shâh, I could rely on Lequin's admirable thesis on the Company's staff in Bengal.<sup>23</sup>

However, I could no longer ignore the serious pressure exerted on me by my two supervisors. I had to take my Ph.D. degree as soon as

possible. So, in 1997 the long-planned book was published under the title of *Al-Mukhâ: Profile of a Yemeni Seaport...*<sup>24</sup> It was a thorough description of the city of Al-Mukhâ and its shipping.

*What has happened since then?*

Just the description of seventeenth-century Al-Mukhâ had taken up an entire book, and I had not even begun to treat its international commerce! Having both time and material, I decided accurately to analyse the city's trade by product. I started with minerals, then coffee, porcelain, pepper and other spices, cottons and silks. Some details that I needed were hard to find, and I am afraid I can rightly say I have an obsession with completeness.... Nevertheless, in 2006 my second book on the Red Sea port appeared, entitled *Al-Mukhâ: The Transoceanic Trade of a Yemeni Staple Town...*<sup>25</sup> It deals with coffee, spices and textiles. The third book which will treat such products as dyes, aromatics and stimulants, in addition to the minerals and porcelains just referred to, is now well under way. So 'The Continuing Story of Al-Mukhâ' is going to be a real triptych!

As far as possible, all of the commodities have been dealt with in a uniform manner. The areas of production, ports of origin, destination, varieties and qualities, quantities and prices, and, not least, profits realised or losses suffered: these are described in the smallest details. The consequent conversion of weights and currencies into local *bahârs* and reals of eight makes comparisons possible. Not only have the commercial activities displayed by Indian Muslims and Bâniyans been analysed, but also Dutch and English trading operations, even though these often prove to have been utterly futile. I consider the reconstruction of the city, shipping and trade of Al-Mukhâ at the turn of the seventeenth century as a contribution to the maritime economic history of Yemen, of the Peninsula, of the Arab world and, in the end, of the Indian Ocean. In my view, local studies are the solid materials for wider surveys or explanatory models.

Finally, my funding in the past has mainly come from ZWO, from museums, from the Yemeni government and, last but not least, from Rie, who has always supported my investigations wholeheartedly. The Yemeni government arranged for several trips to South Arabia during which I explored the ports of Hudayda, Aden, Mukallâ, Al-Shihr and Sayhût, in addition to that of Al-Mukhâ, and lectured at universities and institutes in Sana'a, Ta'izz and Aden on the basis of my publications. These lectures were all delivered in Arabic—English still being considered a colonial language, and therefore not held in high esteem. In addition, education in Yemen is progressing only slowly, so most students would not be capable

of attending a seminar in English. I always stressed the importance of the Dutch sources for Yemeni history as well as the necessity of learning Dutch for enterprising scholars who would like to have access to this wealth of material. There is a limited group of highly qualified scholars in Yemen—I may refer to Sayyid Mustafâ Sâlim, Husayn al-'Amrî and Muhammad 'Abd al-Rahîm Jâzim, all of whom are broaching Yemeni social and economic history by editing collections of records<sup>26</sup>—but unfortunately academic life is extremely difficult. There is little money or funding, and there is much bureaucracy, two factors greatly restricting scholars in their opportunities. I tried all I could to pull some promising Yemeni historians into the highly successful TANAP project of Leiden University, which has now come to an end, but my efforts turned out to be fruitless.

Inshallâh! As I noted in the introduction to the second part of my triptych, my work is meant 'to encourage historians, Yemenis and non-Yemenis, to steer this rarely sailed course.' If they do not want to steer their own vessel they may come on board 'D' Fluyte Rarob' and navigate the largely forgotten past of Yemen's maritime trade with me as their pilot!

## Notes

- 1 Cf. B. Paasman, *Wandelen onder de palmen: De morele actualiteit van het koloniale verleden* (Amsterdam: 2000).
- 2 M.A.P. Meilink-Roelofs, *Asian Trade and European Influence in the Indonesian Archipelago between 1500 and about 1630* (1962; repr. The Hague: 1969).
- 3 J.C. van Leur, *Indonesian Trade and Society: Essays in Asian Social and Economic History*, translated by J.S. Holmes and A. van Marle. Selected Studies on Indonesia by Dutch Scholars, 1 (The Hague, etc.: 1955). The Original Dutch studies were published in 1934 and 1947.
- 4 Included in R. Raben and H. Spijkerma (eds.), *De Archieven van de Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie/The Archives of the Dutch East India Company (1602–1795): Algemeen Rijksarchief, Eerste Afdeling...* (The Hague: 1992).
- 5 Only recently, a (supervisual) contribution in this field appeared: R. Harper, *Als God met ons is... Jacob van Maerlant en de vijanden van het christelijke geloof. Nederlandse Literatuur en Cultuur in de Middeleeuwen*, XIX (Amsterdam: 1999).
- 6 L.O. Schuman, *Political History of the Yemen at the Beginning of the 16th Century: Abu Makhrama's account of the Years 906–927 H (1500–1521 A.D.) with Annotations* (Groningen: 1960).

- 7 Ibn al-Mugawîr, *Descriptio Arabiae Meridionalis, praemissis capitibus de Mecca et parte regionis Higâz, qui liber inscribitur Ta-rih al-mustabsir, secundum codicem Constantinopolitanum Hagiae Sophiae 3080 collato codice Leidensi or. 5572, cum adnotatione critica* edidit O. Löfgren. 2 vols. *Seriei Operum Cura Legati De Goeje Editorum*, XIII: 1–2 (Leiden: 1951–54).
- 8 Ibn Hâtim, *The Ayyûbids and early Rasûlids in the Yemen (567–694/1173–1295)*, ed. G.R. Smith. 2 vols. *E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Series, New Series*, 26:1–2 (London: 1974–78).
- 9 Ibn al-Daybâ', 'Abd al-Rahmân b. 'Alî b. Muhammad b. 'Umar, *Bughyat al-mustafîd fî târikh madînat Zabîd: Ta'lîf - al-mutawaffâ sanata 944*. Tahqîq 'Abd Allâh Muhammad al-Habashî [read al-Hibshî] (San'â': 1979).
- 10 Yahyâ b. al-Husayn b. al-Qâsim b. Muhammad, *Ghâyat al-amâni fî akhbâr al-quṭr al-Yamâni*. Ta'lîf - (1035–1100 h, 1625–1679 m). Tahqîq wa-taqdîm Sa'id Abd al-Fattâh 'Âshûr. Murâja'at Muhammad Mustafâ Ziyâda. 2 vols. (Al-Qâhira: 1388h/1968 m). Turâthunâ, s.no.
- 11 R.B. Serjeant (ed.), *The Portuguese off the South Arabian coast: Hadrami chronicles. With Yemeni and European accounts of Dutch pirates off Mocha in the seventeenth century* (1963; reprint with minor corrections, Beirut: 1974).
- 12 H. Terpstra, *De Opkomst der Westerkwartieren van de Oost-Indische Compagnie (Suratte, Arabië, Perzië)* (The Hague: 1918).
- 13 N. Steensgaard, *The Asian Trade Revolution of the Seventeenth Century: The East India Companies and the Decline of the Caravan Trade*, new ed. (1973. Chicago: 1974.)
- 14 Nowadays NWO, the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research.
- 15 Ayman Fu'âd Sayyid, *Masâdir târikh al-Yaman fî al-'asr al-islâmî*. Wada'ahâ -. Nusûs wa-Tarjamât, 7. (Al-Qâhira: 1974).
- 16 Cf., for example, Muhammad 'Abd al-'Âl Ahmad, *Banû Rasûl wa-banû Tâhir wa-'alâqât al-Yaman al-khârîjiyya fî 'abdihimâ 628–932 h / 1231–1517 m* (Al-Iskandariyya: 1980).
- 17 See, for instance, Fârûq 'Uthmân Abâza, *Adan wa-'l'siyâsa al-barîtâniyya fî al-Bahr al-Ahmar 1839–1918* ([Al-Qâhira]: 1976).
- 18 One may consult Jâd Tâhâ, *Siyâsat Barîtâniyâ fî janûb al-Yaman* (Al-Qâhira: 1969–70).
- 19 C.G. Brouwer, 'Holländische Archivquellen zur ökonomischen Geschichte Jemens im frühen 17. Jahrhundert', in H. Becker & H. Kopp (eds.), *Resultate aktueller Jemen-Forschung: Eine Zwischenbilanz* (Bamberg: 1978), 123–29. Among the numerous relevant publications by the scholars mentioned are A. Schopen, *Das Qât. Geschichte und Gebrauch des Genussmittels Catha edulis forsk. in der Arabischen Republik Jemen* (Wiesbaden: 1978), and H. Becker, V. Höhfeld, and H. Kopp, *Kaffee aus Arabien. Der Bedeutungswandel*

- eines Weltwirtschaftsgutes und seine siedlungsgeographische Konsequenz an der Trockengrenze der Ökumene (Wiesbaden: 1979).
- 20 K.Kh. Brâwir and wa-Â. Kablâniyân (eds.), *Al-Yaman fî awâ'il al-qarn al-sâbi' 'ashar: Muqtatafât min al-wathâ'iq al-hûlandiyya al-muta'alliqa bi-'l-târikh al-iqtisâdî li-janûb al-jazîra al-'arabiyya 1614–1630*. Ikhtiyâr wa-ta'rib wa-taqdîm wa-ta'liq -. Al-tab'a al-thâniyya al-munaqqaha. (1988; Amsterdam: 1989).
  - 21 C.G. Brouwer, *Cauwa ende comptanten: De Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie in Jemen 1614–1655 / Cowha and cash: The Dutch East India Company in Yemen 1614–1655* (Amsterdam: 1988).
  - 22 Brouwer, C.G., *De Oostersche Schouburgh: Nederlandse oriëntaalse treurspelen uit de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw*. 3 vols. Amsterdam: 1992–1994.
  - 23 F. Lequin, *Het personeel van de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie in Azië in de achttiende eeuw, meer in het bijzonder in de vestiging Bengalen*. 2 vols. (Leiden: 1982).
  - 24 C.G. Brouwer, *Al-Mukhâ: Profile of a Yemeni Seaport, as Sketched by Servants of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) 1614–1640*. Al-Mukhâ Triptych: Studies on the Maritime Economic History of a Yemeni Emporium, 1. (Amsterdam: 1997).
  - 25 C.G. Brouwer, *Al-Mukhâ: The Transoceanic Trade of a Yemeni Staple Town as Mapped by Merchants of the VOC, 1614–1640: Coffee, Spices & Textiles*. Al-Mukhâ Triptych: Studies on the Maritime Economic History of a Yemeni Emporium, 2. (Amsterdam: 2006).
  - 26 See, for instance, Sâlim, Sayyid Mustafâ, *Wathâ'iq yamaniyya: Dirâsa wathâ'iqiyya târikhiyya: Nashr wa-ta'liq*. Al-Qâhira: 1982; al-'Amrî, Husayn 'Abd Allâh, *Musawwadât amlâk khamsat a'imma wa-warathatihim (...) (1161–1251 h/ 1748–1835 m). Tahqîq wa-dirâsa fî al-'alaqât al-iqtisâdiyya wa-'l-ijtimâ'iyya fî al-Yaman*. (San'â' / Dimashq: 2005); and Jâzim, Muhammad 'Abd al-Rahîm, *Nûr al-ma'ârif fî nuzûm wa-qawânîn wa-a'râf al-Yaman fî al-'ahd al-Muzaffarî al-wârif*. 2 vols. (San'â': 2003–2005).

# World History and Other Marginal and Perverse Pursuits: Interview with Felipe Fernandez-Armesto

*Lincoln Paine interviewed Felipe Fernandez-Armesto at the St. Botolph Club in Boston on 13 November 2008.*

*I want to thank you for agreeing to talk to me about your career, your teaching and your writing, and I thought we would divide the interview into three sections...*

Rather like Gaul...

*Yes, but I don't want to come, see and conquer; I just want to elicit information...*  
You're very welcome.

*But I would like to talk a little bit about your background, your education, and also your approach to history and your observations on the craft.*

Right, okay. I don't really feel as though I had much family and even less education.

*Well, despite your Spanish name, you are very English.*

Well, my mother-in-law, God rest her soul, who travelled in Spain with me said it was like being with a werewolf. I started off being exaggeratedly English, which I suppose is a desperate attempt to make up for my Spanishness, and after a few days I became exaggeratedly Spanish, which I suppose is an attempt to make up for my Englishness. Apparently after a few days in Spain I always start shouting and wave my arms about.

*So, you were born and raised in England?*

Yes.

*And your father was a journalist?*

Yes.

*For newspapers, magazines?*

Yes, yes. I mean, he spent most of his career with *La Vanguardia*, which is the main Spanish-language newspaper in Barcelona. He wrote books, but they were... essentially it was his collected journalism.

*And your mother is English?*

Yes.

*And where did you grow up?*

In London.

*Did you go to public school?*

Well, I went to a school which I guess technically was a public school. It belonged to this group of about 200 independent schools, which was called the Headmaster's Conference. It belonged to that group, but it wasn't a typical public school. It was a day school and it was secular, and it had been founded by Jeremy Bentham. Apparently, it had a progressive ethos, although it wasn't apparent to those of us who were there in my day.

*And from there you went to Oxford?*

Yes. Well, I had a very brief sojourn at the University of Salamanca. But whilst I was there, General Franco in his wisdom decided that if you talked to more than two people on the street, that was a riot. My faculty was closed down. And I had a place at Oxford; in those days, you could do things like write them and say 'I've changed my mind. Can I come after all?' So, although I greatly enjoyed being in Salamanca with the faculty closed and spending my time drinking with my friends, which I subsequently realised was a much superior education to attending class, I'm afraid I got a little nervous and decided I probably ought to be doing something a little more proper, so I went to Oxford.

*And you read history there?*

Yes.

*What was your initial focus, and who did you study with?*

Oh, God. Well, I don't know. I think before I went there I was really interested in the Enlightenment and the transition to Romanticism. There are something like 250,000 books about Napoleon and I think I'd read most of them by the time I started. As I remember my interview at Oxford, they asked me what I'd been reading and I said I'd been reading

Sorel's *Europe et la revolution francaise*.<sup>1</sup> And I probably didn't need to say anything else in order to get my place at the University. However, in those days, when you started at Oxford you had a very limited choice of what you could do in your first term, and I thought I ought to do something unfamiliar, so I did some medieval history in my first term, and I rather got seduced by that. I suppose my main tutor in my first year was Karl Leyser—I was at Magdalen, which had a big history school and had some great tutors. It had Karl Leyser, A.J.P. Taylor and John Stoye, Gerald Harriss, Angus Macintyre.<sup>2</sup> And I started with Karl and he was a wonderful tutor. People don't realise, people who know his publications, don't realise what a wonderfully uninhibited person he was when you were talking to him, because all his writings are extraordinarily inhibited articles in which he advances a thesis in the first three lines and then spends the next thirty pages withdrawing it. But as a tutor he was liberated and he would wander around his room kicking the piles of notes which he kept on the floor in high dudgeon when he reflected on the immorality of the great ones of the past. He was impassioned and an exciting person to be with and he—and his tutorials were immensely wide-ranging. I mean you'd start off with Charlemagne and you'd end up talking about Schiller, and you know just being with him was a great educational experience and very, very mind-broadening. So, from that time, although I tried to compose myself a curriculum with a course which covered as much of history as possible, I was really most interested in the Middle Ages.

*What was your thesis on?*

My doctoral thesis?

*Did you have an undergraduate thesis?*

Yes. In those days at Oxford you could get a first, which is kind of like a *summa cum laude*; I don't know what the equivalent in Leiden would be. But in order to get yourself into the top category, you really needed... typically you prepared for your final exam eleven subjects, and you could do an optional thesis. And if you got the top grade in six or more of those, if you did a thesis it would be twelve, subjects, you'd get yourself into the top category. So I did the thesis. It seemed to me to be the obviously sensible strategy, because one of the subjects was just an essay on anything; one of them was translating from foreign languages. Two of them were topics which you prepared from the original sources on quite a sort of narrow field. And then there was something I think called the general historical paper in which you could divagate without really knowing anything. And

so that was five papers that you could score heavily on, and then if you did the thesis I thought you could more or less guarantee yourself the top rank without necessarily knowing that much. So that was my strategy.

*And what was it that you didn't know very much about?*

Well, my thesis, which was terribly successful because it won the Arnold Prize [1971], which is the prize that you get for the best thesis, was about the conquest of the Canary Islands.

*Was that your first foray into European expansion?*

Well, I suppose it was, really, although I also did quite a lot of stuff on that before, for the rest of my final exam. The syllabus has changed a little bit, but in those days one of these topics that you could prepare with documents in the original languages was a paper which, broadly speaking, covered Columbus and the conquests of Mexico and Peru, and I did that. So I suppose already as an undergraduate I was relatively self-concentrating on early Spanish colonial endeavours.

*And was colonialism at that time already being seen as this idea of European expansion or was it still a colonialist, nation-state oriented approach?*

Oh, God, well I don't know because at Oxford we don't have, and didn't have, approaches. We just got on with it. It was a place which was very, very hostile to theory of any sort. I remember when I was a young don being stopped in the street by an immensely distinguished Oxford historian who said to me, 'Felipe, you're the sort of person who would know about this. Can you tell me about this person everybody's going on about called Fouquet.' And I couldn't think of whom he meant. The only Fouquet I could think of was an eighteenth-century ethnographer of that name. I'd never read anything by him, but the name rang a bell, and I said, 'As far as I know, he's an eighteenth-century ethnographer.' And this guy looked at me weirdly and walked on, and it was only subsequently that I realised he was actually talking about Foucault! And that shows you the degree of innocence that prevailed at the time in Oxford. You know, you think of the great figures of Oxford in those days, people like Richard Cobb, Hugh Trevor-Roper, people whose whole career really was founded on their objection to theory. So, we weren't really into post-colonialism or anything like that. It was very, very humanistic; it was all about understanding text. It was *philologie et histoire*, and you kind of didn't worry whether you were being Eurocentric or not.

But I do have to say that I was...I found texts which came from indigenous sources much more interesting, compelling—very much more mysterious, more intriguing than those which were more obviously accessible because, though removed by half a millennium, they were recognisably texts from a culture with which I could recognise my kinship. When I was looking at one of the sources in which the University of Oxford is surprisingly rich—early colonial and pre-colonial Meso-American texts—I felt entranced, and I guess my sympathy for the indigenous point of view started then even though I hadn't read Van Leur or anybody like that at that stage.<sup>3</sup>

*So if you come out of this anti-theoretical approach, do you see in your own background a development towards becoming interested in European expansion, or did you see yourself running on a parallel track?*

Oh, I don't know. I think I thought I was doing global history. I was very influenced by [Charles] Verlinden long before I met him and came to like him and admire him as a person.<sup>4</sup> I was a great admirer of his scholarship. And it just seemed obvious that a comparative approach is bound to impart some understanding. That's why Our Lord spoke in parables. And I think that is why I felt attracted to the Canary Islands. I saw them as a sort of fulcrum of global history. I was interested in European expansion only because it's a great global event with an extraordinary global resonance which marks the beginnings of the emergence of this Latin, Christian world which had been marginal and backward in the Middle Ages, by global standards, into a world-shaping force. I suppose at the time one of the things that had penetrated the Oxford history scholars was interdisciplinarity.

In particular, there were two obsessions. One was cliometrics, which I must confess I was never terribly sympathetic to, although I included it in my doctoral thesis. I had all of these very elaborately calculated tables, in all of which I made fundamental arithmetical errors which I only discovered just in time before the thing was published, and which had not been noticed by all the important people: my supervisors, my examiners, my editors at the Oxford University Press, all the outside readers whom they sent this to. Nobody had noticed that all my calculations were wrong! And that made me realise that cliometrics was nonsense, and it was really unnecessary to have all of these very exactly calculated quantitative data. Cliometrics was one of the obsessions, and the other was anthropology. One of my tutors was a great friend, Peter Clarke, an urban historian, who I think was the person who introduced me to the possibilities of getting insights from reading anthropological work. And he made me read Evans-

Pritchard's book on witchcraft.<sup>5</sup> Of course I subsequently became close to him and a colleague of Keith Thomas, who was one of the pioneers of anthropology in the Oxford history school, and then there was another—there were two colleagues of mine, Michael Hurst and Edward Ardener, who were respectively a historian and an anthropologist, who had a joint seminar and I hung out with them quite a lot, and so I suppose that reading the anthropological literature also disposed me to this interest in the indigenous side of empire, the indigenous contribution to empire.<sup>6</sup>

*I think that we tend to think of the indigenous in terms of the Americas, or Africa, or places where nation-states and a written tradition are not as strong as in Asia or east Europe, eastern, or wherever that borderland is, in the Caucasus or wherever. It seems to me that you've done an amazing amount of work in terms of trying to incorporate these other indigenes.*

Well, I've always been interested in the margins of everything. I suppose, partly because being Anglo-Spanish I've always felt on the margins myself, wherever I am, I've always felt a bit foreign. And I'm congenitally, intellectually perverse. I had two quite intellectually perverse parents, and I've inherited the worst of both of them. And, I think, thank God I was in Oxford where the whole system is quite sympathetic to intellectual perversity. I mean it's rather like, I don't know, physical beauty and sporting prowess—it's one of those oddities which the University of Oxford rather overvalues. So I was kind of lucky, but of course my intellectual perversity did take the form of quarrelling with my tutors and my supervisors and being extremely unwilling to accept any historical orthodoxies. I've suffered from this perversity ever since. One positive thing about it was that it drew me to the margins and did make me reject what I call these sorts of slick metropolitan skylines which dominate conventional historiography and turn to the frontiers, which I've always thought...if civilisations are the tectonic plates of history, frontiers are the places where they scrape against each other and generate seismic effects.

I think that's slightly different from having an indigenous point of view because I've always been interested in the settlers who colonise frontiers. That kind of perversity, that kind of madness has always been mysterious to me and I've always striven to understand it. I mean that's why I've always been terribly interested in people who in the sixteenth century were in Peru, which you would have thought was far away—far enough from Spain for anybody, but you know they want to go off and find the Solomon Islands. And one wants to know what makes these people tick, or people in Qing China who go to Urumchi or Ninguta, these are very

surprising undertakings. So my attraction to the margins is I think a little bit different from my attraction to the indigenous point of view. But I suppose the two things must be connected at some level; that level must surely be hostility to or rejection of the mainstream. I don't know; it's a perpetuation of the form of youthful rebellion which I indulged in when my contemporaries were taking to the barricades.

*You certainly talk about, in the introduction to Civilizations, you talk about the Amalia Effect—for the woman in Jorge Marmol's novel—of her being so close, in this opulent European home in Buenos Aires, so close to the pampa and the barbarian world just outside town. But you talk about these tectonic plates of civilisation which makes me want to ask about your interest in geography, which seems to be something that permeates your work, and not only in Civilizations, when you're obviously talking about man's relationship to his environment but also in your work in atlases, the work I think you did with Gibbon and the Times Atlas of Exploration, and Pathfinders—and also your famous jibe about maritime historians, historians of exploration having not enough wind.*

Yes. Too much hot air, not enough wind. Yes. Well, thank you, Lincoln, I'm glad you mentioned this. I think it is all to do with, I don't know, wanting to *épater les bourgeois*, it's all to do with this rebelliousness. As I say, I was schooled in a very textual, very humanistic kind of history, and although I certainly strove to master that and I still love textual scholarship and I still do indulge in it from time to time, I was looking for something different, for something which my tutors and my fellow students would find surprising, perhaps even scandalous. I'm not sure quite how I stumbled on this conviction that—well, I suppose it's a dual conviction. First is the conviction that history is unintelligible except in the context of the environment that surrounds us and the ecosystem that sustains us. I don't think you can make sense of what humans do unless you locate them in their ecological context. And the other aspect is my growing conviction that humans aren't the only species that have history, and the old idea that this literally humane discipline is only about people—that history is about chaps and geography is about maps—that just doesn't work.

If you take the sort of comparative doctrine that I originally got from reading Verlinden in the context of colonial societies and you extend it to its logical conclusion, you have to compare human cultures with those of other cultural species. I think my journey towards the discovery of this started when I was an undergraduate. Because I think the very first paper

I did at Oxford, for my first term, was called historical geography. And I was very surprised to find that there was no geography in it at all. You get all these textual minutiae, and the geographical component—which was obviously in the minds of some Oxford dons of some past generation who thought that it was important, I suppose, just to know where different places were—got sidetracked or even lost, and it made me realise that maybe one should reincorporate it.

Of course *annalisme* was very fashionable at the time, and I read a lot of that sort of stuff. So I think the idea one did need to start looking at the physical environment in which these texts were written in order to understand them began to take shape. And I think I also got that idea from reading a lot of old-fashioned biblical commentaries and atlases of the holy land, this sort of great nineteenth- and early twentieth-century attempt to understand sacred texts by looking at the environment in which they were written. And I realised how illuminating this was, and I thought one should be doing the same with other texts.

So I think that was part of it, but I very much remember that one of my epiphanies was reading Pieter Geyl's critique of Toynbee and thinking, 'Pieter Geyl hates Toynbee so much there's got to be something in this.'<sup>7</sup> And it made me read Toynbee. And Toynbee—you can say what you like about him—but he was a great pioneer of environmental history. He had a wonderful sense of the relevance and pertinence of environment interacting with those very powerful initiatives that arise in our minds and in our emotions and which I'm perfectly willing to believe arise independently of environmental circumstances, but which only shape history within the conditions and limitations of and imposed by the environment. So I think that was also part of the reason that I got propelled in these directions.

But it was a great big struggle for me because I belong to a generation of English schoolboys who spent most of their time—no, sorry, not most of their time—spent more time doing Latin than anything else. I think I might have been almost the last of that generation. I took up science at the age of 12 and gave it up at the age of 14, and I've had to re-educate myself in it. I wasn't stimulated to do this by the struggle between evolutionary and counter-evolutionary explications of human behaviour. I did subsequently become interested in those, but I hadn't seen the relevance. Of course all of this was long before sociobiology, or maybe sociobiology was just beginning to come in, but not when I was growing up, it was more in my early years of teaching.

*In terms of geography, again, which I think is a real hallmark of your work, it seems to me that you are still somewhat out of the mainstream in your use of geography and your willingness to embrace geography as a backdrop to historical study. It still seems to me that an awful lot of people rely either on texts—or certainly in the Leiden tradition, a more archival approach—or on more theoretical understandings. We were talking about that at lunch, that there seem to be methodological approaches. But do you think that geography, do you think that people are taking a different view of geography now, for whatever reason, whether it's because of climate concerns, or at least in America because we've lost a sense of where we are in the world and where the rest of the world is in relation to us?*

Golly. Well, I don't know about that. I'll come back to that sort of sub-question in a moment. I'm always very happy to be out of the mainstream. I mean, I'd hate the mainstream to engulf me. I'd have to—that would force me into even more marginal and perverse pursuits. But I think obviously there is a huge, growing sort of industry in environmental history, but the danger to me is that it's becoming another sub-discipline. I hate it when people ask you: 'Are you a cultural historian or an intellectual historian or a social historian or an economic historian?' I'm just a historian! I try to do total history and global history and try to use every kind of source material and see the connections between all the spheres in which we lead our lives, and I feel that the environment encompasses everything that we do and should be part of every kind of history, and not just another room which opens off the corridor, another atomised part of an already excessively atomised discipline. It worries me that we have this rhetoric of interdisciplinarity, but we don't even talk to each other, let alone people in other departments. And I just feel that specialisation is a vice and it upsets me that we have systems of education and of the institutionalisation of research which nourish vice. So I do think that environmental history is growing, but I'm not satisfied with the way in which it's growing.

The other thing which is growing is obviously global history. In the United States this is now the form in which most undergraduates encounter history. There are hundreds of thousands of students studying global history or world history—slightly different things perhaps, but courses under one or other of those rubrics—in the United States, and I think that is connected with the geopolitical dilemmas of the United States in the world today. Obviously the world history movement in the United States started earlier, but it really took off and attracted these masses of students I think after 9/11, when people in the United States at last realised that

they do need to situate themselves in the world; they need to learn about it if they're going to survive in an increasingly dangerous future.

And I'm rather...it may be invidious to speak of something good coming out of an episode as horrific as the collapse of the twin towers, but I do celebrate this specifically. And when I'm in my own global history class with my own students, I love the way they want to know about the world and how they're looking ahead to a post-American century in which the United States will no longer be the unique global hegemon and will be looking for the help of other decent communities around the world in ensuring peace and humanity. And I always ask my students why they've chosen the course, and overwhelmingly they give me answers along those lines. They want to be there when the saints go marching in; they want to be there when America rejoins the world.

*And so do you think that there's...not to be too distracted by the American question, but do you think that this is sort of...the idea that America will not be the only superpower is increasingly part of the Zeitgeist of American students?*

Well, I don't think that American questions are a distraction. You know America is still the most important single country in the world, and a place which the rest of the world needs to take greatest account of and greatest notice of. I have absolutely no doubt that the United States can't sustain its position as the unique global hegemon; that position is already in ruins and that ruin has been self-inflicted—inflicted by an irresponsible US government that's undertaken wars which are not only a crime but also a mistake, and has betrayed every American...destroyed every ingredient in the American identity. You know if we had Senator McCarthy around, he should be indicting Mr. Bush and Mr. Cheney and Mr. Rumsfeld and Mr. Wolfowitz for un-American activities.

The global power of the United States is obviously irrecoverable partly because the economy is in ruins, the country is mired in inextricable wars... America as a moral exemplar has been sullied and besmirched so profoundly that no effort can redeem it. But above all the position is irrecoverable because other countries are ascending to comparable levels of wealth and power. There's been a lot of comment recently about what made the United States a global hegemon. I think on the whole historians and political scientists have got this wrong. I point to overwhelmingly two factors. Well I hate the word 'factor'; there are two features of the history of the United States in the time of this country's ascent to the status of a global power. One of them is the size of its internal market,

and the other is its huge underexploited resources, above all the prairie, the so-called Great American Desert, which in the nineteenth century became the great granary of the world. Well, the United States no longer has any underexploited resources and it no longer has a particularly large internal market by the standards of the world, so the conditions on which American greatness was founded are now irretrievably in the past.

*I think your point about the reason for American students' interest in world history is well taken, but I think that another reason that we're interested in global history is that we don't have quite the same background either as an expansionist country, or the same depth of background as any of the European countries. We can't look back to when Roman legions first planted their standards on our soil and trace our evolution from that point forward. And we tend to ignore entirely our Native American antecedents. And so if you can't look into the past you might as well look laterally. And I'm wondering if you think global history is something that is peculiarly American? Or are Europeans beginning to look at it in the same way, beyond this colonial expansionist, European expansion programme?*

It certainly hasn't taken off in the classroom in the same way in Europe. There hasn't been this great explosion of courses in it. And most European history departments—almost all Europeans—don't have anybody who has a particular responsibility to teach it and to work on it. Obviously there is a great, a growing interest in a scholarly context in global topics in Europe and a lot of very good work is being done there. But to some extent the European tradition, what historians do outside the classroom, has always been rather independent of what they do in it. And that's not so much the case in the United States I don't think.

Again, to go back to my own undergraduate experience in Oxford where everybody taught everything and what their own research interests were didn't necessarily have anything to do with what they were doing in their lectures or in their tutorials with undergraduates. It would be most unusual in the United States, where people go into the classroom and they teach their speciality.

*So when you're teaching at Tufts, are you teaching pretty exclusively world history or global history?*

No. Well, I mean of course everything is, if you have this sort of totalising, globalizing approach that I have, then everything is sort of seamless, part of the great web, and I don't really like to pander to specialisation by admitting that there are any subcategories. But in practice, to avoid a lot

of circumlocution, I do other stuff. One of the obligations of my chair at Tufts is to teach Spanish history, so I always teach a Spanish history course every year. Or I try to teach it. Teach is a transit verb and I'm not really sure I can say that I teach something unless my students actually learn it. Tufts has a category of courses which it calls research seminars, which sounds rather grand but essentially it just means a small class in which people study a subject with reference to the primary sources. And my research seminar is on Native American attitudes to Spaniards in the early colonial period. I also have an environmental history course that I teach, among one or two other things that I use to vary the menu. But the environmental history course, the Spanish history course, the Native-American course and the global history course are the bedrock of my curriculum.

*I guess if there isn't this approach to global history in Europe or elsewhere that there is in the United States, it would be difficult to discuss national approaches to world history in the same way that one might discuss different national approaches to colonial history.*

No. If there are such different national approaches I don't really know what they are. I suppose it's inevitable; we always see the world from somewhere. What I've said about the motivation for American undergraduate students to study global history implies an American point of view. I don't like to call it a national point of view because I never like speaking of the United States as a nation. Americans do that but it seems to be somewhat an abuse of the word. I never really like speaking of nations in any context; I try to avoid the word.

*Do you think there are, whatever the alternative term is, national views of colonial history in Europe—English versus Spanish versus Portuguese versus Dutch or French—that have any bearing on the way global history—might wind up evolving?*

Well, what strikes me as remarkable is that traditionally the national perspectives, if you like to call them that, of all these communities—Dutch, French, Spanish, British, Portuguese—all of these communities of people whose predecessors established and ran and exploited these empires seem to be remarkably similar. They've all traditionally had a very metropolitan perspective and all the while kidded themselves that these empires were achievements of their forebears who with extraordinary cunning and prowess created these empires. The great breakthrough really of the last forty years or so—sixty years if you go right back to

Van Leur—has been to unpick that perspective and to see that empires are collaborative ventures and they don't—except in very, very, very brief periods when you've got crushing technological superiority—necessarily enable outsiders to impose their views on indigenous society.<sup>8</sup> Even in the most extreme cases—I don't know, Congo of King Leopold II—you always had the quislings and collaborators from the indigenous world, and for me the real problem of imperial history that has emerged is trying to understand why and how these collaborative relationships grow up and above all what's in it for the indigenous collaborators. Why do people see outsiders as potentially positive sources of influence in the lives of various societies?

*Isn't that something you begin to answer in Pathfinders, in talking about the explosion of people across the world trying to get away from each other and then all of a sudden in the period of recorded history coming back together again?*

Well, *Pathfinders* is about a different matter. It's about, perhaps, something else that has always concerned me, which is 'How does culture change?' In a way, that is the great central theme of the historical discipline. History is an attempt to describe and understand how cultures change. And the reason why it's interesting can only be fully appreciated in comparative perspective, because human culture is very volatile and mutable compared with that of other cultural animals. That's what makes us humans an interesting subject.

*Pathfinders* is really part of that attempt to understand how cultures change, how they change by virtue of one particular mechanism or medium—the interaction of one culture with another. The subject of *Pathfinders* is how explorers first led cultures to diverge by putting distance between them and moving into different, variously demanding environments and then caused them to converge by re-establishing routes of contact between them. So I think that's a slightly different subject, although a deeply important and pervasive one.

The question of how empires work is a small part of that huge puzzle. And I have proposed a contribution towards an answer to this question of how empires work, or to the problem of these collaborative ventures in which indigenous and incoming elites find each other mutually useful. I have contributed something towards an answer to that, but not so much in *Pathfinders* as in a collection of essays that Leonard Blussé and I put together about shifting communities in early modern Asia, where I proposed for the first time in print something I'd developed

years previously in lectures to undergraduates in Oxford, what I call the stranger effect.<sup>9</sup> I elaborate on this concept, again really on the basis of a long course of interdisciplinary readings in sociology and anthropology.

The stranger effect I define as the propensity that some cultures have to defer to strangers, sometimes to the point of investing them with power. And of course it's a very rational form of deference because the stranger's objective; the stranger is unimplicated in existing factions and networks. The stranger is therefore an ideal arbitrator, an ideal holy man, an ideal marriage partner. For all of those reasons, in cultures that have this propensity to value the stranger, it's a perfectly rational strategy to hand over power or to incorporate incoming elites in existing power structures. But as well as being a rational response to the opportunities that empires create for collaboration it's also rooted in very widely diffused aspects of collective psychology and of cultural behaviour.

And you can see this even in societies like ours, which is rather hostile to the stranger. Anybody who has tried to get a visa or green card to work in the United States knows this is not a culture—I mean, modern industrialised cultures typically are not particularly responsive to the stranger—but even we value goods from afar, almost in proportion to the distance they've travelled. Well, there are a lot of cultures that value people in the same way. The *nouvel arrivé* who comes with the aura of the divine horizon is a suitable person to invest with authority. And I've particularly found the work of the anthropologist Mary W. Helms helpful in formulating the idea of the stranger effect.<sup>10</sup>

*What is your view of this idea of empire? I know you've spoken a little bit about it in terms of the way that Europeans tend to view themselves as the architects of their own success. I think that one of the difficulties that Americans have had—going back to this question of geography and looking at the map—is that, unlike the British who could 100 years ago look at this great swatch of pink on the world map and see where their influences are, America's modern, neo-empire preserves at least the illusion of different colours and different states, which doesn't allow us to see how our culture, economy and military permeate the rest of the world.*

Even at the height of the British Empire, when British schoolchildren were all being taught where cocoa and ground nuts came from, they still actually weren't all that good at geography. I don't know whether the story about Queen Victoria asking for a gunboat to go to La Paz [Bolivia] is true; it's probably apocryphal. It has a kind of symbolic validity. One does have to accept that the British have the advantage over the Americans in

geography because they have a small country and you can learn where the Gorbals [in Glasgow] are and you've still got time to know where the Ganges is. America's a very big country and, I don't know, if you're in Milwaukee, by the time you've read the news from Minneapolis and Mississippi you don't have time for Moscow and Madrid. I get slightly impatient with Europeans who have this sort of sneering attitude to Americans' geographical ignorance. It's true, I do know a lot of Americans, some very well educated Americans, who don't know whether Paris is actually east or west of Madrid, but I know an awful lot of Europeans who don't even know whether North Dakota is north or south of South Dakota. I think this ignorance isn't peculiar to Americans.

*Another question which is really unrelated, but I'll try to create an artificial bridge anyway, about this outsider effect, and also a little bit about your perversity: as a historian it seems that you straddle these worlds of being the academic historian with edited volumes to your credit and essays contributed to other people's volumes, but you've also done a lot of very broad-gauge history like Millennium and Civilizations and Food. You've written about Truth. You've written the essays on the Americas and on humankind. And I suppose it's too big a question to ask what you think the role of the historian in society is, but I want to ask it anyway. Because it seems in the American context that historians do seem to be bogged down. When we do see historians writing trade books, they tend to be either I think very narrowly focused on, you know, the new biography of Jackson, or Washington, or they tend to be very polemical. I think of Victor David Hanson or Niall Ferguson. What do you think the role of the historian might be?*

Well, I think there are two answers, or perhaps three, to that. The first, or first two: there isn't anything very much that's special about history, especially if you take my view of it and you think it encompasses everything. Everything that we know is in the past, and therefore I regard it as proper for me to study it. And though you know you're right that I've written about all these different things and it sounds as though I'm terribly intellectually undisciplined, which indeed I am, I make no apology for that because I chose to specialise in history when I was an undergraduate because I was interested in everything and I couldn't make up my mind what to do and I wanted to do the subject that incorporated something of everything else. So especially if you take that very holistic view of history, there is therefore nothing special about it. Also, it has the virtue of all academic disciplines. And I think the common virtue of all academic disciplines is that they can do two things for those who study

them. They can enhance life and they can prepare for death. And actually those are the only two things worth doing in the world anyway.

History does have, I suppose, enough of a distinctive profile for one to be able to say that it enhances life and prepares for death in particular ways. It enhances life by enriching your experience, because if you go out into the streets and you look at the streetscape and the roofscape you can enjoy it more if you know that that building is Georgian or that building is Elizabethan. If you go out into the countryside and do this environmental history as I do, you can understand why the topography is as it is, why particular crops are being grown in particular places, and when all that happened—all that actually makes it a more vital experience and more enjoyable. It enhances individual lives by helping those who are leading those individual lives to situate them in a vast context.

And it helps you prepare for death I think. I hope you won't think this is canting if I say that I think it makes you a better person, or has the potential to make you a better person, because it encourages you to strive to understand minds very different from your own. I think if you can understand people in the past of your own culture, because the past is a foreign country and they do things differently there, you can understand better your own contemporaries in other cultures and people with other values. It's a mind-broadening experience to be a historian, and if it does enable, if it helps you sympathise with other people, then I think you're a better person for it.

And my other answer, about the responsibility of the historian: obviously the historian is a teacher. I see all these books and television programmes and stuff, and all the dreadful journalism that I churn out, I see these as teaching in print. I see them as extensions of my life in the classroom; I don't really draw a distinction between them. And what the teacher has to do is obviously stimulate—stimulate his students and readers to respond; if necessary provoke them into reaction and outrage. The greatest pleasure to me in my life as a teacher of history is when my students disagree with me. I once gave a public lecture in New Zealand and a fight broke out in the audience and I was so gratified because I really thought: 'At last, I've stimulated a response.' Of course that's not the whole of teaching, because obviously one hopes that one of the ways you can stimulate a response is by hitting on the truth, and it's obviously the responsibility of all professional intellectuals to speak the truth, to deconstruct myths, to excoriate abuses of power and mistaken policies on the basis of privileged knowledge they have as a result of having studied.

*How secure do you feel the discipline of history is in the academy?*

Do you know, I honestly don't care about that. I mean—and I know I shall get stoned to death by my fellow history teachers for saying this—but I never lost a moment's sleep over anxiety that history is going to disappear from the curriculum. And I don't think it really is. But if it did, I don't think it would make any difference, because you can't eliminate history from people's experience of education, because you can't study physics without studying the history of physics. You've got to know about Einstein and Bohr. And if you're going to do chemistry you have to know about, I don't know, Lavoisier. There's no knowledge that isn't historical, which by definition is in the past. And people can never get away from history. If it ceased to be taught in schools or universities, people would still thirst or hunger to read about it, and there would still be work for professional historians in Grub Street and as pen-pushers and publishers of books.

*Do you think history as a discipline—in terms of methodology, do you think there are methodological principles or applications that should be taught to historians? It sounds like you could be arguing that anybody can be a historian.*

Yes. I am arguing that. I mean I think there are all sorts of terribly good reasons for taking formal history courses, and even graduate courses in history. But to be a historian is not one of them. Some of my favourite historians are not professional historians at all. They are lawyers and scientists and nuns who have written history books just as good as those by any professional historian, and hugely better than my own. And that's one of the great virtues of history, and that's why to me it is the people's discipline, because anyone can do it. You don't need any formal training. You need to be able to read, and it helps to know more than one language, but you just need the compulsion, the passion, and the interest more than you need any specific technique or methodological training or that ghastly stuff, because any such training limits you. It's in some ways better not to have it, or if you have it to react against it and to reject it because then you've really taken advantage of it and you've got something creative out of it.

The wonderful thing about history being the people's discipline, being universal and accessible, is that it can be the forum in which this interdisciplinarity comes together and in which we can all, whatever our training, take part in a conversation about the past. It's inescapable, the past! Everyone's got a past! Everyone is a historian of their own lives and experiences. And that's why I don't try to write accessible books in

order to make them more commercial; I write to make them more easily intelligible and more widely inspiring and stimulating and provocative. I utterly detest and reject the attempt to make any academic discipline hieratic and esoteric and to exclude people by having a lot of jargon and a lot of arcane theory that creates a barrier between a writer and the reader, or that divides this great common pursuit that I see as being possible among warring sects.

*That brings me I guess to my last question, which I'll preface with an observation that you write with the conviction of an autobiographer or memoirist, and with the genius of a novelist.*

Well, I think that's putting it a bit strongly, Lincoln, but it's very nice of you to say so.

*Genius in that you have the novelist's sensibility. And I'm wondering what you think that you would recommend to an aspiring historian, your students, whether undergraduates or graduates in becoming historians and to make themselves better historians. What do you recommend as the most important thing? I think I could anticipate an answer, which would be that they should read more literature, and not just history. But I'm very curious to hear your take.*

I think perfectionism is the end, because you can never attain it. And of course being a perfectionist is a recipe for unhappiness, but I don't mind inflicting unhappiness on my students. After all, I think history is going to enhance their lives and prepare their deaths, so I think a little bit of unhappiness is worth enduring along the way. But it's perfectionism that I recommend. I always smother students' papers with quibbles and complaints and suggestions for changing everything and reworking it. And this can be shocking for a student to get their work back and to see there isn't a sentence in which I haven't challenged them over something. I think you're only ever going to improve if you're reaching for higher standards, and I think that the feel-good society is the enemy of education. If you want to be better, feel badly about yourself. Hate your work. But of course, I suppose, what I'm offering here is a prescription for any field of study and isn't peculiar to history.

If I'm looking for a nostrum that history students need to know, the thing I do often say to students is, think the best of the people you're studying. They may be the foulest tyrants, the most bloody oppressors, the most ruthless exploiters. But what did they think they were doing? How did they justify themselves? And scour the sources for clues to that.

One way of putting this is to say to yourself, ‘The work of a historian, the work of a historical researcher, is really the interrogation of the dead.’ And the aim of that interrogation is to hear them speak to you with the same intelligibility and vividness as you experience when you’re speaking to your friends and contemporaries and people whose outlook and cultural background are very similar to your own. That’s when the wave of academic pleasure which is the nearest intellectual experience you have to an orgasm occurs.

And I think the ultimate test—again I always try to inflict this on my students—is do you get the joke? And you know you’ve graduated as a historian, not when you get the Ph.D., but when you can laugh at a joke that is hundreds or even thousands of years old. And that’s the moment when you know you’ve established that sympathy which is the unique pleasure the study of history can impart.

## Notes

- 1 Albert Sorel, *Europe et la révolution française*, 9 vols. (Paris: E. Pion, Nourrit, 1885–1904).
- 2 Karl Joseph Leyser (1920–1992); A.J.P. Taylor (1906–1990); Angus Macintyre (1930–1994). John Stoye’s books include *The Siege of Vienna* (1965); Gerald Harris is author most recently of *Shaping the Nation: England 1360–1461* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).
- 3 Jacob Cornells van Leur (1908–1942).
- 4 Charles Verlinden (1907–1996), Belgian historian of slavery in medieval Europe and the early modern European slave trade.
- 5 Edward Evans-Pritchard (1902–1973), *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1937).
- 6 Keith Thomas (1933– ), whose works include *Religion and the Decline of Magic* and *Man and the Natural World: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (1971), and *Man and the Natural World: A History of the Modern Sensibility* (1983).
- 7 Pieter Geyl (1887–1966): Dutch historian; see in particular *Can We Know the Pattern of the Past? Discussion between P. Geyl and A. Toynbee concerning Toynbee’s Book A Study of History* (Bossum: FG. Kroonder, 1948).
- 8 Van Leur’s posthumously published *Indonesian Trade and Society: Essays in Asian Social and Economic History*, translated by James S. Holmes and A. van Marie (The Hague: W. Van Hoeve, 1955).

- 9 Leonard Blussé and Felipe Fernandez-Armesto (eds.), *Shifting Communities and Identity Formation in Early Modern Asia* (Leiden: CNWS, 2003).
- 10 See in particular Helms's *Ulysses' Sail: An Ethnographic Odyssey of Power, Knowledge, and Geographical Distance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), and *Craft and the Kingly Ideal: Art, Trade and Power* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993).

# Studying Southeast Asia in and for Southeast Asia: Interview with Anthony Reid

*Leonard Blussé and Carolien Stolte met Anthony Reid and his wife Helen for an Italian dinner in Leiden. Cultural confusion ensues: a life and career in Southeast Asian studies. For the convenience of our readers footnotes have been added concerning some of the people and publications mentioned during this interview.*

*Could you tell us something about your youth and educational background in New Zealand?*

Growing up in New Zealand definitely contributed to my interest in the rest of the world. It bred a kind of internationalism; since the centre of the world was so clearly not New Zealand, it had to be somewhere else. I never studied history at school. Fortunately it wasn't available for the academic stream in my school, but since memory was never my strong point, I would have done badly and would have given up on the whole thing. So I didn't discover history until I was in university. However, my parents were good friends with John Beaglehole, the biographer of Captain James Cook, and probably New Zealand's then best-known historian on a world stage.<sup>1</sup> Since they were diplomats and often overseas, they arranged for me to live with the Beagleholes during my last undergraduate year (1959). Dr. Beaglehole was a brilliant researcher and writer, though not a great lecturer. His passion for history and the infectious humanism that went with it must have had its influence on me.

*If we remember right, you did not spend all your youth in New Zealand.*

Yes, being dragged about to various places as a 'diplomatic kid' must have had an effect. My parents went to the US at the end of the war. New Zealand didn't really know it was an independent country until the end of World War II, and hardly had any diplomatic representation until then. It did not have a foreign ministry, or a foreign service. There was an office in London to which they appointed ex-politicians, but nothing else. After all, we were 'British' so we didn't need to have separate representation—

Britain would look after us. The Second World War was a watershed in that sense; New Zealand (and Australia) saw that in a crunch Britain would look after its own interests first. If anybody was capable of protecting New Zealand and Australia in the Pacific, it was going to be America. The fall of Singapore was a crucial moment. A shift in orientation away from Great Britain began, and my father was sent to Washington to open up an office there in 1943. However, the war was still going on and the journey by sea was quite dangerous. I was still only 4 years old—I am the youngest of four children—and my parents didn't think it safe for us to cross. So the kids stayed behind until the last stage of the war. I was put up with an aunt in Auckland for a year. At the end of 1944 it was considered safe enough to ship us across the Pacific. So we got on an American troop ship taking US soldiers back. The crossing was still a little dangerous then, but for a little boy it was mostly exciting. I remember the target practices on board. They would send all of us below decks, saying all the civilians had to disappear. My siblings and I knew that those were the fun times when balloons would be released and shot at, so we would try to hide in the lifeboats to see everything.

So I began school in the US, and experienced that temporary trauma that displaced kids do. I was the boy with the funny accent for at least the beginning of my four and a half years there. After our return to New Zealand in 1949, I was again the boy with the funny accent, talking like an American kid. But children adapt quickly for survival.

My father took up a second posting soon after I began high school in 1952, seconded from New Zealand's Department of External Affairs to serve the UN as its representative in Jakarta. One of his main tasks was to look after international experts from agencies such as the FAO and the WHO. It was a frustrating time for him; Jakarta was expanding rapidly towards the hills to the south, and the newly built houses in Kebayoran intended for international staff would invariably be taken over by the Indonesian army when they neared completion. My father was never very comfortable in the role of diplomat, but did believe the Jakarta assignment was his most worthwhile. He had been trained as a lawyer, but keenly felt his own working class background and being born 'on the wrong side of the tracks.' He may have been a little over-anxious as an Ambassador subsequently, afraid that people would find out that he was just a working lad. I did visit them for a few months, but my parents considered me to be a failure in the tropics—I reacted badly to the climate, I missed my mates and my football, and was sent home. My next foreign visit was to see my parents in Japan when I had just started university in 1957. That

was my first adult experience of Asia, and it made a big impact on me. The post-war economic take-off was just beginning. Although I had seen poverty in Indonesia, I worried about it more in Japan. I went with my brother, and once we got into an overcrowded subway at opposite ends of the carriage. There was no problem finding each other since we both stood a head taller than everybody else. But when I next visited Japan in 1973 I no longer stood out at all. It was amazing to see by how much the Japanese post-war generation who came to maturity in the 1960s had outgrown their parents.

*So you were not a typical New Zealand boy.*

Who is typical? I do think my background made me relatively predisposed to appreciate the other; to recognise that there was cultural difference in the world and to find that endlessly fascinating.

*What did you study in University?*

I went to Victoria University in Wellington. As an undergraduate, I took history and economics, and in my first year also political science and French. I did not initially think history was an *important* subject, though it turned out to be so much more fun than economics. Economics was what seemed serious. I was an eager young boy who wanted to improve the world, and I thought economics should explain the world's inequalities and how to fix them, and that perhaps political science would also help a bit. But I kept on with economics through my first degree, thinking that was what would be relevant to the world's problems.

*Helen interrupts: 'Your whole family was like that; it was your Methodist background.'*

Yes, you are probably right. Methodism and the Student Christian Movement (which absorbed some of my time as an undergrad) conveyed this conviction that one should try to leave the world a better place. There turned out (by much later hindsight) to be one great advantage to studying history at that time and place. One studied to explain the world, not to explain oneself. No one was interested in New Zealand's history, which did not even begin to be taught at university until a few years after my time. I was not the only one who suspected that it was not the centre of the world. In the interim since then, history in New Zealand and Australia, like everywhere, has become more concerned with indigenous heritage and identity issues, and we have grown less confident about even our right to teach and write about the other. The history I learned in Wellington

was of course primarily European and British history, but that provided the frame for adding Asian history to a broadly global understanding. I felt I was learning something about the world, and wanted to explain that world. If history had meant predominantly the history of my own country (as tended to be the case in England and France, for example), I would have chosen something else.

*So how did you end up in Southeast Asian studies?*

What may have influenced things was that around 1949–50, a group of Commonwealth countries, spearheaded by Australia and New Zealand, initiated a scholarship agreement for students from the Asian Commonwealth initially, but eventually extended to most of Southeast Asia. Immigrants from those countries were not yet being accepted, but after the war it became obvious that they were neighbours and that they were poor. So we started offering scholarships under what was called the Colombo plan after the initial agreement in Colombo. Suddenly all these diverse and interesting students were coming to homogeneous New Zealand. I played a small role as a student organiser of programmes for one or two intakes in the late 1950s. This programme was one indication, along with the Volunteer Graduates scheme for Indonesia in particular, of what seemed clear to my generation down under: that the challenge was in Southeast Asia. There was no China—it was inaccessible—and the Pacific Islands that later became important to New Zealand were still a colonial responsibility. Southeast Asia was the challenge—whether thinking of poverty and development, of politics, or of cultural otherness. It was there and it was exciting. It has become less obvious now, but for my 1950s generation there was a real movement, a reformist challenge to ‘do something.’

*Helen: The first thing his parents ever asked me, was: ‘So what can you do for the world?’ I was brought up a Catholic; his Methodist family took me by surprise.*

Yes, Helen comes along somewhere around this time, towards the end of my undergrad years. She played basketball, as did I. We met at the New Zealand inter-university summer camp at Curious Cove in the Marlborough Sounds. It was a summer camp for wannabe intellectuals, full of the pretentious dreams of youth. Garfield Todd was one of the keynote speakers, and something of a hero as the New Zealand-born first prime minister of Rhodesia, trying to find a multi-racial solution before the white separatists took over. Helen was a student of languages

at Auckland, and a Catholic with a strong Auckland Catholic student network, while I was an SCM-type activist, for whom the biggest issue of the pre-Vietnam times was to stop racially exclusive rugby tours to and from South Africa. We became interested in each other for the usual reasons, but also perhaps a touch of the exoticism of otherness. My parents were somewhat less impressed.

I was Christian-activist enough at the time to write my MA thesis about Church and State in New Zealand during the Great Depression—the only time I ever did New Zealand history. Subsequently, I was interested in getting away, whether to do a Ph.D. on something Indonesian or to join the Foreign Ministry. The Rhodes scholarship rounds came along whilst I was working in a construction gang, mostly digging ditches, it seemed, over the summer holidays. I foolishly thought I had to tell the foreman of my gang that I had to go for an interview with the Governor General for a scholarship. I should have just called in sick, since nobody believed me anyway. I didn't get the scholarship, though. I always wondered if the problem was basketball—the rules at that time still required that, as well as academic prowess, you had to excel in 'the manly sports' to show the leadership potential needed for a Rhodes. In New Zealand that was clearly rugby, and I played basketball. The Governor General asked me: 'Is that a manly sport?' But I was still interested in doing a Ph.D., and not long after I got a phone call from someone connected with that process, asking if I would be interested in a much less lucrative and prestigious scholarship handled by the same committee—a consolation prize of sorts for not getting the Rhodes. So I took this Oxford scholarship to King's College, Cambridge.

To return to the question, I did know that I wanted to do something on Indonesia. I had even taken an undergraduate class in Southeast Asian history and read my Furnivall, Emerson and Kahin at that early stage. That course was a first for New Zealand, in 1958. It was taught by Emily Sadka,<sup>2</sup> who was from a Sephardic Jewish family in Singapore and had done her Ph.D. at ANU on colonial Malaya. New Zealand was starting to get interested in Southeast Asian history and was looking for people who could teach it. At Wellington they had also just begun teaching Indonesian, which subsequently had a long career in New Zealand before being abandoned a couple of years ago. Leslie Palmier<sup>3</sup> was appointed to Wellington in my time also to start the Asian Studies programme. He didn't stay very long, but I asked him once where I should go if I wanted to do something on Indonesia. Of course he said Cornell. But I got the scholarship to Cambridge, and did not even apply for anything in

America—I was much more interested in going to Cambridge and being in Europe. So in 1961 I sailed through the Panama route to start work in Cambridge.

When I got there, they tried to persuade me to do something else. I already had an MA. But the historians at Kings said that what they did best was the Tripos, the three-year undergraduate degree. Cambridge still didn't pay great attention to graduate studies at that time, and many of the other scholarship students from abroad had indeed been persuaded to do a second bachelor's degree. I am glad I had the courage to say no, and of course the trend moved quickly in that direction subsequently. But they had no one in Cambridge for Southeast Asian studies—the only person I might do a Ph.D. with was Victor Purcell,<sup>4</sup> who worked on the Chinese in Southeast Asia. I wasn't at all interested in the Chinese at that stage (see below), nor he much in Indonesia, but he became my mentor and so I went ahead with him. Helen and I married at the beginning of my third year at Cambridge (1963). She had come to Europe after teaching for a year to get some money, and after we got together again she had taught English in Aachen, as near as she could get to where I was toiling in the Dutch colonial archives at Schaarsbergen, near Arnhem.

*What about the thesis itself?*

Aceh, I am afraid to say, was an arbitrary choice in a way. I worried about all those Dutch researchers who would read the colonial sources so much faster than me, and although I did start learning Dutch right away, I did not want a 100 per cent Dutch topic. Purcell was a fascinating character, but he was ageing, finishing up his memoirs, and not very interested in me. So I used to go to SOAS to talk to the historians there, among whom was Jeremy Cowan,<sup>5</sup> later Director of SOAS. He suggested I do East Sumatra, the *cultuurgebied* around Medan, as a key economic story on which little had been done. I went to the archives, and discovered that for every document on East Sumatra in either Dutch or British archives, there were twenty on Aceh. East Sumatra seemed such a quiet side-show by contrast that it would be hard to justify. So I went ahead with Aceh, trying to explain the origins of the war from both Dutch and British records leading up to the war, and discovering some fascinating Anglo-Dutch imbroglios along the way, largely ignored in the Dutch publications of the time because they embarrassingly compromised Dutch sovereignty. One of these was the strong Turkish role in the diplomacy of the war; another was the *Nisero* affair of 1883, which has remained in the shadows although a film could be made of it. A British steamer, *Nisero*, was wrecked on the

west coast of Aceh in the middle of the Aceh war, 1883, stranding its crew of 25 mostly British seamen. The local raja of Teunom had the wit himself—or more likely was advised by a French pepper-trader friend, Edouard Roura—to see this as a great chance. Why not hold them hostage and propose not to let them go until Britain guaranteed a proper solution to this war? It proved to be a stroke of brilliance because the British (especially in Singapore and Penang) were already very critical of Dutch policies, and the emotive pull of British hostages in a Sumatran jungle for a year made it imperative for London to appear to be doing something. The Hague was almost desperate to prevent the British from intervening. The Dutch government presented the eventual compromise with the British and the Raja, including the freeing of trade, to the Dutch public as if it was just what they would have done anyway. But losing that weapon of trade control was one of the factors that prevented the Dutch making a start on conquering Aceh for another ten years. Intriguing.

Anyway, I completed my thesis in January 1965 and published it with the University of Malaya and with Oxford.<sup>6</sup> Overall, it was a fairly conventional diplomatic thesis, with some interesting data but no ambitious new paradigm or anything of the sort. It got a couple of reviews and took its place on dusty shelves in a few libraries. So it was astonishing to me that a few years later, in the 1970s, I received a letter from Hasan Tiro's independence movement (then still a small thing), saying how much they liked the book which inspired their guerrillas in the jungle in Aceh! I was incredulous and frankly appalled. I told nobody at the time. It seemed inconceivable that this pedestrian dissertation written entirely in Europe, with scarcely any knowledge of modern Aceh (I was able to visit Aceh only once between thesis and book), could have had such an effect.

It appeared later that Hasan Tiro had read my book in the New York Public Library in the early 1970s, and was excited by the picture of nineteenth-century Aceh being taken seriously as an independent country having diplomatic relations with Britain, France, Turkey and the United States. No doubt I had tried to make it, if not Aceh-centric, at least a story with three equal protagonists—Aceh, the Netherlands and Britain. My generation was fed up with colonialism and therefore inherently sympathetic with nationalism. I certainly sympathised with the Aceh underdog having little chance in a colonial world. The British sources provided a useful additional window, just because they were not Dutch, and could show the Aceh case. So I see now how that story may have inadvertently appealed to Aceh nationalists. After the peace began I felt

able to meet Hasan Tiro and Malik Mahmud in Sweden, and I became again more active on the Aceh front—especially after the 2004 tsunami.

*What about your first university appointment?*

That was Malaysia. I had put some feelers out, but the job offer from the University of Malaya arrived halfway through an overland trip through the Middle East: Yugoslavia into Greece, Turkey, Syria, Iran. A telegram somehow reached us at a campground in the south of Turkey, which we must have given as a forwarding address for the Poste Restante in Istanbul. I had a job option in New Zealand if nothing in the region had come through. But having written a thesis without any fieldwork in the country I really wanted to be near Indonesia. And I couldn't go to Indonesia itself in 1965 because of *konfrontasi*.<sup>7</sup> The telegram basically urged us to get to Malaysia as soon as we could. I think I said we would need a couple more months, since we were only a third of the way and hadn't yet seen Jerusalem, Damascus, Baghdad and Isfahan. This was before the June 1976 War and so old Jerusalem was still part of Jordan. We had a booking made to get our Volkswagen van onto a ship in Madras, and I think we stuck to that.

Malaysia was an exciting place to start a career. The History Department was itself very interesting for a Southeast Asianist, with Wang Gungwu as head,<sup>8</sup> Jan Pluvier<sup>9</sup> already there as an Indonesianist, as well as David Bassett,<sup>10</sup> Bill Roff,<sup>11</sup> Tony Short,<sup>12</sup> and David Wyatt<sup>13</sup> and Gerald Maryonov as Fulbright visitors. But Malaysia itself was the real fascination. The late 1960s were turbulent times there as elsewhere. My first months witnessed Singapore's departure from Malaysia (August 1965) and the abortive coup in Jakarta (September), with all that followed from that. The most personally dramatic moment was the Kuala Lumpur rioting of 13 May 1969, which transformed the Malaysian scene. From hindsight it was the end of its age of innocence. About 200 people were killed, mainly Chinese, and many gruesomely slashed with parangs. Chinese Malaysians, although the victims of this violence, were also the big political losers from it, as the Malay-dominated government drew the conclusion that Malay resentment had to be addressed through one of the world's most large-scale affirmative-action programmes. Almost overnight Malay nationalism became legitimate, and the old relaxed cosmopolitanism suspect. Transforming the medium of Malaysia's universities from English to Malay, first a distant goal, became a political urgency, and (although the transformation came at a heavy price for the universities) I was glad to be there for the beginning of the process.

I was asked to teach Early Modern Southeast Asia, about which I then knew very little. Obviously the seed of the ‘Age of Commerce’ idea was planted there. But I got into it and started reading, and it was there that I started to find it really interesting. But as long as I was living in the region (as I found again in Singapore after 2002) the tug of understanding its contemporary shape was hard to resist. Of course I was itching to visit Sumatra for the first time, but couldn’t until Indonesia recognised Malaysia. When I did start to visit in late 1966 I was struck by the enormous contrast between Malaysia and Sumatra, despite their rather similar frontier background in colonial and pre-colonial times. The vital factor appeared to be the Indonesian revolution, which swept away so many local *anciens régimes*. In Malaysia I started work on the ‘social revolution’ of Aceh and East Sumatra, which overthrew the old order of sultans, rajas and ulèëbalangs in a few violent months of 1945–46. This proved my most fieldwork-based book, drawing much from interviews with revolutionaries, administrators and surviving aristocrats.<sup>14</sup>

In total I spent five academic years in Malaysia. In 1970, I took up an essentially research appointment at the Australian National University. I was glad that I had already accepted the appointment just before the Kuala Lumpur riots, so I did not face the problem of some of my colleagues in seemingly overstaying their welcome in the transformation that followed the riots. 1969 turned out to be a defining moment in Malaysian history, and Malay-first racial politics dominated the next forty years. I think I left at the right time, and my experience in Malaysia was entirely positive.

*And now come the big themes!*

The first big idea was revolution. That Malaysia-Indonesia contrast, which stayed with me all my life and is again a feature of *Imperial Alchemy* (2009), underlined for me the enormous importance of revolution. The revolutionary break with past legal and customary constraints in favour of the sacralisation of a revolutionary moment has had results even more decisive in Asia than in Europe. Indonesia’s unification as a centralised nation-state (not to mention China’s) would have been impossible without it. While I was writing my book on the social revolution in Sumatra, I was asked to write a short general book about the Indonesian revolution which I there called a ‘national revolution.’<sup>15</sup> I think it is a necessary way to understand Indonesia—it became a nation through revolution, providing a certain coherence and eventually shared culture (through a very centralised education system), at the cost of much more violence, lawlessness and impoverishment than Malaysia.

Through the 1970s, therefore, I was basically busy with this idea, which spawned a number of publications on the 1940s. ANU was fortunate in having a critical mass which made possible some joint projects, such as those on historiography,<sup>16</sup> on the Japanese occupation,<sup>17</sup> and later a number of others. But by the mid-1970s I was starting to feel that I did have something to say about the early modern period that I had taught in Malaysia. I started rather cautiously proposing a few ideas about what at one stage I called ‘the Origins of Poverty in Southeast Asia,’<sup>18</sup> and was able to do some serious research on it during a sabbatical in Europe in 1978. The problem of slavery arose in that early stage of trying to understand the pre-colonial social systems. How should one render a concept that appeared so frequently in the sources, but remains controversial and unhelpfully pejorative in contemporary culture? I convinced myself, though not all of my collaborators in the project, that slavery was a critical institution in Southeast Asian history, precisely as a point of interaction between cultures, and between the state and non-state domains.

The Bondage book<sup>19</sup> was therefore a useful step towards the big project. Other themes that excited me along the way to the big book were the unusually autonomous position of women in Southeast Asia; the causes of Southeast Asia’s low population before 1800; and (after a year in Sulawesi in 1980–81) the exceptionally open society of seventeenth-century Makasar.<sup>20</sup> These all became minor projects, and to some extent diversions, along the way to the two volumes of *The Age of Commerce*. I was very relieved to be able to persuade Yale to take one volume at a time, because the scale of the thing was getting out of hand and starting to crush me. But I was certainly fortunate to be at ANU, which made possible an unusually ambitious writing project of that sort. It was the perfect research institution for such a project.

*Helen: At that stage, Southeast Asia was still relatively very poor, and the explanation of that poverty was the challenge that got him started on the Age of Commerce project.*

Thank you for reminding me that Methodist social conscience hadn’t quite deserted the Catholic adult. In terms of the dichotomy I once proposed in the motivation of Southeast Asian studies, between reformism and alterity,<sup>21</sup> I certainly started with reformism—though somewhere along the way alterity (the fascination with cultural difference) got the upper hand. I did certainly begin with that ‘origins of poverty’ idea, but in the twenty years I took to realise it, that became overtaken by a number of other ideas. And the transition to ‘capitalism’ in the grand Marxist

sense was, I concluded, just too slippery a concept. Nevertheless I did pursue what seemed a particular feature of the Southeast Asian scene, the difficulties experienced in conserving capital. Like the gender question, this appeared to be something that distinguished Southeast Asia from both of its neighbours in India and China. There was a marked pattern in the region for investing in people rather than in institutions.

*Whom were you inspired by in the Age of Commerce project? And did you ever imagine that this work would have such an impact?*

I was particularly inspired by Fernand Braudel. Having discovered *La Méditerranée*<sup>22</sup> some distance into the project I was greatly relieved to find that someone much wiser than I had managed to write inspiring early modern history around a maritime unit. I could not have had the courage to be so ambitious without that important precedent. Others in the *Annales* school, notably Emanuel Le Roy Ladurie, also showed how things could be done. I liked the big-picture work of Geoffrey Parker on the seventeenth century, and Charles Tilly, and the anthropologist Jack Goody. I certainly did not fully expect all the reactions I got—they were strong and they were many. Enthusiasm came from a number of unexpected quarters, notably Japan, and among graduate students in the US and Southeast Asia. Criticism necessarily came from colleagues, perhaps particularly targeting what some felt was seeing the region through a maritime/Indonesian lens, and for using sources rather boldly at a time when the cultural turn was discouraging some from using them at all. But there is not much about the work that I would repent or do differently. What irritated Southeast Asianists the most was perhaps the attempt to quantify some things. Economic history was very little developed for Southeast Asia since the pre-war Marxists, and putting numbers on things shocked some with a sense of misplaced concreteness. I do believe somebody had to begin to do this, to drive home that Southeast Asia was not some exotic Shangri-la which could not be compared with anywhere else. I love and admire the specialist work of epigraphers and literary scholars, but I want that to be more, not less, accessible to the non-specialist by making the comparisons where we can. One needs numbers to compare things; one needs to do one's best to put *vis* and *pikul* and so forth into metrics, after all the acknowledgement that nothing is precise and that things change with time and place. We needed to go forward, and it seemed wrong to me to ignore numbers only on account of there being less data. We may never know for sure whether Ayutthaya was as big as Paris in 1600, and we will never know as much about Ayutthaya

as about Paris. But there are still things to work with. Of course people started using my numbers, particularly for population, and people like Gunder Frank read more into them than they could bear. They should certainly be used with great caution, as I made clear, and treated as only one step towards contextualising the comparative place of Southeast Asia in the broader Early Modern world.

*And how does your work on the Chinese enter into this story?*

I had always felt that the Chinese in Southeast Asia were best left to those who had the language and context, but I was thrust increasingly into this field in the 1990s. There was a crisis in the study of the Southeast Asian Chinese at ANU when Wang Gungwu left for Hong Kong, and then in 1989 Jennifer Cushman<sup>23</sup> died suddenly in her early forties. We set up a series of lectures in her honour,<sup>24</sup> and later started a Centre for the Study of the Southern Chinese Diaspora, a way of including Australia and the Pacific as well as Southeast Asia without too many initials. We were all shocked at her sudden death, and Craig Reynolds and I were both propelled into taking responsibility for this Centre without much academic preparation for it.

This in turn gave rise to another ‘big idea’—to compare the experience of the Southeast Asian Chinese with the European Jews. Once again, fools rush in where angels fear to tread. I am reminded of the opening sentence of Clifford Geertz’s review of *Age of Commerce* Vol. I: ‘Of impossible books asking to be written, a “total history” of Southeast Asia in the manner of Fernand Braudel...would seem very near to the top of the list.’<sup>25</sup> I acknowledge that I have done some rash things that others had the wisdom to avoid, perhaps driven by that Methodist conscience or whatever. I had been troubled by this comparison ever since the Kuala Lumpur riots (pogrom?). Southeast Asianists and especially Southeast Asians steered well clear of it, and this itself began to seem a problem to me. I proposed it to the (New York-based) SSRC Committee on Southeast Asia, of which I was then a member, on the proviso (I thought unlikely to be met) that we could find an experienced Europeanist to handle the major sensitivities on that side. Daniel Chirot<sup>26</sup> was found able and willing—a specialist on Eastern Europe, and a sociologist given to ‘big ideas.’ We got together an impressive group about equally composed of Europeanists and Southeast Asianists, who met in San Diego, immediately before the Northridge earthquake of 17 January 1994 (presumably not connected). It was an eye-opener, even more for the Europeanists than for us. In Eastern Europe the huge role of Jewish financiers had long

been judged to be largely fictional, but in Southeast Asia the Chinese domination of the economic high points was a fact. Managing resentment looked like an even bigger issue for Southeast Asia than for Europe. They tended to read the Southeast Asian evidence as similar to that of Europe in the 1920s, and in some ways more alarming. We reassured them; it was all manageable and under control, at least as long as the economies flourished. Dan and I definitely wanted to publish on the issues, but our two colleagues from Malaysia thought that would be much too sensitive, given the demonisation of Jews in much contemporary Islamic discourse. At this point the Europeanists exploded. Now it *really* looked like Europe in the 1920s, when the establishment preferred to ignore anti-semitism as just an unruly fringe. Having insisted things were OK, how could we now say it was too sensitive to publish? It was an interesting episode, from which both sides learned a lot. While it remains true that the two communities have almost nothing in common per se, there are certain historical situations when entrepreneurial minorities become particularly endangered. Perhaps in both cases the gap between ruler and ruled was filled by an entrepreneurial minority. In the end, we took care to keep the book on a very analytic level.<sup>27</sup> We thought there might be some fireworks if the book got into the Southeast Asian press, so we didn't seek that and it never did.

*What about your later career?*

The book I have just finished is called *Imperial Alchemy*.<sup>28</sup> It is another example of the way being in the region tends to pull me back to more contemporary concerns. I am very happy to be back with more time to write, since getting out of administration in 2007. But to go back a few years, I left ANU for UCLA in 1999. My formal career ended most surprisingly with two offers I could simply not refuse, since each was offering major resources to build an important new institution. I don't think I am a natural administrator, especially when really tough decisions have to be made and defended, but I am proud of these two institutions. A viable Southeast Asian Centre in Los Angeles was an important and long overdue achievement, since LA is so important a diasporic centre for all the Southeast Asian-American communities. The Centre is still going strong, with Title VI funding from Washington in partnership with Berkeley. And after UCLA came the offer from NUS.

*Helen: That was fantastic because it was never our intention to stay in America. He always wanted to work on Southeast Asia in Southeast Asia with Southeast Asians.*

It is true that at ANU in the 1990s I was increasingly conscious that Southeast Asian Studies had to be centred in the region itself to be healthy. From an Australian base I was trying to develop the concept of Asian Studies in Asia, with Australia as very much part of it.<sup>29</sup> And because there were too many historians of my generation at ANU, and too few opportunities for young scholars, I very much wanted to move to Southeast Asia if I could find the right way to do it. I had various impractical schemes, but never dreamed that somebody would come along with generous resources and invite me to build a research institute in the region. So, despite many warm feelings about UCLA, I didn't have to hesitate long about the Singapore offer. And I am very honoured and grateful that I was able to have those last seven years (2002–09) in the region.

## Notes

- 1 J.C. Beaglehole (ed.), *The Journals of Captain James Cook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955); J.C. Beaglehole (ed.), *The Voyage of the Resolution and Adventure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961); J. C. Beaglehole, *The Exploration of the Pacific* (London: A. and C. Black, 1934).
- 2 Emily Sadka, a distant relation of Singapore's first (also Jewish) Chief Minister David Marshall, was a brilliant student and Queen's Scholar, who completed her Ph.D. at ANU in 1966, later published as *The Protected Malay States, 1874–1895* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1968). After only a year or two teaching in Wellington she returned to the ANU in 1960 as Research Fellow and then tenured Fellow (in effect my predecessor), but died tragically early in 1968.
- 3 Sociologist Leslie H. Palmier was appointed to head New Zealand's first Asian Studies Department at VUW in 1959, but resigned in 1963. His books include *Indonesia and the Dutch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962); and *Communists in Indonesia: Power Pursued in Vain* (Penerbit: Anchor Press, 1973).
- 4 Victor Purcell's earlier life to 1950 is covered in his *The Memoirs of a Malayan Official* (London: Cassell, 1965). He is best known for *The Chinese in Malaya*

- (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948); and *The Chinese in South-East Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).
- 5 C.D. Cowan had taught at the University of Malaya in Singapore before moving to SOAS as Professor of Southeast Asian History, and eventually as Director (1976–89). His books include *Nineteenth Century Malaya: The Origins of British Political Control* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961); and *The Economic Development of Southeast Asia: Studies in Economic History and Political Economy* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1964).
  - 6 *The Contest for North Sumatra: Atjeh, the Netherlands and Britain, 1858–1898* (Kuala Lumpur: OUP/UMP, 1969; Indonesian translation 2004).
  - 7 President Sukarno took the view that Malaysia was a neo-colonial British plot, and launched his military ‘Confrontation’ of it when it was nevertheless formed in September 1963 by the federation of Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak and Sabah.
  - 8 Wang Gungwu was the first Malaysian Professor of History at the University of Malaya (1960–68), before moving to the ANU as Professor of Far Eastern History (1968–85), to the University of Hong Kong as Vice-Chancellor (1985–93) and to NUS in various capacities after retirement.
  - 9 Jan Pluvier moved subsequently to the University of Amsterdam. His books included *Confrontations: A Study in Indonesian Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965); *Southeast Asia from Colonialism to Independence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).
  - 10 David Bassett moved in 1968 to the University of Hull, in his native Yorkshire. He later authored *British Trade and Policy in Indonesia and Malaysia in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Hull: Inter Documentation Company, 1971); *Britain and Southeast Asia* (Hull: Inter Documentation Company, 1980); *The British in Southeast Asia during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Hull: Inter Documentation Company, 1990).
  - 11 William R. Roff moved in 1969 to Columbia University. His pioneering ANU Ph.D. was published as *The Origins of Malay Nationalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).
  - 12 After military service and degrees from LSE and Oxford, Anthony Short arrived in Malaya in 1960 as ‘more or less official historian of the communist insurrection in Malaya,’ but combined this with teaching European history at the University. He moved to the University of Aberdeen in 1966 (Interview with Tony Short 2003, University of Aberdeen Oral History Archive). His books include *The Communist Insurrection in Malaya 1948–1960* (London: Muller, 1975); and *The Origins of the Vietnam War* (London: Longman, 1989).

- 13 David Wyatt (1937–2006) spent a semester on a Fulbright at the University of Malaya in 1967, prior to moving to teach at his alma mater, Cornell University, in 1969, where he remained until his death. His work includes *The Politics of Reform in Thailand: Education in the Reign of King Chulalongkorn* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969); *Thailand: A Short History* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), and a project influenced by his time in Malaysia, *Hikayat Patani: The Story of Patani*, 2 vols (with H. Teeuw, KITLV 1970).
- 14 Anthony Reid, *The Blood of the People: Revolution and the End of Traditional Rule in Northern Sumatra*, OUP, Kuala Lumpur: 1979 (Indonesian translation as *Perjuangan Rakyat*, Sinar Harapan, 1986).
- 15 Anthony Reid, *The Indonesian National Revolution, 1945–1950* (Hawthorn, Vic. Longmans Australia, 1974; Indonesian translation Sinar Harapan, 1996).
- 16 Anthony Reid and David Marr (eds.), *Perceptions of the Past in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Heinemann for ASAA, 1979; Indonesian translation 1983).
- 17 A.W. McCoy (ed.), *Southeast Asia under Japanese Occupation* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1979).
- 18 Anthony Reid, ‘Trade and the Problem of Royal Power in Aceh, c.1550–1700’, in Reid and Castles (eds.), *Pre-Colonial State Systems in Southeast Asia: the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, Bali-Lombok, South Celebes* (Kuala Lumpur: MBRAS, 1975), 45–55. A special lecture on ‘The Origins of Poverty in Southeast Asia’ at the Third New Zealand Conference of Asian Studies, Auckland, 1979, was later published as ‘The Origins of Poverty in Indonesia’, in J.J. Fox, J.A.C. Mackie and Peter McCawley (eds.), *Indonesia—Australian Perspectives* (Canberra: RSPacS, 1981), 441–54.
- 19 Anthony Reid (ed.), *Slavery, Bondage and Dependency in Southeast Asia* (St Lucia: Queensland University Press, 1983).
- 20 Two of the 1980s articles on Makasar were republished in Reid, *Charting the Shape of Early Modern Southeast Asia* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999).
- 21 ‘“Alterity” and “Reformism”: the Australian frontier in Indonesian studies’, *Archipel* 21 (1981) 7–18.
- 22 Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1949).
- 23 Jennifer W. Cushman (194?–89) came to ANU from Cornell in 1976 to work with Wang Gungwu on the Southeast Asian Chinese. She authored *Fields from the Sea: Chinese Junk Trade with Siam during the late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Ithaca: Cornell University Studies on Southeast Asia, 1993); and edited with Wang Gungwu, *Changing Identities of the Southeast*

- Asian Chinese since World War II* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1988).
- 24 Eventually published as Anthony Reid (ed.), *Sojourners and Settlers: Histories of Southeast Asia and the Chinese in Honour of Jennifer Cushman* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996).
- 25 Clifford Geertz, 'A South Sea Renaissance', *New York Review of Books* 53:2 (1989). Although I feared disaster after this beginning, the review was in the end generous.
- 26 Daniel Chirot, *Social Change in a Peripheral Society: The Creation of a Balkan Colony* (New York: Academic Press New York, 1976); *Social Change in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977); *Social Change in the Modern Era* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986); *Modern Tyrants: The Power and Prevalence of Evil in Our Age* (New York: Free Press, 1994).
- 27 D. Chirot and A. Reid (eds.), *Essential Outsiders: Chinese and Jews in the Modern Transformation of Southeast Asia and Central Europe* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997).
- 28 *Imperial Alchemy: Nationalism and Political Identity in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- 29 Anthony Reid, 'Preface: Asian Studies in Asia', in *The Directory of Asian Studies in Asia: A Summary of Reports Presented at the 'Asian Studies in Asia' Workshop, held in Hua Hin, April, 1998* (Canberra: ASAA, 2000); 'Studying "Asia" in Asia', *Asian Studies Review* 23:2 (1999), 141–51; 'Completing the Circle: Southeast Asian Studies in Southeast Asia', in Reid (ed.), *Southeast Asian Studies: Pacific Perspectives* (Tempe, AZ: Program in Southeast Asian Studies, Arizona State University, 2003), 93–107.



## The Red-Haired Barbarian from Leiden: Interview with Leonard Blussé

*You have reached the mandatory retirement age of 65 and gave your farewell lecture on 6 June last. High time to have an interview with you! After Itinerario was founded by George Winius and you in 1976, you yourself did many of the interviews. Interviews were and still are rather uncommon in scholarly journals. Why did you start them?*

It was a mixture of egoism and curiosity. We meant the journal to be a research journal, so apart from publishing articles we had two things in mind: to speak with prominent people active in the field and also to do special reports on archives and research institutions. George and I loved to ask colleagues about their backgrounds, their personal interests and their approaches to teaching and research. The interviews worked out well, but it turned out to be very difficult to find people who were willing to write about their experiences in foreign archives. But before you start asking more questions there are two points I would like to make, because they are important: I have been very fortunate to work in a happy department almost all of my career, a real blessing. Leiden University with its fine libraries and the National Archives at a fifteen minute train ride away is a great place to be. I have never seriously thought of going elsewhere. The second point may surprise you, but I never intended to have a career in academia. But then, life is full of good intentions. Once I became caught in the interesting research developments in overseas studies I was hooked.

*Could you tell us something about your childhood?*

I was born in Rotterdam in 1946, shortly after the war came to an end. The whole city centre had been bombed away by the Germans in May 1940, and during my entire youth the town was in a perpetual building frenzy. The 1950s and 1960s were a period of tremendous development. In those years Rotterdam even surpassed New York as the world's biggest port. Shipping on the Maas river was flourishing, tugboats towed barges up the river, sea ships were sailing in and out of the city to far-flung destinations. Across from our yacht club you could see the ocean steamers of the Holland America line depart and arrive. We actually used to sail

our old flat-bottomed Dutch sailing yacht with leeboards in the midst of all that traffic. The liners disappeared in the 1960s—but not before I had served as a pantry boy on board the *SS Rotterdam* on the Rotterdam–New York line—and for almost forty years now it has been forbidden to sail without using an engine on the river. When I was a young boy I devoured all the books I could find about the sea: various Dutch writers like Anthony van Kampen and K. Norel, and of course British and American ones like Slocum, Kipling, Stevenson, and so on. I was much too young for Conrad! In any case, it was my dream to go to sea.

*Why didn't you?*

One of the frustrations of my youth was that the connections with Indonesia were slipping away. I was very much in awe of people of my father's generation who had been overseas visiting interesting places. My mother was born in Singapore. Because I had to wear glasses from the age of 10 my dreams of becoming a ship's captain in the merchant marine were shattered. My father was a maritime lawyer, and together with my two older brothers I have been sailing for as long as I can remember. I am the proud and somewhat worried owner of a more than 100-year-old little sailing barge on which we go on vacations with friends and my kids. Ships have always been a part of my life. I am afraid I passed most of my school time dreaming about impossible projects like sailing around the world or settling on Tristan da Cunha in the South Atlantic after I had read some books about that 'lonely isle.' But when in 1961 a volcano exploded and the complete population was moved from the island that dream was shattered too. I still collect every scrap of paper about Tristan I can find, and I am happy to see that James Fichter, who recently published a great book on American Trade in the Far East, shares this interest with me.<sup>1</sup> At last somebody I can talk to about the Repettos, the Greens, the Swans and the other families of Tristan, who, by the way, have returned to their island.

*So why did you take up the study of Sinology?*

After I finished the Gymnasium I went to University in Leiden. My interests had changed a bit, and I wanted to take up anthropology. But by coincidence I met with Professor J.H. Van den Berg, a psychiatrist who was well known for his writings about *Metabologica*. He was devising all sorts of aptitude tests for school and business purposes at the time and needed young guinea pigs. After I had participated in one week of tests, I had an informal interview with him to talk about the results. Looking at

my records he discouraged me from studying anthropology, saying that instead I should do something that would keep me more focused. Out of the blue he suggested I should take up either Arabic or Chinese. Feeling that China would rise again in the future I decided on Chinese, especially after I found out that Holland's biggest shipping line in Asia, the Royal Inter-Ocean Lines, had its headquarters in Hong Kong.

If you will allow me a funny anecdote: my grandfather De Monchy, who had worked on Java for an insurance company in the first decades of the past century, liked to play tricks on his little grandson, saying that he could speak Chinese. He would tell me to sit down in front of him on the carpet. Then, sitting in his armchair, he would unfold a newspaper in front of him, burn a little hole in it with a cigar and send three puffs of smoke through it, whereupon he started to 'speak Chinese,' mumbling *Patcha kokka*, *Patcha kokka*. Three more puffs through the hole would follow, the paper was folded again and there the face of grandpa reappeared. I have never found out what those words meant—he never said more. *Kokka* probably was *guojia* in the Hokkian dialect meaning country. *Patcha*? No idea. He may have overheard some nationalistic slogans in the street.

Anyway, I had all sorts of romantic ideas of what a career in shipping in Asia was going to be like. So I started out with Chinese, but I had hardly begun in 1965 when the Cultural Revolution broke out, which made it impossible to go to China for years to come. Not that it mattered for the time being, because in Leiden at the time students did not learn any modern Chinese; all you learned was classical Chinese. So we happily continued studying Chinese history and complex traditional characters while, in the meantime, the Communists were simplifying all of them! Together with a couple of friends I also established the Dutch Open Air Barge Museum, saving a handfull of rare, old sailing barges that had been sent to the scrapyards at the time and went on restoring them. Most of the ships we saved are still in existence and are now incorporated and treasured in the Rotterdam Shipping Museum collection. A few years later, the '68 student revolutions occurred in France, and less aggressively so in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe too. A very exciting time. The whole youth scene was incredibly vibrant, with great music and good vibes. After I had been in Leiden for four years amidst all these kinds of distractions—but wisely passing my examinations—I was rather unsure of where I was heading. I didn't feel I had learnt anything useful yet. I had read a lot of Far Eastern history, could handle Classical Chinese texts and to a lesser extent also Japanese. But then my French girlfriend suggested

that we should go to Taiwan to find out what Chinese popular culture was really about, and that turned out to be a masterstroke.

*How so?*

It was like diving in the deep after years of swimming lessons at the side of the pool. Just before we left Europe we met with the famous Sinologist and Taoist [Kristofer] Schipper, who had been living in Tainan, in the south of Taiwan, for nine years. When I complained that I would probably have to study Confucius and Mencius all over again, he advised me to enroll in anthropology because it would open up Taiwanese society for me. So I learned to speak Chinese within six months, thanks to an elderly Chinese gentleman by the name of Wang Yuh-chuan. He made me learn by heart three or four 300-character stories a week. Then, I studied anthropology under famous professors like Li Yi-yuan and Ch'en Ch'i-lu and was also able to engage in fieldwork among the tribes in the mountains. But I ended up doing anthropological fieldwork on the folk religion of the fishermen in the Penghu archipelago, between Taiwan and the mainland. I ran into all kinds of folk tales about the 'red-haired barbarians' there. I soon realised that these must have been the Dutch, who roamed those islands in the early seventeenth century and even built a castle there in 1622. Of course this is well-known today, but at that time very little work had been done. In the backyard of a temple, behind the laundry of soldiers living there, I found an inscription saying that the Chinese had chased out the Red Barbarians in the Tianqi period, the early 1620s. A few months later I rediscovered the ruins of the castle on a small promontory in the bay. A big anti-aircraft gun was positioned in the middle. We were arrested for going near it, but now this whole area is open to the public.

Back in Taipei, I was introduced to Professor Ts'ao Yung-ho, the librarian of the research library of the university. Professor Ts'ao had been schooled by Japanese professors before the war, and was very much a product of the Japanese philological tradition. During the 1950s, he had taught himself seventeenth-century Dutch by typing out all the manuscript copies of the VOC diaries of the Dutch governors of Formosa (Taiwan) during the Dutch occupation (1624–62).

*That does seem like a very timely and fortunate introduction. Who introduced you?*

Well, Professor Schipper had told me that after my arrival in Taiwan I should look up Dr. Inez de Beauclair, a famous anthropologist and niece to the last Austrian Emperor. She was living in retirement at the Academia

Sinica. She was very old, in bad health, and stayed alive eating nothing but biscuits. We agreed that I should see her once a week to have dinner with her. She was a phenomenon, full of interesting stories about the aborigines of Melanesia, Guizhou and Taiwan, among whom she had been involved in fieldwork. She gave me the nickname *hongmao fan*, 'Red Haired Barbarian', and when I met her son years later he did not believe I had known his mother until I mentioned that I was the Red-Haired Barbarian. Dr. de Bauclair was the one who introduced me to Ts'ao Yung-ho, of whom she was very fond. I worked with Professor Ts'ao for two years—he tutored me at home and in his office—after which he suggested that I should move to Japan to continue my studies there under the guidance of his own former professors, Iwao Seiichi and Nakamura Takashi. That was forty years ago! Incidentally, last October we celebrated Professor Ts'ao's 90th anniversary at Taiwan University. There is nobody in the scholarly world to whom I owe as much as to Professor Ts'ao Yung-ho. Now, at the end of his career, he has been promoted to academician of the Academia Sinica.

*A somewhat materialistic question, but how did you make ends meet at the time?*

We were quite jealous of the well-funded American students of the Stanford centre in Taipei. We received a small scholarship, just like our Chinese comrades at the University, but did not fancy living in separate dormitories. So we taught English and French to make some money. My father continued to send me the same monthly stipend I had received when I studied at Leiden. To him, it made no difference whether I studied in Leiden or Taipei as long as I passed exams. Together, this allowed us to rent a house with some French friends, buy books and lead a relatively comfortable life. In Japan it was a different story altogether. A year after my arrival I received a Mombusho scholarship, to be an assistant to Professor Hibino Takeo at the Jimbun Kagaku Kenkyujo of Kyoto University. In addition I became a recruiter of Western extras for the Toei Eiga film company: they needed western faces for *Yakuza* movies, *Tokugawa jidai geki* (historical dramas) and the like. I was a regular extra myself, actually—I have played Russians, drunken GIs, Dutch VOC captains and so on in plenty of third-rate films. We even played with Robert Mitchum in *The Yakuza*, but unfortunately they cut a lot of scenes out of that film. I studied in Japan for three years and ended up working on a thesis on the Wako—Japanese pirates—during the Ming dynasty. But suddenly, in 1975 Korean scholar So Kwan Wai published a monograph detailing most

of what I was working on, so I had to find another subject and turned to the larger framework of the history of the China Seas.

*Who did you study with in Japan?*

In addition to working with the historical geographer Hibino Takeo in Kyoto, I helped Nakamura Takashi, then at Tenri University. He was working on a Japanese translation of the seventeenth-century VOC Diaries of Batavia castle. I helped him with the footnotes for the sections about Taiwan and Japan. That is when I began to see how important it is for Asian scholars to use Dutch East India Company sources to fill in gaps in their own historical sources. That really was an eye opener. Among Asian historians, the Japanese were and are number one in translating and editing foreign sources for their own use.

Even before the war, scholars like Yamamoto Tatsuro and Iwao Seiichi had written important monographs using ample foreign sources. That generation was still very active in the 1970s and 1980s. They were very hospitable to me as a young foreign scholar. I was invited to conferences and given the opportunity to publish. Kyoto University was a strange place to be in those days, because student factions were still bashing each other's heads in with iron pipes. Nevertheless, the Jimbun Ken was heaven on earth. At that time the Marxist approach to history, with regard to the Tokugawa period, was losing its grip and even fading away. Japanese historians were completely revising their views on Sakoku, the so-called Closed Country. Based on an essay published by Engelbert Kaempfer in the early eighteenth century, it was generally believed that during most of the Tokugawa period the whole country had been closed off and looking inward. That in itself is to a certain extent true, but it is not correct that this was something abnormal or typically Japanese. Autarky was an old Chinese ideal. Come to think of it, the Koreans were even better at it than the Japanese. While there is no denying that the Japanese strongly reduced their foreign trade, they used the Chinese and the Dutch traders as their eyes and ears for the outside world. The first thing I did when I came back from Japan in the autumn of 1975 was to write an article about the changing views in Japan regarding the concept of sakoku and how the revisionist thinking had developed.<sup>2</sup> I also brought out the contribution to this discourse by those scholars with access to foreign sources. Around the same time, Ronald Toby wrote his article on this topic from a different perspective. Later on he published his famous book on the subject.<sup>3</sup>

*Did you ever return to your dream of working in shipping?*

Around the same time I actually applied for a job with Royal Inter-Ocean Lines in Hong Kong. I even paid a visit to Hong Kong to see what it was like, and found the situation I had always dreamed of: the management of the company living on the hill, overlooking the anchored ships, the harbour... just perfect. The director, Mr. Dirkzwager, was very accommodating—it was early spring, but he told me I could begin in September so that I could finish my contract with Professor Hibino first. But only two months later, when I was back in Japan I learnt from a newspaper that Royal Inter-Ocean Lines was merging with Nedlloyd Lines, and that the headquarters would be moved from Hong Kong to Rijswijk, a suburb of The Hague in the Netherlands! I decided that I had better give up the shipping dream. It was not just the main office's move to Rijswijk; we were also witnessing the final throes of the decline of mercantile shipping in the old sense of the word. Most of the vested European shipping lines in Asia were disappearing fast. Container shipping was on the rise, and everything changed. The romance of shipping was lost, too.

*What was the next step?*

Well, I heard that a Centre for the History of European Expansion was being established by Professor Henk Wesseling in Leiden. At the time we were living in a little temple in the mountains north-east of Kyoto overlooking Lake Biwa. We spent our last year in Japan there. The Konrenji was a Jodoshinshu village temple, which had been left by its priest, and after a friend of mine, Willem Rimmelink, had lived there for two years we moved in and essentially became the *jushoku* (caretakers), preparing tea for the villagers returning from the rice fields in the afternoon and performing all sorts of little tasks. So I collected a bag full of 100 yen coins and went to the only public telephone in the neighbourhood, near the post office on the hill. I called Wesseling from Japan, constantly throwing in all those little coins. He is still fond of telling this story, also because it is such an excellent demonstration of how communication lines have changed since then. But my call was in vain—Wesseling told me that they had just hired Piet Emmer. A new vacancy might arise at some point, but not in the next two years.

*But did you return to the Netherlands anyway?*

Well, I was almost immediately hired by Professor Teeuw upon returning to Holland, to help him set up the *Bureau Indonesische Studies* [Office of

Indonesian Studies] which was to restore the cultural relations between Holland and Indonesia on an academic level.

*Why the sudden interest in Indonesia?*

My interest in Indonesia had been there since my childhood. But there was another interesting connection to Indonesia: Professor Nakamura, who was teaching Southeast Asian history at Tenri University. Tenrikyo, the Tenri religion, is a 'New Buddhist' religion. All followers of the Tenrikyo have to give part of their salary to the temple. Interestingly, the head of the Tenrikyo, the *Shinbashira* was a great bibliophile. He was absolutely mad about books. I was told by Professor Nakamura that the *shimbashira* used part of the incoming money to buy books for the university, because the Tenri missionaries in Southeast Asia needed to be well informed before going out to spread the gospel, and learn about the customs of the people. Mind you, this was a man who took KLM planes to the Netherlands in the 1950s, where the staff of Martinus Nijhoff publishers—who also ran a large antiquariate at the time—would meet him personally at the airport. After having enjoyed a copious dinner at Sauer, his favourite fish restaurant in The Hague, they would spend the whole night sorting out thousands of kilos of books and journals on the Netherlands Indies, mostly purchased from retired colonial servants who did not want them anymore. So Tenri, until the 1970s, had the most complete library on Southeast Asia in Japan. I would go there once a week—first of all to help Professor Nakamura translating the Batavia diaries, but also to just delve into the stacks of this library. I could stay with friends one night a week. I read everything I could find in old journals, specifically on the Overseas Chinese.

*Overseas Chinese?*

Yes, I felt there was a strong connection between the Dutch and the sojourners and immigrants from China's south-eastern seaboard provinces in Indonesia—it has always been my idea that the colonisation of Java and Sumatra cannot be explained without taking into account the strong cooperation and competition between these two partners. I say partners, even though the two were part of a different world economy, the Dutch within their formal imperial set-up and the Chinese as part of an overseas Chinese informal empire. There can be no doubt that this was, in political terms, an unequal relationship, with the Dutch 'colonial masters' on top. Nowadays people even speak of 'co-colonisation,' which is a somewhat stronger term, but back then this was a new idea. It is also what I ended up writing my thesis about, *Strange Company*. I exploded the

myth of Batavia as a Dutch colonial town in the tropics by showing that the biggest population was actually Chinese, and that it was a Chinese colonial city just as much as it was a Dutch one. That idea of a Chinese informal empire of trade amidst Southeast Asian state formations in the eighteenth century I further developed through papers at conferences in Lisbon, Tokyo and London; and it was actually in Tokyo that my friend Sakurai Yoneo suggested that I was really referring to a Chinese Century. That was also the title that I gave to the article when I finally published it in the book of essays in memory of Denys Lombard.<sup>4</sup>

*What did you end up doing at the Bureau of Indonesian Studies?*

Ah yes, it was an interesting experience because I saw how this very well-intentioned project was not as effective as everybody had hoped. It was mainly due to a poor selection of students and to an overabundance of steering committees on both sides. Professor Teeuw was a fine organiser and diplomat, but with all those people from everywhere having a say in everything the programme was top heavy. The selection of the students was difficult to control in Indonesia. They came to the Netherlands to study history, linguistics, anthropology etc. But we did organise the first Dutch–Indonesian Historical Congress since the war!

That was how I got to know both the older and the younger generation of Indonesian scholars, like Sartono, Ong Hok Ham, Adri Lapien, Eddy Masinambow, Thee Kian Wie and Taufik Abdullah, all of them formidable scholars. Most of them had had a formal Dutch colonial school education first, and university degrees from American universities afterwards, often on Fulbright scholarships. I realised how many difficulties they had encountered after returning to Indonesia to teach the next generations at very poorly organised universities. It was an almost impossible mission. However, times have changed. Nowadays, we cooperate closely with our colleagues of Gajah Mada University in Yogyakarta. Dr. Bambang Purwanto is running a tight and dynamic department there and I am proud that our TANAP and Encompass programmes, training their students in Leiden, have been useful for him and other professors in Indonesia.

*But at some point, you did join the Centre for European Expansion?*

Yes, I did. As Wesseling had said, there was a new opening after two years, and I was fortunate enough to be selected. I worked together with Piet Emmer (Caribbean history, slavery and migration), Gerard Telkamp (the Centre's documentalist), Robert Ross (South African History), George

Winius (Portuguese empire), and later also Jaap de Moor (documentation and colonial military history). Piet Emmer had been publishing a bilingual newsletter in French and English, but he had only managed to issue it twice. George and I decided that there was a task for us to carry out, so we founded *Itinerario*. Thanks to that close cooperation I have learned so much from George in terms of writing and dealing with broad historical issues. George, Piet, Robert and I took turns as editor of *Itinerario* in the early decades of the journal's existence.

*What were the first years of Itinerario like?*

When you look at the first issues of *Itinerario*, they almost look like issues of a high school journal. But we immediately decided that we were going to do something different from other journals, that is to say that we were going to do interviews with important people in the field. For a period of over twenty years there was no greater joy for me than to interview great historians. What better opportunity is there to encounter interesting people? It was a great privilege to meet so many of these scholars—some of whom have long since passed away. But where does one nowadays find the likes of Ronald Robinson, Henry Brunschwig, Bailey Diffie, Niels Steensgaard and Charles Boxer? We republished the most interesting interviews of the first twenty years in book form when Henk Wesseling moved to NIAS under the title *Pilgrims to the Past*. It is perhaps time that we published the second batch with people like Geoffrey Parker and Hermann Giliomee.

Scholars today are bred and nurtured almost exclusively within an academic setting. But that earlier generation had often done completely different things in life. Diffie, for instance, had joined the stock market and made a mass of money before he went into academia. That would not be possible today. I have a close American friend and colleague, whom I shall not name here, who after writing a terrific Ph.D. thesis joined his family's firm. He retired from business at the age of 50-something, but he has not been able to join a faculty again, even though he is an excellent historian. He would have been a great asset to any US history department and its students. Shame on the system!

One of the more memorable interviews we did was the one with Charles Boxer. After a copious dinner at my house, he told George Winus and me so much about his military past in the Far East that he afterwards asked us not to publish it during his lifetime. By the time he died at a very great age, the tape had disappeared with George, who moved to various places after his early retirement. Boxer, by the way, is another good example

of someone who joined academia later in life. His wife Emily [Hahn] was a well-known writer for the *New Yorker*, and Boxer, who was a very overpowering figure when you met him, changed into a meek schoolboy whenever she was at his side smoking thin cigars! Do read Emily Hahn's *China to Me*, which is about her years in Shanghai and her budding relationship with Charles

Boxer.

Anyway, I was fortunate to join the Centre in Leiden, especially since I was a Sinologist by training. I was something of an ugly duckling at the history department, having had such a different education from my colleagues. It was also a great privilege to work with Henk Wesseling, and through his connections with French scholars, as we did back then: Fernand Braudel, Jean-Louis Miège, Maurice Aymard, Denys Lombard... French and English within one conference was no problem. British scholars like Robinson, Chris and Susan Bayly and Tony Hopkins would also attend conferences where French was spoken.

I am very fortunate to have known quite a few remarkable people in the field. Among them was M.A.P. Meilink-Roelofs, the famous archivist and VOC historian, whom I regularly visited after she retired. This 'iron lady' gave a lot of impetus to the VOC-related studies that have been flourishing over the past decades. What would global history be like without all those wonderful studies of early modern trade in Asia by Bruijn, Gaastra, Glamann, Steensgaard, Prakash, Das Gupta, Chaudhuri, to name just a few? Closely involved with the Centre were also the Leiden Indologists Jan Heesterman and Dirk Kolff, the multi-talented Cees Fasseur, and of course Professor Han Baudet from Groningen. Emmer and Wesseling organised special European summer programmes on European expansion. As 'mister Asia' at the Centre, I helped set up the Cambridge–Leiden–Delhi–Yogya programme, which held four meetings on the comparative history of India and Indonesia. It was a great success and a lot of fun, involving people like Dharma Kumar, Ashin Das Gupta, Om Prakash, Sinnappah Arasaratnam and Sartono Kartodirdjo. Mind you, this was before the global history craze started. In the 1980s, this comparative approach was something new. Indianists used to work only on India and Indonesianists only on Indonesia. Then came a project called 'The Transfer of Science and Technology' in which Chinese, Turkish and Japanese scholars were also involved.

The funny thing was that for some time at the Leiden history department we young lions working in overseas history were sort of seen as like parachutists—Wesseling had all of these young and energetic

people working for him! Rather than creating a chair in Overseas History, young scholars were hired and encouraged to develop their own fields. We started *Intercontinenta*, *Studies in Overseas History*, all sorts of workshops, and the archival buffs working on the VOC had the weekly loempia [spring roll] lunches close to the National Archives in the Hague, with archival curators Margot van Opstall and Marius Roessingh! Those were very energetic years, working closely with people from abroad. The idea of publishing extracts from the *Deshima Diaries* was actually born during those lunches.

All these things have only been possible because we got a lot of help from friends. A good example is Gerard and Ria de Graaff, who have been producing *Itinerario* since its humble beginnings at the *Labor Vincit* printing shop. This couple have gone through all the technological developments of text production that have occurred since the 1970s. One of the great things of Cambridge University Press [which began publishing *Itinerario* in 2010] is that there is something like a gentlemen's agreement that as long as Mr. and Mrs. de Graaff are still able to produce the journal, they will continue to do so. Rosemary Robson has also been editing the English for as long as I can remember.

*What else did you work on during those years?*

As homage to my former mentors in Taiwan and Japan, I thought it would make sense to publish the diaries of Zeelandia Castle of Taiwan.<sup>5</sup> At the time, the Chinese government still had this very strange idea that Taiwan had been part of the Chinese empire and Chinese culture for thousands of years. The original population of the island of course belongs to what De Josselin de Jongh used to call the 'Greater Indonesian Culture Sphere.' That is also why Nathalie Everts and I started publishing important excerpts on Taiwan's native population from the VOC archives in *The Formosan Encounter* series. We have literally given back history to 'people without history.'<sup>6</sup>

A mere look at the VOC documents already makes it clear that, although there had been some contacts with the Chinese fishermen and smugglers prior to the Dutch arrival, this was basically an Austro-Malay language-speaking population and very much part of the larger Southeast Asian cultural sphere until the Dutch started bringing in large numbers of Chinese settlers who eventually, under the leadership of Zheng Chenggong, kicked them out and brought the island under Chinese domination in 1662. As I love to say, Taiwan made in Holland.

Anyhow, I fell into my own trap, so to speak. I had never realised what a hell of a job it is to get out source publications, and how much time it takes.<sup>7</sup> I must confess that I had a lot of help. It was great to work with Wouter Milde, Paul van de Velde, Cynthia Viallé, Rosemary Robson, Margriet de Koning Gans and Nathalie Everts—colleagues who fortunately also enjoy this kind of work.

*Eventually source publications were to become a significant part of your work.* Our discipline's publish or perish credo does not quite tally with dabbling in source publications, but somehow I got stuck deeper and deeper into this muddle. I often had sleepless nights wondering how we would ever be able to finish. But the satisfaction of having supplied people in the field with sources that they would otherwise never have had access to has been enormous. The last source publication project in which I am now involved in is the *Kong Koan Gongganbu* project with my Chinese colleagues Nie Dening and Wu Fengbin, and others of the Nanyang Research Center at Xiamen University: the publication of the minutes of the Chinese Council of Batavia. This is a ground-breaking project. If I exaggerate a bit, these archives may be as important for the history of Overseas Chinese as the Donghuang Caves have been for the history of Buddhism in China. These minutes of the Chinese Council at Batavia published by Xiamen University Press allow us to see for the first time from within how an Overseas Chinese urban community functioned in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Ten volumes are out already.

Such projects depend on the initiatives and personal enthusiasm of those involved. Looking back now, I feel proud that we have made these source publications possible. In the case of Taiwan they have completely changed the views on the early history of the island, as is shown in the Ph.D. theses of Tonio Andrade and Chiu Hsin-Hui. The Zeelandia Diaries have even been translated into Chinese. In the Japanese case, the Deshima Diaries also have had an important impact. Here the collaboration with the Historiographical Institute of Tokyo University and the Japan Netherlands Institute in Tokyo has been absolutely essential. Last year my Japanese friends, punctual as always, surprised me a year before my retirement with a flattering *Festschrift* full of a variety of subjects that they have been working on over the past years.<sup>8</sup>

After China opened its doors in the 1980s I started to go to Xiamen. At first I went every three years or so. But later, after the Nanyang Research Institute appointed me as extraordinary professor, I started to go every year for three weeks or more. It has been very inspiring; to live in

China every now and then and work at the university there and to get in touch with the daily problems that people face. Every time again I realise how important it is to go somewhere regularly if you want to understand anything of the history of a country or of the conditions under which your colleagues work. In two decades Xiamen changed from a run-down urban settlement where there was running water only between specific hours each day into an attractive modern city with all the modern amenities available now.

*Was Xiamen at that time already the best place for research on Overseas Chinese?*

Yes, that had always been the case, but during the Cultural Revolution much of the documentary evidence got damaged and eaten by worms. Professor Tien Jukang used to say in those days: we started our Southeast Asia programme at the same time as Cornell with about the same investment, but look what the Americans have achieved and what an appalling situation we are in now! But then by the end of the 1980s all sorts of young people started to come to the Netherlands from Japan and China, and I was able to help some of them, like my friend Dr. Zhuang Guotu. Largely thanks to him the Nanyang Yanjiuyuan (Southeast Asian Research Academy) has regained its prime position in China and East Asia.

*You also worked with Zhuang Guotu on a book related to the Queen's intended state visit to China of 1989.*

One writes scholarly articles, source publications, articles and books for a broader audience, but sometimes you are asked to write something for a commemoration—in 1989 I was asked if I could write a book in Dutch and in Chinese on the Dutch–Chinese relations to be presented to Deng Xiaoping on the occasion of the Queen's visit to China that year. I managed to get this done in six months with a lot of help from Dutch and Chinese friends—and this was in pre-internet times. It was great fun in the end. We had a Chinese typesetter in Hong Kong but both the Chinese and Dutch editions were printed in Amsterdam. The Chinese version should have been published by a Chinese publisher—but this would have taken ages—so I invented a Chinese publisher by translating the Dutch publisher's name (Cramwinckel) into a somewhat antique-looking Chinese bookshop name, Lukoudian Chubanshe. Even now this is still creating headaches for Chinese librarians all over the world.

The copies got into the aeroplane but, due to the Tian'anmen Incident, the state visit was cancelled. Zhuang Guotu had done most of the translation work for the book. Now it so happened that the Chinese authorities had in turn also asked Xiamen University to make a book to be presented to Queen Beatrix, a Chinese book. While he was studying in Holland I had taught Zhuang Guotu seventeenth-century Dutch by translating into Chinese the authentic travel diary with sketches made by Johan Nieuhof, secretary to the first Dutch embassy to China.<sup>9</sup> I had discovered that rare manuscript in the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in Paris. Zhuang now proposed that we also make the Chinese present together, without anybody on the Chinese side knowing that we had also cooperated on the Dutch present. And so the day after Queen Beatrix was to present 'her' book to Deng Xiaoping, the Queen was scheduled to receive from the Chinese another book by the same authors! This practical joke gave us incredible energy and strength. But because of the political developments the whole crazy scheme fell through. Whether the Dutch present ever reached Deng Xiaoping, I don't know. Ten years later it was reprinted when the Queen did visit China. On that occasion I told the story to the Queen and her husband, Prince Claus, and they found it very amusing.

*Tribuut aan China* [Tribute to China] was meant to be accessible both for Chinese and Dutch readers. So when writing I had these audiences in mind—I wanted to write about people and events that distinguished Dutch–Chinese relations from the well-known Chinese relations with other Western countries.<sup>10</sup>

*Let us return to the Overseas Chinese for a moment. How did your doctoral thesis [published as Strange Company] come into being?*<sup>11</sup>

In the early years of the Centre for European Expansion, as I mentioned, we did a lot of organising and were very active in setting things up. When Ivo Schöffers became the temporary head of the Centre—Wesseling had left for Princeton for a year—on his first day in charge he said: 'What about your thesis?'. I was writing an ambitious book on the history of the Dutch China trade; actually I had written eight chapters of it but had great difficulty in pulling the whole thing together with all the various odd jobs to do. Then Schöffers said: 'You have already written widely about Overseas Chinese, so why don't you turn that work into a book?'. So I did, and graduated in one year. The moral of the story is that you need at that moment in life somebody to help you see things in perspective, things that you do not see yourself because you get caught up in all kinds of work. One of the chapters from that study I later reworked into *Bitters Bruid*—

which was translated into English [as *Bitter Bonds*] as well as many other languages. It is a biographical study cum divorce case of a rich Batavian mestizo lady in the seventeenth century.<sup>12</sup>

Having written about a woman's life in the seventeenth century I thought it would be fun to write a biography of a twentieth-century woman from Asia. In Xiamen I became acquainted with the Tan family—intellectuals from Indonesia. After Mr. Tan died, when in Xiamen, I visited his widow Anni frequently—often three times a week. We hit upon the idea that I should write a biography of her interesting life which spanned her youth in the Netherlands Indies, her pre-war studies at Utrecht University, wartime under Japanese domination, post-war Indonesia and finally their 're-migration' to the mother country just before the Cultural Revolution broke out with all its impact on the family.<sup>13</sup>

*What a story to tell!*

In comparison with *Bitter Bonds*, for which I had to dig up everything from the archives, I now recorded whatever Anni Tan was saying and I typed it out when back in Leiden with the help of our then secretary, the redoubtable Mrs. de Kock, whom all past visitors to the Centre will never forget. It became something of a sport to look up the people Anni had been talking about and to check her story. This also brought me into close contact with the sons of the famous Raja Gula of yore, Oei Tiong Ham.

I think it is very important to enter such a project knowing quite a lot about the society and living conditions of your biographical subject before you even start talking to him or her. You must also be able to supply all kinds of information so that the story can be placed in context. Anni's story was basically one of female emancipation in twentieth-century Asia. It is a pity that the book, which sold well in Holland, never was translated into English or Chinese—something I may yet do in the future. Chinese publishers are hesitating because the book ends with Anni's (rather innocent) memories of her family's experiences during the Cultural Revolution.

When you hear about all these different things on which my friends and I have been working, you can see that my research has been fragmented over China, Japan and Southeast Asia. And my main interest, the overseas Chinese, is itself a fragmented subject. It connects with many other subjects, like seafaring, international trade, port cities, state formation (Chinese as tax farmers), mestizo societies. So the point is that all these various activities do not so much hamper one's creativity, but they do so if one is engaged in a long-term book project. The greatest authority on

the history of the overseas Chinese, Wang Gungwu—a scholar whom I admire tremendously, has however been very successful in making ends meet. He appears frequently on all kinds of platforms, delivers public speeches and later rewrites them—perhaps he doesn't have to even!—into great essays. I very much enjoyed reading his memoirs recently. What a monumental figure!<sup>14</sup>

*When did you start the Crayenborgh Lectures?*

In 1994 Wim van den Doel and I initiated the Crayenborgh Honours Course. Like doing the *Itinerario* interviews, this too was an egoistical act of self-satisfaction. For a period of seventeen years, with the initial help of a businessman/historian, Arend de Roever, we were able every spring to invite twelve first-rate historians from all around the world for private lectures to twelve selected students. We chose a different subject each year. Ironically the Crayenborgh Course has been such a success that in the end the formula has been stolen and deformed and turned into a monster by Leiden University. We never intended the students to get marks or credit points for attending, and we selected them not necessarily because they had the highest grades but also because they showed character in extra-curricular activities. The university has turned this round completely by selecting undergrads with the highest grades in the first two years. Those often are the most unimaginative students that one can imagine! Our idea was that every year there is a number of history students who are so intelligent and clever that they will certainly not continue in the historical field after they graduate from university, but will seek a career elsewhere. The sad thing is that such students will have read many books but they will never have met and engaged in discussions with great historians themselves. And that is precisely what we wanted to provide to them.

*You are currently the first Professor of the History of European-Asian Relations.*

In Holland there is a system where there is only a restricted number of chairs for university professors. And so it becomes very difficult to get such a position, especially if you work in a field that crosses disciplines. At the Royal Academy (KNAW) this was recognised in the 1990s, so they decided to establish some extraordinary chairs for people who were bridging different fields. That is how I was offered a chair, which I could name myself. And so I named it History of European-Asian Relations. Leiden University later on formalised this chair on a personal basis, and now this has been institutionalised. And because in the Netherlands we still have a mandatory retirement age, I am now happy to hand over the

torch to Jos Gommans. I found out that a professorial position is essential for setting up new projects. That was a bit of an eye-opener to me. Once you have the *ius promovendi* and come up with a good plan doors open. Mandatory retirement has its upsides: it will give me ample time to do research and write and supervise the twelve Ph.D. students that I have left. But unfortunately it also closes doors. For example, a French colleague of mine wanted to invite me to come to Paris to teach for a month or two, but it turns out that his university will not provide money for people past the age of 65. Can you believe it?

*What was it like to teach at Harvard, when you were there in 2005–06?*

After I arrived at Harvard to take up the Erasmus Chair for one year, Wilt Idema invited me to give the Reischauer Lectures in addition to teaching a course in Indonesian history. That really forced me to think about a topic and to turn it into three lectures. I decided on the interaction between three early modern ports around the China Seas: Batavia, Canton and Nagasaki. The talks were published as *Visible Cities*.<sup>15</sup>

Another anecdote, if you will permit me. I taught the first Indonesian history course ever taught at the Harvard history department. I have the impression that before the emergence of Obama, with the exception of Philip Kuhn, hardly anyone at the department was aware that there existed something like Indonesia. I seduced students of the history department to participate in this class by challenging them when they came ‘shopping’ at the beginning of the semester to draw a map of Indonesia. Nobody could. I promised that the three students who drew the best map for the next week would be treated to an ice cream. Remember these are Harvard students who all want to be the best—so the week afterwards I had eighteen students who had all made nice maps, and I took them all to an ice cream parlour and said: ‘And now you must sign up,’ which sixteen of them eventually did. I returned to the history department, quite content with myself, and said to the administrator that I had sixteen students—and the administrator said: too bad Leonard, if you had seventeen students you would have had a teaching assistant! It was great fun working at Harvard for a year. We were living at Adam’s house just opposite the Widener Library.

*One of the biggest projects you undertook as professor was TANAP. Can you tell us how it came into being?*

After I had written the book on China, the commemoration of 400 years of Dutch–Japanese relations in 2000 came up. The book for that

occasion was put together with some sixty Dutch and Japanese young scholars and published in Dutch, English and Japanese versions. It was a gigantic undertaking, which would not have been possible to carry out without many friends, among whom were Willem Remmelink, Ivo Smits and Martha Chaiklin. We had to translate so much. After we had pulled that off, the ABN AMRO bank approached me to write a series of books about Dutch relations with various countries in Asia in connection with the commemoration in 2002 of the founding of the Dutch East India Company in 1602. I felt that I should not do so myself, but after realising that the various authors in Asia who could do so were all in their 60s and 70s, I said: 'Why don't you give me the money and I shall train a new generation of Asian historians who can use the VOC archives.' The bank refused and gave the money to the Rijksmuseum for a VOC exhibition instead.

But the idea lingered on, and I teamed up with the people of the Rijksarchief (now National Archives) and we decided to propose a project where the Archives would ask for money to work on the preservation of the remaining VOC archives in Asia (Jakarta, Colombo, Chennai) and we would train at Leiden young lecturers from universities in some twelve countries in Asia which had had VOC trading posts. And out of that major offensive we were able to establish the TANAP [Towards a New Age of Partnership] project. The whole set-up of the project and its achievements can be seen at <http://www.tanap.net/>.

But let me briefly explain what it entailed: for three years in a row we carefully selected every year ten young university teachers in Asia who did not yet have a Ph.D. for a one-year advanced Master's course. For the best ten we reserved a Ph.D. scholarship. The project was so successful that in the end we acquired twenty scholarships—ten from the project and ten from outside. With the exception of one student who became gravely ill, all of them have obtained their Ph.D. degrees. I have personally supervised more than ten of them. All in all, I have supervised the writing of 30 Ph.D. theses over the past ten years. Quite a lot of work.

By now most of the TANAP theses have been edited by Cynthia Viallé and me and have been published in the TANAP Monographs Series by Brill. The TANAP programme organised with Henk Niemeijer, and later its successor, the ENCOMPASS (Encountering a Common Past in Asia) programme coordinated with Alicia Schrikker, were ambitious projects.<sup>16</sup> With comparatively speaking modest sums of money we were able to train some ninety young historians from Asia to use Dutch archival texts (VOC and colonial archives) to write their own country's history. Again without

the help from volunteers like Hugo 's Jacob (originally from Groningen University) and Lodewijk Wagenaar (from Amsterdam University) we would not have been able to reach our goals. We have created a whole network of young enthusiastic people teaching and working at various Asian universities and archives. I hope that these programmes will be continued in the future, but when the pilot leaves the ship somebody else has to take charge. It is great fun to have one large family spread all over Asia.

*How do you view the development of the field of European Expansion History, from its origins in Colonial History to today's World History?*

Colonial history was already dead when I started studying. It was a dirty word. Curiously enough, I think it may soon make a comeback. The concept of the History of European Expansion was developed at Columbia University. George Winus has commented on that in his interview [for *Itinerario*], I believe. That topic still has its own value, and also its own approach. After all, Europe played a major role in global history for some time; as Jürgen Osterhammel has remarked, the nineteenth century was in many respects the European century. When Jan Romein wrote his *Eeuw van Azië* [The Asian Century] in the 1950s he was a bit premature, but the twenty-first century definitely will be so. What I have found fascinating about working as an Asianist at the Centre of European Expansion is that there is an enormous wealth of Asian language sources to combine with Western sources. I hope to continue doing so in my future work. What I do worry about, if you allow me to slightly change the subject, is the decline in interest among Asian students in the historical discipline. Especially in Southeast Asia fewer and fewer students major in history. History does not seem to offer attractive job perspectives any more in this MBA oriented world.

*In your farewell lecture you mentioned your plans to engage in a long-term research project on the comparative history of the Rhine and Yangzi deltas.<sup>17</sup> Yet your students performed that same night an eighteenth-century drama in which you were symbolically beheaded as a professor.<sup>18</sup> Wasn't that a gentle gesture that you should start repairing your old boat, and stop meddling in academic affairs? Any more plans?*

Well, during the summer holiday I shall have to read the beautiful *Festschrift* I received from my Dutch friends and colleagues.<sup>19</sup> Then I will have to finish a book on Chinese shipping to Southeast Asia in early

modern times. And who knows, perhaps I may find the old floppy discs with the chapters on the Dutch China trade.

*One more question: how has modern technology affected the field?*

We of course profit from the internet and from progress with regard to digitisation but I do have a nostalgic feeling when I think of foreign friends who used to come to work for longer periods at the archives here or elsewhere. Nowadays many people no longer come because they can get most of the stuff they need from the internet; or they just sit one week in the archives photographing like crazy. I think this development is bad news for academia. And I am not the only one. Eric Tagliacozzo told me last year he felt he was probably one of the last who could afford to work at the archives here for a longer term and make friends there with colleagues like Martha Chaiklin, Tonio Andrade and Kerry Ward.

*But is it not positive that digitisation provides access for more people?*

Yes, there is no denying that. But if I look at somebody like Om Prakash, who spent so much time in the VOC archives before he could really get a grip on the seventeenth-century Dutch language and the wide variety of materials, I wonder whether people can gain enough depth in the archives, even if they take 1,000 photographs. You need to have the focus and develop the skills to work with the archival sources in your hands.

But I agree that the good old days of Charles Boxer are long over now. Boxer wrote most of his books and articles on the basis of manuscripts he would collect and which he would trade for something else when he moved to a new topic. He was a collector at heart—but he collected to trade it for something else. When visiting the Netherlands he would bring something to trade and exchange with Nico Israëls, the antiquarian book seller. By doing so you learn a tremendous lot, by discussing manuscripts with people who deal in these manuscripts—like art collectors. It adds extra colour to the whole academic enterprise.

This also touches on something else, and I guess I should stop rambling on after this for fear of turning into the proverbial Dutch Uncle. From the early days of collecting ships, as an anthropology student doing fieldwork, and also ‘on the road’ during many of my trips either in Europe, Asia or even America, I have always been interested to see how people live elsewhere, and discover more or less direct links with the past. Learning foreign languages is indispensable if you really want to understand ‘the

other.’ The interview with the Dutch philologist-turned-Arabist Cees Brouwer in *Itinerario* a few years ago tells it all.

If you talk with Dutch, American or, for that matter, Chinese students nowadays, they often have no clue what China was like in the 1970s or in the more distant past because they grew up in such different circumstances. Most of them spend virtually their whole lives at school on campus or, even worse, in front of a computer screen. Young people should reconnoitre the field. So, I greatly sympathise with the good old Minangkabau custom of merantau or, to put it in more romantic German terms, *das Wandern, das Wandern*. Yes, A.J.P. Taylor was right: what a good historian needs is a pair of sturdy boots!

## Notes

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## You turn a page and then there is suddenly something on a turtle': Interview with Jürgen Osterhammel

*On 1 September 2011 Jürgen Osterhammel, Professor of Modern and Contemporary History at the University of Konstanz, and his wife, the historian and sinologist Sabine Dabringhaus (University of Freiburg), visited Leiden to participate in a conference on 'Forms of Dynastic Power in Late Imperial China and Early Modern Europe.' The conference marked the start of a new comparative research programme on 'Eurasian Empires: Integration Processes and Identity Formation.' After discussing the aims and objectives of the new programme in a highly stimulating roundtable with the fresh researchers, Itinerario (Andreas Weber and Jos Gommans) took the opportunity to have a talk with Jürgen Osterhammel about his career and the writing of his recent masterpiece, Die Verwandlung der Welt (The Transformation of the World). This monograph is a painstaking and thought-provoking attempt to write a global history of the nineteenth century. In more than 1,500 pages, Osterhammel offers a kaleidoscopic view on topics such as cities, frontiers, empires and nation states, nomads, music, science, religion, work, revolutions and living standards. Reviewers have praised the book for its thoroughness and innovative methodology, and an English translation will appear in the course of 2013. Already dazzling in itself, it is 'just' the latest addition to an awe-inspiring oeuvre of one of the leading historians in Europe.*

*First things first: why and how did you decide to become a historian? Was there some kind of 'natural road' in your family that paved the way?*

No, there was no natural road; quite the contrary. I was born in 1952 in a small town in the Bergisches Land (Rhineland) in the north-west of Germany, which is a part of the country well known for people like Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Jürgen Habermas. Nothing prepared me for becoming a historian. My immediate family had a strong natural science emphasis. My father was a physicist; he did not prevent me from studying humanities but also did not think it would be the best of all possible choices. The inspiration probably came from attending a very good school, a public school (Gymnasium) where in the late 1960s questions especially

of politics and recent history played an important role. My original impulse to do history as an academic subject was very much related to contemporary concerns. And in a way it still is. I still consider myself a historian who in whatever he does tries to address questions which are relevant today.

*Being born in 1952, to what extent was this present-minded agenda inspired by the generation of the roaring 1960s and 1970s, which aimed to reform society. Were you ever a political 'activist' yourself?*

My school was not in the Bergisches Land, but in Hanau, a city in the state of Hesse. That is important because in 1968, when I was 16, obviously the intellectual hothouse after Berlin was Frankfurt. Hanau was quite close to Frankfurt and sometimes I managed to go there. I even played with the idea of going to Frankfurt to study philosophy and sociology with Theodor W. Adorno. He was a man who mastered the entire literary and philosophical tradition, also a brilliant pianist and composer himself, and of course an anti-capitalist radical—that is an interesting tension. I might have done that, but unfortunately he died in August 1969, which was a year before I took my A-levels (*Abitur*). So the chance was missed and I decided to study at the university in Marburg.

*This means that you fostered a strong and serious interest in philosophy at a rather young age. To what extent was this special at that time?*

Many young people were interested in philosophy at that time. I can't really reconstruct the exact origins of that. A couple of friends and I, we all claimed a broad range of authors, and in the German language and literature classes read excerpts from Hegel and Nietzsche and a lot of the dramatist and poet Bertolt Brecht, who was re-emerging as an important author at that time. Philosophers were much more in the public eyes than they are today. That was the time when you opened *Der Spiegel*, a weekly political magazine, and you found interviews with philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, the Marxist visionary Ernst Bloch and the great men of the Frankfurt school, Adorno, Max Horkheimer and the young Jürgen Habermas. So it was in a way natural to become acquainted with their ideas and texts which were made available in the famous rainbow-coloured books in Edition Suhrkamp in their original shape, with a loose paper flap. A real treasure. These little books were my early intellectual nourishment.

*So at that time you were not really at the frontline of the new intellectual movement?*

No, I was too young to be an active rebel, and at my school in Hanau there were no sharp confrontations between conservative teachers and the wider revolutionary world. The school was quite progressive, and contemporary history played an enormous role. I read, as part of a regular school education, Hannah Arendt, another important author for me. When I was 17 or 18, I worked my way through *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft* (first published in English as *The Origins of Totalitarianism*) and a couple of other social science classics. We read, for instance, Ralf Dahrendorf, so it was not just Marxism and the Frankfurt School. I always had an interest in contemporary history and a direct engagement with questions of National Socialism and the recent German past, which was a generational experience elsewhere as well. Those were themes openly discussed in a way that a young person easily felt encouraged to study history and politics.

*To what extent was Germany special at that time? Didn't the Cold War and the division between East and West Germany have a huge impact?*

Yes, definitely so, because of two factors. There was, on the one hand, the need to reconsider the past and move against attempts to cover it up and not face its horrors. I still remember the tremendous shock caused by Peter Weiss's drama *Die Ermittlung*, based on documents from the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial (1963–65). And, on the other hand, there was of course the divide between East and West, resulting, among other things, in two competing historiographies. A burning issue at the time, more important to my generation than the division of Germany, was the Vietnam War. We were really concerned as young people about things going on in Vietnam. And at the same time, in 1968, we were intrigued by the Cultural Revolution in China that, just in 1968, was moving into its hottest phase.

*So you decided to study in Marburg. What was the academic environment there?*

The environment was that of a quintessential university town. There are these old-style university towns, only a few of them are left in Germany. When I was a student, there were still dueling fraternities (*schlagende Verbindungen*). You did not meet those people frequently (most of them were law students) but they had special inns and you saw them on the street with their peculiar outfits; they were remnants of a different age.

More characteristically, this was an age of enormous expansion in the student population. It was not unusual to have large lecture halls with 300 or 400 students attending one lecture.

*How was history taught in Marburg?*

History was a fairly conservative field in Marburg. On my very first day in mid-October 1970 there was a huge public debate—in the main auditorium in front of around 1,000 students—pitting the right-wing Ernst Nolte, who was at that time a professor at Marburg (he later left for the Freie Universität in Berlin), against Wolfgang Abendroth, a veteran socialist jurist and political scientist who had suffered severe persecution during the Nazi period, a *Bildungsbürger* of the radical Left. Nolte and Abendroth had a vehement public debate about National Socialism and its legacy. It was an event with great rhetoric and a scandal at the end when Abendroth walked out. That kind of political polarisation between history and the social sciences was quite symptomatic of the situation in Marburg. History was a conservative discipline also in a methodological sense with the fresh impulses coming from the Bielefeld School of social history making little headway among the teachers of history. As I studied both political science (and also some sociology and philosophy) and history, I moved in different worlds without really committing myself deeply to any of them.

*This was still very much a German debate. At some point you left Germany and developed an interest in China. How did that happen?*

It is quite difficult to reconstruct how that came about. Part of the story was a revulsion against a kind of narrow Germano-centrism. Really everything was German, the whole curriculum was German, not for nationalistic reasons, but because it had always been that way. My early irritation with the Vietnam War led me to an interest in the Third World. In the early 1970s, people like Dieter Senghaas from the University of Bremen—he was quite influential at that time—published books on *dependencia* and the economics and politics of poverty and underdevelopment. We also read radical economists such as Paul A. Baran and, a little later, Immanuel Wallerstein. For a historian, the development of the Soviet Union held a special interest, and even more so the attempts of the People's Republic of China (especially in the 1950s) to jump across historical periods, ages and stadia towards an industrial future.

At some point I thought I had made a mistake in choosing my subjects and that I should learn another language in addition to the languages you

learn at school; and it should be a challenge. So I took up Chinese and did that as a sort of sideline subject. I accumulated a modest knowledge of Chinese, and by the end of my studies in 1976, when I passed my *Staatsexamen* (roughly equivalent to a Master's), I was able to get the gist of a modern Chinese text, admittedly with the help of a dictionary. That didn't really qualify me for being a sinologist. At one point I considered moving entirely into Chinese studies, but then my interests were too broad—you may say, too superficial—to be confined in one particular kind of area studies.

*Was this an acceptable road for academic historians at that time in Germany?*  
No. It was quite impossible to work on China, and also on Japan or on Arabic countries within the discipline of history. Only a handful of universities offered lecture courses on the history of Asia or on decolonisation. Despite the new methodological approaches and theories of the Bielefeld School, German historical studies in the early 1970s were dominated by a strong fixation on Germany and on the development of industrial modernity in the Atlantic West. And that was mirrored in the composition of history departments. There were very few history departments at that time—perhaps Hamburg was the most important one—where you had chairs or at least lectureships for non-European or even non-Western history. Only Latin American history enjoyed a high reputation, being considered less 'exotic' than Asian or African history.

*How did you find a job after your student years in Marburg?*

I completed my studies in Marburg and then I was looking for, not a job, but a post-MA opportunity. Fortunately I was a scholarship-holder of the *Studienstiftung des Deutschen Volkes* (German National Academic Foundation), a highly rated institution which, at that time, supported less than 0.5 per cent of the student body who were considered to be the best. They leave you incredible leeway, even to change your subject, to do what you want as long as you give them good reasons. They allowed me to go to the London School of Economics for a year after graduation. And I went there with all those more or less contradictory ideas in my head about history and politics.

*Tell us more ...*

I went to London with the idea that I should forget all German subjects, should do something else, and should continue with China. So I went to LSE's department of international history. I also discovered the library of

the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) which I used quite a lot. At LSE I was registered as a research-fee student, which meant you neither had any obligations nor studied for a degree; you just spent a year there, doing whatever you wanted. I went to many lectures—by luminaries like the historian James Joll and the polymath Ernest Gellner—and at the fairly advanced age of 25, I met my first teacher in an emphatic sense. He was Ian Nish, Professor of International History and a great expert on the history of Japanese foreign relations; perhaps next to Akira Iriye at Harvard the greatest non-Japanese authority in the field. He was and still is—he is 85 now—a great and good man, and he took this wayward German student under his wing. I went to his very small classes (mostly three or four students) and got almost personal tuition in diplomatic history. Later on, in his 60s, Ian Nish became a much more general historian, but at that time he was an excellent specialist in diplomatic history. And that is what I learnt from him: diplomatic history. So I am a trained diplomatic historian; I am not ashamed to say that after doing all sorts of other histories, and one might detect traces of it in my latest book because there is a chapter on *Die Verwandlung der Welt* on the international system, international politics and war—somewhat unusual for global historians these days. This is a legacy of my brief and intense training at the LSE in the late 1970s.

*Meanwhile, what happened to your research—was there a Ph.D. topic in your mind already?*

My Ph.D. topic was a combination of my two most important historical interests at the time. That was first of all the development of China in the twentieth century, and secondly imperial Britain. I never warmed to Japan, which was Ian's subject. He probably never understood why I didn't care to learn Japanese, but he was generous and supported my developing orientation. So I tried to bring together my old interest in China, especially in the pre-1949 Republican period (which one has to study in order to understand what happened later) and my newly-acquired interest in Britain's international position, and in particular the British Empire.

*So the British part of your research was born in London?*

Yes, very much so. And I think that was, looking at those origins from the vantage point of today, a good starting point. China as that quintessentially closed (of course that is a cliché) civilisation with its enormous continuity and, on the other hand, the British Empire, waterborne and scattered

all over the world. I intuitively found that to be a fascinating tension. From that I developed a Ph.D. topic on the question of what happened to British imperialism in the Far East after the British had lost their dominant position in China after the First World War. Despite the rise of China's nationalism, British business was going strong in the 1920s and 1930s without being much affected by the political turmoil in the country. My question was very simple: how did the big British firms in Shanghai and elsewhere manage to safeguard and even extend their economic interests and their physical establishment of wharves, factories, coal mines and whatever else on the territory of the Chinese Republic in an age of emerging nationalism and the erosion of Britain's power to control events in China?

*Was that still a politically inspired research question connected to your early years at the Gymnasium and Marburg?*

No, my political engagement was quite weak at that time. There was perhaps a tenuous link through Marxist interpretations of Chinese history, especially a peculiar attempt to explain China's 'special path' in modern history. The idea was that before 'socialism' was victorious in 1949, there had been neither a purely 'feudal' nor a 'bourgeois' stage. Rather, China was a 'semi-feudal, semi-colonial country,' and when capitalism came, it assumed the characteristic form of 'bureaucratic capitalism,' especially under the rule of Chiang Kai-shek's [Jiang Jieshi] Guomindang during the Nanjing period from 1927 to 1937. I wasn't empirically convinced, but found that an intriguing idea and wondered what 'bureaucratic capitalism' was. In a different way, this question continues to be relevant today.

The main result of my thesis was to have shown in great detail how the big British companies such as BAT or Butterfield & Swire operated quite independently from British politics on the spot in China, and how they dovetailed with the policies of the Guomindang for opening China to foreign capital. So in a way this is the pre-history of the opening up of China for foreign business that occurred on a far grander scale after 1978. The Guomindang started a precursor of that policy in the 1930s in conjunction with Western business interests, and with only the tenuous involvement of the government in London and of British diplomats and consuls in China. In a way, it was business imperialism after political imperialism. And I developed a model to explain that. The book was published under very difficult circumstances in Germany. No historical series accepted it because China was anathema to any decent history series, so it was published in a small sinological series.

But then, to my utter surprise, it won the attention (and this was probably the great turning point in my professional advancement) of the famous Paul Kennedy at Yale, who reviewed it very favourably in the *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* and alerted the readers of the journal to an article summarising the book that I had just published in *China Quarterly*. That article was fairly successful; one of the younger scholars later to use the model was actually Frans-Paul van der Putten of Leiden University and editor of *Itinerario*.

*Did you ever consider leaving Germany for good to extend you career somewhere else?*

Not really. The Kennedy review was an enormous encouragement. When I applied for a research fellowship at the German Historical Institute in London, I got it and went back to London in 1982. My boss at the Institute was Wolfgang J. Mommsen who, at a fairly late stage of my academic education, became my second genuine ‘teacher’. He had no regional stake in China but was generally interested in imperialism and a comparative approach. In Germany there had been for a short while a broad concern with imperialism. Hans-Ulrich Wehler had published his book, *Bismarck und der Imperialismus*, in 1969. A couple of other books, especially on the German colonial empire, appeared during the following years. Within that generation of historians studying imperialism Wolfgang Mommsen was the only one with an almost universal perspective. He was also the person who introduced foreign theories of imperialism to Germany. He was a friend of Ronald Robinson whom I met several times, of David Fieldhouse and of many others of that seminal generation of historians. He brought many of them to the Institute. Immediately after I joined the Institute in 1982 we had a big conference called ‘Imperialism and After.’ The volume emerging from it was later published in English.<sup>1</sup> It is still a very good collection. Robinson was there, Fieldhouse, the economic historian Paul Bairoch from Geneva; many of those prominent in the field; from the German side, among others, the best-known historian of modern India on the European continent, Dietmar Rothermund, who held a chair at the South Asia Institute in Heidelberg, founded in 1962. Also present was Rudolf von Albertini, a scholar who was instrumental in establishing non-European or non-Western historical studies in the German-speaking countries, perhaps comparable to Henk Wesseling in the Netherlands. He was Swiss and had been a professor of modern European history at Heidelberg before moving to Zurich in 1967. Albertini inspired a whole generation of talented Ph.D. candidates, and he established a series of

monographs on 'colonial and overseas history' where much of the most important work in German has been published up to the present day.

But to answer your original question: for my generation leaving Germany in pursuit of a career elsewhere in Europe or in the United States was far less of an option than it has been for younger colleagues in recent years. I never received an offer, and I never considered becoming an academic emigrant.

*After your second stay in London, you got a position as reader in political science at the University of Freiburg. Could you include non-European subjects in your teaching by that time?*

Within certain limits I could include non-European subjects. I offered courses on international relations, colonialism, theories of imperialism, China, etc. But my main duty was political theory. Anyway, I maintained my old interest in China. And at some point—I can't remember why and when—I decided to write a synthesis of the integration of China into the modern world system—a non-Wallersteinian synthesis that would include political but also economic aspects and in a sense even vaguely cultural aspects. That was my earliest book of synthesis. Since then I have found it always quite helpful to have a broadly conceived book to follow upon a research monograph. So, almost a decade after my Ph.D. thesis I wrote the book, *China und die Weltgesellschaft* (China and the World Society), covering the period from the eighteenth century onwards. It wasn't meant to lead to anything because I did not have the intention of a 'Habilitation' at the time. I just wrote this manuscript and I gave it to a history professor at Freiburg, Ernst Schulin (my teacher number three), and he passed it on, without telling me, to Beck Publishers in Munich. One day I received a letter from the history editor at Beck's expressing his interest in the manuscript. How long would it take to finish the book? Would I be interested in a contract? I was. The book came out in 1989. C.H. Beck have been my principal publishers ever since. They also published my study of European attitudes towards Asia during the eighteenth century (*Die Entzauberung Asiens*, 1998), a personal favourite among my books, meant as a contribution to the debate about historical 'orientalism' triggered by Edward Said.

It was possible under the rules of Freiburg University to submit a published book in application for a *Habilitation*, in Germany still an unavoidable stepping-stone towards becoming a professor. Thus, I obtained a *venia legendi* [permission to lecture] for modern and contemporary history. And then I was lucky again. The Open University in Hagen had

just established a professorship for non-European history. I got that job and I spent the next six years writing study materials across a broad range of non-European topics. That allowed me to read a lot since I didn't have physically present students; it was almost like being in a vacuum. I was left with plenty of time on my hands to acquire a broad knowledge of colonialism and imperialism, something that stands me in good stead nowadays, as a teacher of 'general' history at the University of Konstanz.

*Would you say that the German approach to this topic, the history of European expansion, was in any way different at that time from the more maritime historiographies in Britain, France and Holland?*

In Germany, there was a fairly strong interest in the continental empires—the Habsburg Monarchy, the Ottoman Empire and the Tsarist Empire. A superb book on an obvious but much-neglected topic had been written by Dietrich Geyer. Geyer was the intellectual giant among German historians of Eastern Europe. His *Der russische Imperialismus* of 1977 is still a classic study to be read alongside Andreas Kappeler's great *Russland als Vielvölkerreich* (1992).<sup>2</sup> Geyer successfully transposed ideas and concepts of Wehler's Bielefeld School into a Russian context.

A power in his own right was and is Wolfgang Reinhard, a professor of early modern history at the University of Freiburg. Reinhard never belonged to any 'school'; in a sense, he created his own. His magnificent four-volume work on the history of the European expansion (1983–90), for mysterious reasons never translated into English, remains internationally unrivalled.<sup>3</sup> Reinhard blends the maritime with the continental dimension. Long before the onset of post-colonialism, he was much more sensitive towards culture than all the other German and Swiss historians mentioned before. Whereas the Wehlers, Mommsens and Geysers hardly ever cared for anything earlier than 'High Imperialism,' Reinhard, who is also a world authority on early modern Italy, the Papacy and the evolution of the state, always bears the long-term sweep of history in mind. His scope of vision is unique, while certainly not being 'typically German.'

*Let us now switch to your recently published book, *Die Verwandlung der Welt* (*The Transformation of the World*). What struck us most was the architecture of the book. Could you tell us how the book's idea and fabric emerged?*

The general answer is that it is a NIAS [Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies, in Wassenaar] book. I spent a full year there thinking about the architecture of it. There is actually an intriguing story in the background. I came to NIAS with the intention of doing a comparative

history of European overseas empires in the nineteenth century. Upon arrival, I knocked at the door of Henk Wesseling, the rector of NIAS at that time. After a pleasant chat, Henk said: 'I have just sent my book on the nineteenth-century European empires to the publishers.' I protested, as politely as possible, 'What, that's my subject!' And that serene master merely said: 'Don't worry!'

So what can you do in such a situation? There were just two options: either to go several steps backwards and do a research monograph, or to hazard a *Flucht nach vorn* [take the bull by the horns] and attempt something even grander with empires being just a facet of a comprehensive portrait of an age. I decided on the latter option. So I spent my time at NIAS considering many alternatives of the contents and construction of the book. Peer Vries, now at the University of Vienna and one of the sharpest minds in comparative history, was a fellow at the same time, and we had frequent conversations. He doesn't agree entirely with the book as I later wrote it. For very good reasons he prefers a more problem-oriented historiography, but we are still on the best of terms. After returning from Wassenaar to the mundane duties of a German professor, I shelved the project. In 2004, Chris Bayly's masterpiece, *The Birth of the Modern World*, appeared out of the blue, and for some time seemed to have killed off my own venture. But I overcame the 'Bayly shock' and managed to write the bulk of my manuscript in 2006 and 2007. An invitation from the Carl Friedrich von Siemens Foundation to spend a sabbatical year in Munich made the completion of the book possible.

*So Die Verwandlung der Welt didn't follow an existing paradigm?*

No, and I was lucky in not having to comply with a series template. I had nurtured many minor obsessions with things which should somehow be included, for instance animals and opera. This is one of the reasons why even people in search of scholarly entertainment like the book. You turn a page and then there is suddenly something on a turtle. You cannot devise such ornaments of the 'architecture' at the very beginning. They crop up spontaneously when you are sitting in front of the screen.

Several features of the overall design had to be corrected during the process of writing. For example, the division between the long 'panoramic' chapters and the shorter 'thematic' chapters was a fairly late invention. It is the result of a change of gear required for straightforward practical reasons. If I had continued in the original epical manner, the book would have run into two or three volumes. Therefore, I pulled the emergency

brake and developed a kind of more concise *écriture*, dispensing with much of the illustrative materials I had collected.

There was also a certain influence from my university. Things I learned from my colleagues in the department of history and sociology at Konstanz include the importance of communication, memory and the media. The very first chapter is soaked with those issues. Other things had to be corrected in the course of writing. Thus, I never wanted to write a chapter on religion, an especially demanding subject. But then I came to the conclusion that, for systematic reasons, such a chapter would be indispensable. A few people seem to have found it worth reading.

*Where would you yourself situate the book in the field world history?*

It is in many different respects a middle-of-the-road or compromise book. What I mean is that it is neither a ‘synthesis’ nor an ‘analysis,’ but both at the same time. Books like this one and also Chris Bayly’s *Birth of Modern World* are analytical syntheses. We cannot have enough of them. Someone else should write another global history of the nineteenth century. A middle-of-the-road book is also one that includes all kinds of concepts and theorems without committing itself to any grand theory, be it Marxism, or world-system theory, or post-colonialism. My approach is deliberately eclectic. And, third, the book is middle of the road in that the barriers between the usual compartments of history are lowered. The greatest personal joy in writing was in combining so many different approaches to history.

*Your book is very successful in the German book market. How did people in Germany respond to the book? Did you write it with a particular audience in mind?*

The most amazing thing is that even today I get emails and letters from all kinds of people pointing out mistakes or making comments. My most contentious reader is a retired military officer who has sent me a thirty-page list of errata, most of them justified. The later editions from edition number four onwards are much improved. No, I didn’t have a particular audience in mind. I am optimistic enough to imagine students tackling such a big ‘think book’ even though much of it is unlikely to be useful for their exams. And of course it is gratifying that there is a general audience interested in such a broad, but in no way racy, narrative. I defend the position that a historian should communicate with a broader audience without letting his standards slip.

*What is your next project?*

After having co-edited, with the much-admired American historian Fritz Stern, an anthology of historiography, I haven't got any plans ready to present to the public. But two things are already clear. The new book will focus on the twentieth century and people will play an important role in it. At the moment I am groping for ways—I always need a lot of time for that—to come closer to individuals than in my previous work. Certainly not a biography, but something with a clearly articulated biographical touch.

## Notes

- 1 Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Jürgen Osterhammel (eds.), *Imperialism and After: Continuities and Discontinuities* (London: German Historical Institute, 1986).
- 2 For English translations see: Dietrich Geyer, *Russian Imperialism: The Interaction of Domestic and Foreign Policy, 1860–1914* (Leamington Spa: Bergahn, 1987); and Andreas Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: A Multiethnic History* (Harlow: Longman, 2001).
- 3 Wolfgang Reinhard. *Geschichte der europäischen Expansion*, 4 vols (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1983–90). And more recently: Wolfgang Reinhard. *A Short History of Colonialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).



# Are We All Global Historians Now?: Interview with David Armitage

*The interview took place on a splendid summer day in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The location was slightly exotic: Martine van Ittersum and Jaap Jacobs had lunch with David Armitage at Upstairs at the Square, an eatery which sports pink and mint green walls, zebra decorations, and even a stuffed crocodile. What more could one want?*

*Armitage was recently elected Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. At the time of the interview, he was just about to take over as Chair of the History Department at Harvard University. His long-awaited *Foundations of Modern International Thought* (2013) was being copy-edited for publication.<sup>1</sup> Granted a sneak preview, the interviewers can recommend it to every Itinerario reader. In short, it was high time for Itinerario to sit down with one of the movers and shakers of the burgeoning field of global and international history for a long and wide-ranging conversation.*

*Could you tell us something about your life story? Where were you born, where did you grow up, what is your family background?*

I had a very land-locked childhood, which, at least superficially, gave no indication that I would be interested in international and global history later in life. I say superficially because, as I think back over the years about aspects of my family history, I can see that the seeds were already there, although I did not realise it at the time. My father, a marine engineer, did his British National Service in the Merchant Navy and then stayed on for some years afterwards, spending most of his time on the so-called 'MANZ run', which took in Montreal, Australia and New Zealand via year-long tours of the Pacific. It was perhaps an indication that I was going to have a global future as well, and was possibly also the genetic origin of my recent interest in Pacific history. When I was a child, my father spoke very little about his activities at sea. But I occasionally picked up hints when I saw occasional photographs of his travels or he mentioned a visit to Australia here, having been in New York there. Without putting too much of a burden on the accidents of family history, I think that it was significant both that my father had had a distinctly global career in his

twenties and that he spoke so little about it. That seems characteristic of the way Britain itself in my childhood was a power with international and global connections, but maintained a great amnesia about speaking of these connections or acknowledging how much the world beyond Britain had shaped British history itself.

And I also remember as another thread of family history that my great-grandfather in the years before the First World War had wanted to escape his family. He was something of a wastrel, not to be relied upon. He went on a long and rather mysterious tour of North America in 1912–13. There was clearly a gene for *Wanderlust* in the family, even though it was rarely spoken about, and was thought about in somewhat dangerous terms. I have the postcards that my grandmother's family received from him, all of which were dismayingly, suspiciously brief about what he was up to, where he was going, etc. There was clearly a strain in my family—my father's global career through the Merchant Navy, my great-grandfather with his *Wanderlust* taking him through North America—that I must have picked up in a career that's taken me to the US for the past twenty years, when I've lectured on six continents. (Antarctica has eluded me so far.) By contrast, most of my relatives have stayed very close to the unremarkable town where I was born, Stockport, just south of Manchester. It was a spinning and hat-making town, one of the cradles of the Industrial Revolution, although all of that industry was already receding when I was a child.

There is a third coincidence which, looking back, perhaps made me into an imperial and ultimately a global historian. My mother went into labour on the day Winston Churchill, the last living symbol of the British Empire, was buried. I now like to think, without being completely self-aggrandising, that the weekend the British Empire was buried in the figure of Winston Churchill was a rather appropriate time for a self-consciously *post-imperial* historian to be born. As the empire was passing away in the early 1960s, I was born as part of a generation of historians that would regard the British Empire as history, as something to look back on, but no longer as a living force. I was part of a generation that came of age in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the last wisps of the British Empire were given up. It conditioned the way my generation thought about British history in relation to its larger international and imperial contexts. It was hardly a coincidence that I should come out of an amnesiac Britain trying to forget its international, imperial and global connections, or that I grew up as part of a generation which was determined to recover those broader contexts, i.e. the impact of the wider world on Britain and the impact of Britain on the wider world as well.

One realises in retrospect that every part of British society was deeply enmeshed with the Empire and Commonwealth, even people coming from landlocked places. However, this was little talked about, something I call imperial amnesia. My parents contemplated emigrating to Nova Scotia in the late 1960s, for example. This was entirely typical of upper- and middle-class whites moving to the Empire in the twentieth century. David Cannadine's reflections on the hidden but multiple imperial connections of his family in Birmingham suggest a very similar profile to that of my own family.<sup>2</sup>

White settlers born in the Empire were educated at Cambridge and Oxford, on the understanding that you would return to the place you came from. The great historian of political thought, J. G. A. Pocock, was born in New Zealand and still retains a very strong identity as a New Zealander. It inflects almost everything he writes, increasingly self-consciously in recent years as well. His scepticism about Europe as a project has always come from his New Zealand identity. In his view, Britain faced a choice between Europe and the white settler Commonwealth at the beginning of 1970s, and made a choice for Europe and against the settler empire. It was exactly at that moment that Pocock wrote his first essays on the 'New British History.' He envisaged a metropolitan Britain as part of a congeries, a global nexus of commonwealth settler societies across the globe, a set of islands scattered around the globe, including New Zealand. The 'New British History' came from that charged political moment and that set of choices.<sup>3</sup>

*You were educated at the University of Cambridge. What difference did it make to your intellectual interests and academic career?*

I benefited from excellent teaching at Stockport Grammar School, most notably an inspirational history master by the name of Nicholas Henshall.<sup>4</sup> A very fine publishing scholar in his own right, he had done a special subject with Geoffrey Elton at Cambridge, and later started a Ph.D. at the University of Manchester which he did not complete. I am convinced that I got from Henshall as good a history education as I would have had, had I done history at Cambridge. Henshall gave me a real feel for what it was like to work at the highest pitch of scholarship, absent immediate access to the archives. I am immensely grateful for that. Nick is a really inspirational figure: we all have someone like that, especially in our school careers, who showed you the excitement of intellectual life, intellectual work, of whatever kind it might be.

I went to the University of Cambridge in 1983 to read English, in probably the only act of rebellion in my whole life. I was supposed to enter Cambridge as a History student, but at school I revolted and opted to do English instead. Although I lacked the terminology, I knew that I wanted to be what we might now call a cultural and intellectual historian. If there is one single book that made me want to be a historian, it is Frances Yates's *The Art of Memory* (1966).<sup>5</sup> I still have the copy that I first read at the age of 15. To me, it was so thrillingly unusual in what it revealed about the past. These were aspects of the past that I had never encountered before. And Yates did it in such an elegant and revelatory way. I decided that this was the kind of history that I wanted to do. At Cambridge in the early 1980s, the undergraduate History Tripos was still very much focused on political and institutional history. I had read everything by Geoffrey Elton and his followers by about the age of 16: very impressive institutional and political history, but not what I wanted to do myself. In order to become a cultural and intellectual historian, I knew I needed training in the reading of texts, i.e. interpretation and hermeneutics, with historical sensitivity. The Cambridge English Tripos—formally entitled ‘English Literature, Life and Thought’—seemed the more sensible option. I had no intention of pursuing an academic career at that point. I wanted to be a barrister, which meant doing two years of English and one year of Law. My plan was totally derailed by surprisingly good exam results in English in my first and second years. Everyone said: ‘you should carry on with it, because you are apparently very good at it.’ Since I had by then lost my rebellious streak, this is what I did.

Following a BA in English, I immediately started with a Ph.D. in English. I spent two years on Shakespeare's classical sources, particularly Shakespeare's use of Ovid. Halfway through that process, I discovered that almost all the Ovidian poets in sixteenth-century England had also written poems about English colonial enterprises in Virginia or Guiana. I thought: this is a much more interesting topic, this is where the juices start flowing, this is something novel that has not been talked about before. I faced a fork in the road. To cut a long story relatively short: rereading John Milton's *Paradise Lost* was the point on which my work pivoted back from literary scholarship to intellectual history. There are two great narratives in *Paradise Lost*: a) the narrative of the Fall of Mankind, and b) the narrative of Satan's discovery of the New World. There are references all the way through to Satan as a voyager, a traveller, going to a New World, where he encounters the native peoples. The poem is saturated with the language of empire. I thought: ‘why was this the case?’ Why did Milton reflect in the

late 1650s and early 1660s, when writing *Paradise Lost*, on contacts with the New World beyond Europe? Why did he mention empire, discovery and colonisation, often with a negative valence? I related that to Milton's republicanism, his commitment to classical republicanism, to neo-Roman thought.<sup>6</sup> This was the topic I had been looking for: the relationship between republicanism and empire. I took this project with me when I left Cambridge in 1988, right in the middle of my Ph.D., and went to Princeton for two years on a Commonwealth Fund Harkness Fellowship in order to retool as a historian.

I was particularly encouraged to do so by J. H. Elliott, who was then at the Institute of Advanced Study at Princeton. Elliott's *The Old World and the New, 1492–1650* (1970), based on his 1969 Wiles Lectures at Queen's University, Belfast, had been a great inspiration to me.<sup>7</sup> (I was therefore more than usually honoured and delighted to follow Elliott as the Wiles Lecturer at Queen's in 2010.) John himself was extraordinarily kind to me and had a decisive influence on my career. Although based in Princeton, he retained a house in Cambridge, to which he returned every summer. I met him one summer when he was in Cambridge, explained that I had a fellowship to go to the US, and that I wanted to work on the relationship between English literature and English imperial ventures in the Americas. He immediately suggested I come to Princeton. Since the Institute of Advanced Study does not take graduate students, he could not officially supervise me, but offered to help in any way he could. He gave me the names of Princeton faculty members I might work with, including Lawrence Stone, Natalie Zemon Davis and John Murrin in History and David Quint and Victoria Kahn in Literature. He was extraordinarily generous, really decisive at that point in helping me to move my intellectual framework towards the US and American academia, Princeton in particular. He was amazingly generous to someone he had never met before, to whom he had no prior connection. As a side-note, I should say that I have been struck at various points by how generous extremely senior scholars can be to junior scholars and how decisive this can be in one's academic life. Throughout my own career, I have tried to follow Elliott's example as much as I can, in my own faltering way. I realise that I owe so much to so many generous people who helped me at critical moments in my career, when they really had no reason to. Elliott was the first one to do that for me. He did not just introduce me to Princeton scholars, but also—here is where the irony comes in—to many of the great Cambridge historians who would play a decisive influence in my career for the next ten years. It was at Princeton that I first met

Anthony Pagden, Richard Tuck, Chris Bayly, Linda Colley and David Cannadine. It was at Princeton as well that I first really came across the work of Quentin Skinner, whose name had never even been mentioned to me in the five years I spent at Cambridge studying English.

*So Princeton, not Cambridge, was the decisive influence in your career?*

You might say that; I couldn't possibly comment. However, the pivotal figure in my career is Quentin Skinner, a founding member of the so-called 'Cambridge School' of the History of Political Thought, who, like Pocock, also had a family background in the Empire.<sup>8</sup> Quentin saved my academic life. In my second year at Princeton, I had reached a crisis point. I realised that I could not in good conscience continue with a Ph.D. in English. I wanted to be in a History Department and to work as a historian. It became necessary to throw myself at the mercy of at least one historian in order to make the transition. By that time, I had read a great deal of Skinner's work. Quentin was then publishing his major work on republicanism,<sup>9</sup> which fitted very closely with my interests at that stage. I very much wanted to work with him. It was the last chance to rescue myself as a historian. Through a friend, I got in touch with him. On a brief visit from Princeton, we had lunch and I explained my project. With what I soon discovered is his characteristic generosity and grace, he agreed to take me on as a student and to help me make the transition to the History Ph.D. programme at Cambridge. He did exactly that. He did all the necessary administrative legwork to transfer me from English to History. The rest is history—or, rather, History. It was unforced, unanticipated generosity on Quentin's part, and an enormous vote of confidence. When I joined the History Ph.D. programme at Cambridge, it was the absolute zenith of intellectual history and history of political thought at Cambridge in terms of the breadth and depth of the group I was part of. Among my contemporaries were Annabel Brett, Joan-Pau Rubiés, and Andrew Fitzmaurice.<sup>10</sup>

It was a really extraordinary moment in terms of early-modern intellectual history, the move towards connecting intellectual history with extra-European history and the history of colonisation. Richard Tuck was independently beginning his work that led to *The Rights of War and Peace* (1999).<sup>11</sup> There was in different areas a move towards the international, colonial, imperial, global setting of early-modern intellectual history in particular. Sometimes we worked entirely independently of each other, but then we discovered that we arrived at the same set of topics via different routes. There were common seminars: the famous Monday night seminar

in the History of Political Thought, run for many years by Skinner and John Dunn—yet another founder of the Cambridge School who came from ‘a sort of imperial family’ in British India<sup>12</sup>—and which still continues today. Together with Joan-Pau Rubiés, I organised a seminar on ‘Cultural Encounters in the Early-Modern World’, a colonial history and European expansion seminar with a cultural/intellectual history focus. In doing so, we had the full support of Peter Burke, a fellow-Fellow of mine at Emmanuel College at the time.

*You taught at Columbia University from 1993 until 2004. How different was American academia from what you were used to back in Britain? Do you feel that it was a crucial step in your academic and professional career?*

By extraordinary good fortune, a junior position in British history opened up at Columbia University just as I finished my junior research fellowship at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, a year later, in 1993. David Cannadine held the senior position in British History at Columbia. His extraordinary generosity, inspiration and camaraderie began when I went for my interview at Columbia University and continued throughout the time that I was there. He was an immensely supportive, energising figure, who was taking his own imperial turn in those years as well.<sup>13</sup>

David and I very much saw eye to eye in terms of where British history was going. There was a palpable sense among British historians, particularly in the US, that the field was dwindling into insignificance, that the tweedy Anglophilia that had sustained it for decades was no longer viable, as America was becoming a more outward-looking and global society. If British history was to survive as a teaching and research subject, a subject in which major universities would continue to hire, we had to reconsider its position in the wider academic ecology in the US. In the late 1990s, the North American Conference on British Studies undertook a self-study of the field. Its report concluded that a turn towards empire, towards Britain’s international connections, towards the global setting of British history was going to be essential to save the field, just as it was intellectually unignorable as a major aspect of the field—it had been largely overlooked, except under the rubric of imperial history. I arrived at the right moment in the US, just when that move was taking place.

There is one other big difference between the US and British academia: the breadth demanded in teaching, the fact that one has to teach British history to a non-British audience, in the context of a very diverse student body. When I started teaching at Columbia, I had to think from the bottom up about the larger stories, the larger narratives into which I

would put British history, which would be narratives intersecting with colonial American history, with Atlantic History, with imperial history, with global history. Just in the course of writing my first series of lectures on British history for students at Columbia University, I was being pushed to think in my capacity as a teacher—even before I took this turn in my research—to think outwards, to think imperially, to think globally. That was decisive for my career, as was a succession of brilliant graduate students at Columbia and now Harvard who have taught me more than I could ever have taught them about expanding the boundaries of established histories.<sup>14</sup>

I taught the Contemporary Civilization course at Columbia University, a 2,000-year text-based, seminar/discussion-based survey of (mainly) Euro-American intellectual history, Plato to Rawls and beyond. That was the most exciting teaching I have ever done. Its chronological breadth over the very *longue durée* was salutary. It was in some sense my education as an intellectual historian, inculcating an interest in questions over the *longue durée* that have become increasingly urgent in my current work. Half of my teaching at Columbia University was in the Core Curriculum, in fact, which was one of the great attractions for me. I was very committed to it, and chaired the Contemporary Civilization course at Columbia in 2002–04.

*What about your research and publications at this time?*

In the 1990s, I did research in the New York Public Library, Columbia University Library and the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington DC, among other places. I went back to Britain in the summer time in order to do research in London and Edinburgh. I did quite a lot of Scottish history as part of the larger British project I was working on, to make sure that it was truly British, representing both the English and Scottish experiences.<sup>15</sup>

I published an edition of Bolingbroke's political writings in 1997.<sup>16</sup> Bolingbroke played an important role in my *Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (2000).<sup>17</sup> He was among the first to theorise Britain as a blue-water empire in the 1730s. In the course of doing research on him, I discovered that there was no modern edition of his writings, and there deserved to be. So a left-hand project in the context of my other work was to bring Bolingbroke back to some prominence in the context of the blue book series, edited by Skinner, who had written the most important classic essay on Bolingbroke many years before. Skinner was very receptive to the

idea of publishing Bolingbroke's writings in the *Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought* series.

*Theories of Empire*, published in 1998, was a collection of previously published essays.<sup>18</sup> The hardest part of putting together that volume was to find anything on the Dutch empire. I wrote to various Dutch historians, including Prof. Piet Emmer at the University of Leiden, to ask whether there was one classic essay on Dutch ideas about empire. Emmer replied: 'Sorry, the Dutch had no ideas; they just counted. There is no secondary literature on the intellectual history of the Dutch empire.' Consequently, I included in the volume the classic essay 'Freitas versus Grotius' by C. H. Alexandrowicz (1902–75). This led to an abiding interest in Alexandrowicz's work as perhaps the first post-colonial historian of international law, who anticipated by two decades the 'Third World Approaches to International Law' school, which has more recently transformed the field of international legal studies. Together with Jennifer Pitts of the University of Chicago, I will shortly publish a collection of Alexandrowicz's scattered but germinal essays.<sup>19</sup>

My doctoral dissertation was mostly a collection of case studies, which were published separately as articles or led to other projects, such as the edition of Bolingbroke's political writings. *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2000, contains just a chapter and a half or maybe two chapters of my doctoral dissertation. The rest was freshly researched. Much to the anxiety of my colleagues at Columbia University, the monograph appeared just weeks before the tenure-file went forward. It was a risky strategy for any junior scholar in the American tenure system. Do not try this at home! I was very, very lucky to have the extra time (i.e. a junior research fellowship at Emmanuel College and research support from Columbia University) to write the book the subject deserved.

*Should we characterise the period 1993–2004 as the 'Atlanticist' decade of your career?*

Yes and no: yes, in the sense that most of the work which I published during that period was either explicitly or implicitly Atlantic in focus, and no, in the sense that the transition to international/global history was already taking place in 1999–2000. There was an obvious overlap between my Atlanticist and international/global interests. The focus on global history was firmly in place when I became Fellow at Harvard's Charles Warren Center for American Studies in 2000–01, starting my project on the 'Foundations of Modern International Thought'. Out of

that project grew—some might say metastasised—a single chapter, which turned into a book entitled *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (2007).<sup>20</sup> My year at the Charles Warren Center was filled with a series of very intense, very fertile conversations with international and global historians, led by the late Ernest May (1928–2009), Akira Iriye, and James Kloppenberg. I really began to discover that I was an international historian or had been one all along, like some sort of scholarly Monsieur Jourdain.<sup>21</sup> I was thus becoming an international and increasingly global historian on top of being an Atlantic historian. That is when the conversion really began to take hold, during that year.

The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800 (2002) was workshopped at a meeting of the International Seminar on the History of the Atlantic World at Harvard University in September 2001. On that occasion, you presented your now classic essay ‘Three Concepts of Atlantic History,’ which has been rather extravagantly compared to Marx’s Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte for its quotable opening line, ‘We are all Atlanticists now’.<sup>22</sup> But what was the connection with international/global history? This interviewer attended the workshop, but never felt the connection with her own work. As Bernard Bailyn once put it, ‘Martine insists on doing the East Indies.’<sup>23</sup>

The boundaries have broken down more since. We can now recognise each other as being part of the same enterprise: *l’histoire des deux Indes*, if you will. That was not always the case.<sup>24</sup>

*National boundaries seem to have been reintroduced in Atlantic History, which defies the purpose.*

Absolutely, partly because of volumes like *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800*, insisting that there is something British about it. We had thought, perhaps naïvely, that it might generate a series of volumes on the French Atlantic World, the Portuguese Atlantic World, the Dutch Atlantic World, etc. Happily, none of those happened, otherwise it could have been even more entrenched than it is. In some ways the cynics may be partly correct in saying that Atlantic History was a way of rescuing different national historiographies by putting them in broader contexts. Early American history became Atlantic History, parts of early modern British History became Atlantic History, and the same happened with the early modern histories of other European countries that had overseas connections or empires.

*To do proper Atlantic History requires the knowledge of so many languages that is very difficult for anyone to do that.*

Yes, perhaps it can only be done as a collaborative enterprise.

*Were you influenced by Prof. Bernard Bailyn's conceptualisation of Atlantic History? Bailyn first outlined his ideas for the International Seminar on the History of the Atlantic World in the Itinerario interview of March 1996.<sup>25</sup>*

Absolutely, yes. I presented a paper at the International Seminar on the History of the Atlantic World at Harvard University in August 1997, i.e. the second year that the August seminar ran. I continued to attend the annual seminars until 2005. Although I was already making the turn towards international history, I consider the Atlantic seminars among the most fertile forcing-houses for historiographical innovation that I have ever been part of. Bailyn's vision, ever expanding, ever deepening, was extraordinary to see unfold in the early years of the seminar. I was very privileged to have had a ringside seat for that.

*What is your position with regard to FEEGI discussions about hemispheric history versus world history and European expansion versus world history?*

My answer is twofold: 1) This is perhaps a trivial point, but I have not been directly engaged in discussions, face-to-face, with groups like FEEGI, to thrash them out. 2) To make a more substantial point, I am a great believer in letting at least 1,000 flowers bloom. One should not be exclusive about these things. It all depends on the question you want to answer. Turning that around, the framework that you choose to bring to bear on your materials will generate new kinds of questions as well. There is a reciprocity, a back and forth, between the problems and the methodologies available to solve them. Prescriptivism is death in these matters. One should not legislate for one approach or another. All approaches should be in play in order to generate the questions to open up the archives and to create the discussions that are necessary to solve particular problems. That is the only reasonable answer to that question.

*It is also sitting on the fence a bit.*

Yes, I always remember what David Lloyd George said of an opponent in the British House of Commons: 'he has been sitting on the fence so long that the iron has entered his soul.' I feel very much that way myself: uncomfortable yet implacable.

*You say that international and global history has been at the forefront of your mind since your year at the Charles Warren Center. At Harvard, you find yourself in good company: Niall Ferguson, Charles Maier and Emma Rothschild, to name a few, are extremely distinguished historians of empire.<sup>26</sup> Has the Harvard History Department gone global? Are we all global historians now?*

Those are two separate questions, but connected. Yes, what I have found most hospitable about the Harvard History Department is precisely its long-running commitment to international and global approaches. The two great innovators of International History were Ernest May and Akira Iriye, with more than seventy years of teaching at Harvard between them. They had laid the groundwork for this approach with their own students for the broader tenor of the Department long before any of the recent generation of imperial historians was appointed.

*But both May and Iriye did/do modern history.*

Yes, both published on modern history, but both were also deeply learned in earlier periods. Most of their Ph.D. students did topics in nineteenth- and twentieth-century history, and therefore the field could be identified with that era to some extent. But there was never any hostility to earlier periods. Part of the raising of awareness about international and global history has been a breaching of chronological boundaries. For example, if we conceive of international history in terms of the interaction of both national and non-national histories, then before the great age of nation-states, before the cementing of a regime of nation-states, all history was *ipso facto* transnational or international history. I would insist upon that. My colleagues in medieval history do as well. Pre-modern history (i.e. history before the late eighteenth century) is *ipso facto*, by definition, by its construction, a trans-national historiography, although it has only very recently been conceived of in those terms. Possibilities for dialogue with more self-conscious international/transnational/global historians are opening up, across chronological as well as geographical barriers. That is something the History Department at Harvard is very hospitable to—as are larger swathes of the historical profession, at least in the US. And a good thing too! That is something I am quite evangelical about. I am not on the fence about that at all.

To answer the larger question, are we all global historians now? No, not in the sense that we are all doing global history. We certainly are in the sense that all historians now have a global audience, thanks to the Internet. But in one strong sense we could say that we all have to be global

historians now. By that I mean, if you are not doing... this formulation will get me into trouble, but let me nevertheless put it in these strong terms: if you are not doing an explicitly transnational, international or global project, you now have to explain *why* you are not. There is now sufficient evidence from a sufficiently wide range of historiographies that these trans-national connections have been determinative, influential and shaping throughout recorded human history, for about as long as we know about it. The hegemony of national historiography is over. It used to be the case until very recently, let's say ten years ago, that if you did not do national historiography, you had to tell other people why you were not doing national historiography. I would like to say the boot is now on the other foot. We now have to ask the national historians: why are you doing US history without the history of the hemisphere, the American empire, America's relations with the wider world, the history of American emigration, the transnational circulation of ideas, whatever it may be? I think it is time for us to put the national historians on the defensive, to justify their choice of particular local, regional or national frameworks. I am putting that a little aggressively, but I also hope that it might be productive for those who work on smaller units, to justify to themselves why it is they choose them—apart from the inertia of the historical profession, that it has always been the case that one would take a town, a region or a nation-state as a focus of historical study. We need to be more reflexive about exactly why we choose those things, rather than the path-dependency of historiographical activity.

*The irony is that many historians born and/or living in newly independent countries in the so-called Third World are doing national history.*

Yes, it is essential for them to do so; it is essential for the public purposes of their historiography, because of the former suppression. It is absolutely essential for them to go through that stage. Is it essential for US or British historians to continue doing national history for the same reasons? There is no equivalence there. If historians find themselves in a post-imperial, not a post-colonial, situation and if they continue to write national history, then we have to ask why. They need to justify why they are doing what they are doing, when there is so much evidence that the nation-state is a container at once too small and too large to encompass everything that we want to learn about the past.

*Does it not also depend on the audience historians are writing for? Historians have a duty towards society, their own societies, hence the predominance of*

*the nation-state in historical narratives. It feeds into national identity, any identity. That is what people are interested in. As an ideal, we should do global history. But we are all rooted in our local communities.*

I agree. History has a public, indeed a civic function in that sense. But to take the example of the US, we now know from the latest census analyses that white descendants of Europeans are already in the minority.<sup>27</sup> That necessarily changes the public and civic focus of US historians. They should not continue to tell the story of the nation-state as the advance of European immigrants and the embedding of their institutions, but tell the full story, the diversity of the US in its connections with the wider world—oceanic, hemispheric and global. So, yes, there will be conservatives who say ‘the national story should continue to be the story that has been told by the New England historians since the beginning of the nineteenth century.’ However, that story will increasingly lose an audience because that audience is dying off, and being replaced by a much more diverse audience, with a much greater consciousness of transnational connections, not least through their own family lives.

*The general public is mainly interested in genealogy and local history. That is what you see all around you, especially in the Boston area—lots of historic sites associated with the American Revolution. In order to keep in contact with the larger public, university-trained historians should have a feel for that, while showing at the same time the larger implications.*

One of the impetuses behind my book on the US Declaration of Independence was precisely to show that this most American of American documents was fundamentally international, even global: if one could globalise the Declaration, then there was no reason not to globalise the rest of American history—by which I mean, as most of its practitioners mean, United-States-ian history. Even in its physical make-up the Declaration was an international object, printed by an Irishman, using a printing press and type imported from England. Moreover, he printed it on Dutch paper. There were no paper manufacturers in British North America in the 1770s. The US would not become self-sufficient in paper production until the early nineteenth century. Even the paper the Declaration was written on had to be imported. The inkstand used to sign the manuscript was made of silver, not from the mines of Virginia, but probably from the mines of Peru. So it does not take very much to show the international connections, even in the Declaration’s physical fabric.

The Declaration of Independence: A Global History (2007) is now available in paperback. More importantly, it has been translated into Italian, French, Portuguese, Spanish and Japanese. A Chinese translation is underway. Does this make you a public historian? Was it your intention to speak to a wider audience? That book grew out of your forthcoming Foundations of Modern International Thought. Did you ask Harvard University Press to publish one chapter as a separate book?

Oddly enough, it was actually my editor at Harvard University Press, Kathleen McDermott, who suggested the idea to me of doing a separate book, as something that could reach a wider audience. I was very happy to do that. I was quite bullish about taking a broader, international and global approach to early American history in general. Harvard University Press very generously, very wisely saw the potential for a book on that subject, a relatively short book that would bring that perspective to a wider audience. One of my great satisfactions is the way in which the book has been read by non-academic readers, including high school students. I have done a lot of talks to high school teachers, in particular about how to teach the American Revolution in wider contexts. That seems to be an important shift in the teaching of American history in American high schools.<sup>28</sup> Teachers have realised the necessity of taking a broader, cosmopolitan perspective to educate their students about the wider world that they are part of. For civic purposes, the national narrative is no longer sufficient for them. I am very proud indeed to have made a small contribution to that. I have the satisfaction of seeing my research go very quickly into classrooms across the US.

*Were there any negative reactions to your interpretation of the Declaration of Independence?*

Yes, it was written as a polemical work. I deliberately downplayed the importance of the Declaration's second paragraph (i.e. 'self-evident truths' and 'inalienable rights') because historically it has been much less important to the global context than the opening and closing paragraphs regarding the rights of peoples and 'Free and Independent States.' But I did get some pushback from American historians and Americanists, who claimed the book was unbalanced in not giving due attention to the importance of the second paragraph for American history itself.<sup>29</sup> But that work—placing the second paragraph into its larger, historical context—has been done as well as it is likely to be done by Pauline Maier in *American Scripture* (1998).<sup>30</sup> Her book was a great inspiration to me. So I said to myself: 'my job now is to place the whole document into

its international context in 1776 and beyond, and see what the evidence turns up.' And the evidence was very decisively against the importance of the second paragraph. That did get me into some kind of trouble. The way that I tend to teach that, especially when I work with high school teachers, is to say: 'it is important to remind your students that the promises of the second paragraph, the promises of individual rights, the broader promises of human rights, are always contestable and reversible, not something you can absolutely rely upon.' One of our jobs as teachers is to encourage our students to make arguments in favour of those rights, not to assume that these rights will always be available to them or to anybody else. Come up with good arguments why this conception of rights, natural rights, rights perhaps derived from a divine source, rights derived from major foundational documents like the Declaration of Independence or the Bill of Rights are substantive and can be actionable, can protect you. How do you gain protection from that? Only by protecting the rights themselves, by being able to argue for them. My sceptical view of the second paragraph is very much intended to push in that kind of civic direction: to say, well, justify these arguments. There are plenty of philosophers who say that the assumptions underpinning the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence are, to put it mildly, not very robust. We may need to come up with better arguments in their favour. So what might those better arguments be, instead of the shorthand assumptions that Jefferson built into the document?

*Do Harvard historians have a duty to speak to the general public? Many of your colleagues are writing in the big American newspapers, weekly magazines etc. Is it valued by the Harvard administration?*

Maybe not a responsibility, but certainly an opportunity. The Harvard name does open doors. The inspiration provided by colleagues who have a public presence encourages one to rethink how to couch one's scholarship to reach a wider audience. On the part of the administration, there is an expectation that one should speak to the widest possible audience. The EdX initiative may become important in this regard as well. Instead of having at most 1,000 students in a physical classroom at Harvard, it will now be possible to have tens of thousands of listeners and learners all around then world.

*What will be History's contribution to the joint MIT–Harvard EdX initiative?*

I was at a meeting a few days ago to discuss Harvard's entry into the world of 'massive open online courses' (MOOCs). The very first on-line

Humanities course to be offered through EdX will be a course on Chinese history taught by my colleagues Peter Bol and Bill Kirby. They are working on it right now. There is a potential audience of over a billion in China alone.

*But there would seem to be a problem if the History contribution to EdX were nothing more than a Harvard History professor pontificating in front of a camera, expecting the world to watch in breathless admiration.*

That is true. That turns out to be very unappealing to an on-line audience. That is where the really interesting questions begin. We had a two-and-half hour discussion about this. How do you do what we do as interpretative, evaluative, qualitative scholars in that kind of scaled-up, massive on-line environment? It is fine for introductory courses in mathematics or computer science: almost all on-line courses so far have been of that kind. They are introductory; they can easily be accessed by non-human assessors, through multiple-choice questions and machine-marking, for example. It really is a matter of advancing stage by stage from simple to more complex information. It does not involve evaluation or analysis of the materials. So the really interesting questions are: 'How do we do what we do in that kind of environment? Is it even possible for us to do what we do in that kind of environment?'. That is one reason why Harvard and MIT are investing a large amount of money in the EdX initiative. It is a very good programme in the sense that Harvard, in particular, has said: 'This will not just be for the sciences and engineering; this will also be for the Humanities and Social Sciences.' Harvard has now turned it over to all of us, asking: 'Well, how will it be?' 'What kind of resources can Harvard put your disposal to create on-line the kind of analytical experiences that we value in our classrooms?'. There are various possibilities, of course. It could mean digitising texts and physical objects, in order for students to zoom in and view and rotate them in three-dimensional space. It could mean allowing various kinds of on-line discussion, perhaps with off-site but on-line teaching assistants. Or it could be done through various kinds of peer advising and peer teaching, i.e. more-experienced students help less-experienced students in on-line discussion groups. Students who take an on-line course for some kind of credit become teachers for that course in due course. It is creating a wholly different kind of teaching environment, and on an international and global scale. A professor who teaches a course on leadership at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard told us at the meeting on Wednesday that he had to rethink the course in light of the cross-cultural, international conceptions of what leadership

means, which he got back from the 10,000 students who were taking the course on-line. They were feeding back very different conceptions of leadership. He brought along a student from Serbia who was a graduate of the on-line course, who had come to Harvard to take a Master's degree at the Kennedy School and is now teaching on the course here. Contact with actual, living subjects changed the way this professor taught the course at Harvard. Another participant said: 'We now have a huge survey group for testing pedagogical innovation.' You can try a new technique or module, and get immediate feedback from 10,000 students, whether it works or does not. That can take years in a normal classroom. A third participant mentioned the possibilities for crowdsourcing in research, such as the Transcribe Bentham project in London, which uses non-academics to crowdsource scholarship itself.<sup>31</sup> That could come through courses as well, i.e. to have certain core texts or materials that people can use for research. It is possible to begin to imagine ways in which we can build in research and analytical experiences in on-line courses that are unimaginable in a classroom of between twenty and 120 students, but become conceivable when you are scaling up to 10,000 students. It could create very different, novel, previously unimaginable ways of teaching and doing collective research, which are not possible in a small, classroom setting.

*Is EdX going to be one of your priorities as Chair of the History Department at Harvard?*

It cannot be formally a priority, because for the moment EdX is something the faculty do in their spare time. It is a non-profit organisation, independent from both universities. The members of the board are senior administrators, including the presidents, provost and deans of both Harvard and MIT, etc. Right now, Harvard faculty members are asked to contribute *pro bono* and *pro fama*—they can become famous and reach a larger audience. However, there is no salary recognition for it. It is like writing a textbook, which you also do in your own time. Crucially, there is no business model for it yet. Nobody has figured out how to generate a revenue stream out of this kind of higher education. Until somebody works out how to do that, EdX may continue to be something that you do out of a passion to reach a larger audience and that the universities like Harvard, MIT and Stanford will undertake to expand their brand. Part of the down-side of these on-line courses is the drop-out rate: at best 90 per cent, at worst 97 per cent, of the people who signed up do not see out the course until the very end. This is no reason not to press ahead: even if such a huge proportion of students do not make it the end of the

course—or, in most cases, even get past the beginning—thousands still may. As the best recent analysis of MIT's first on-line course concludes, 'the message for MOOCs has to be: disregard the dropouts and celebrate giving huge numbers of people access to free, high-quality, education.'<sup>32</sup> To retain students, smaller modules are being developed for EdX, i.e. four- to five-week modules, rather than the thirteen to fourteen weeks of the Harvard teaching semester. So that is the question: how do you keep people's attention, when they do not have regular class assignments, when they are not doing it for credit? In some cases, you can get a certificate of completion, but that does not have any credibility for employers as an academic qualification, unless you can find a way to make it more robust and, essentially, to sell those kinds of accreditation. It is not clear how you monetise this kind of higher education. There are all kinds of questions, very interesting, fundamental questions. What are the university's responsibilities towards a wider audience beyond its gates? How can faculty members reach out, under what circumstances, with what kind of encouragements? It is all fascinatingly up in the air. But this is just a tiny corner of the much bigger digital revolution that is taking place now. I am absolutely certain that we are in the midst of the single most transformative moment in academic life since the modern research university was created at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. In five years' time, the landscape is going to be unrecognisable. It is already becoming unrecognisable in fundamental ways.

*You mean new formats of publishing, secondary literature with direct links to primary sources and other secondary literature, possibilities to annotate e-books on-line, etc?*

Of course: six different layers of annotation, books themselves becoming wikified, through their interactions with past scholarship and later readers. This is already happening, it is already here. That is where I feel very strongly that we have an agenda to follow. That is an agenda that I am already putting into place for the History Department at Harvard. I have set up a Digital Working Group for the Department. We have more than ten faculty members who are actively engaged in rethinking pedagogy and research, using digital tools and materials. I take that to be our major issue now: to publicise which is already going on in the Department—there is a huge amount of innovation in this area which is not as well known as it should be—and to equip all of our students and as many faculty as want to be equipped with these digital capacities, because they are rapidly

becoming essential for everything that we do. Some familiarity with how they operate is going to be as basic as philology was to a classical historian, for instance. We need to realise that this has already happened, but we are lucky to have some of the field's great innovators here at Harvard to give advice and inspiration.<sup>33</sup> What we are doing now is playing catch-up. As one of participants of the Wednesday meeting [about EdX] put it, 'Putting together these large on-line courses now is rather like driving a very rapidly moving train, when you have to construct both the engine and carriages behind you and lay the track in front of you, at the same time as the train is moving 100 miles an hour.' That is the way it is going in all areas now. I am absolutely convinced of that.

*But that is a Western phenomenon, is it not? In his essay 'Codex in Crisis,' Anthony Grafton recalls that he was sitting in a 'tin-roofed, incandescently hot West African internet café' in 2005, trying to answer e-mail questions from his graduate students in the US. He could find 'little high-end material on the screen, and neither, by the look of things, could [his] Beninese fellow users.'*<sup>34</sup>

There are digital divides within the US as well. As with any valuable resource, very rapidly inequalities kick in. We have to be aware of that. There is a lot of discussion within, for instance, the digital community in the US about these inequalities of access and how digital access can overcome them to create more connected forms of public history and community history, to have history literally from the bottom up. For example, local groups crowdsourcing materials from their own communities, feeding them into on-line archives, where these can be supplemented by historians, but in a non-hierarchical relationship between professional historians and non-professional people interested in history and with access to historical materials. That is great, but you are absolutely right: the conversation has to be expanded outside the wealthy heartlands of the digital world. In terms of academic institutions, we have immense computing power—large amounts of money are being put behind it here. But that is not true everywhere, even within the relatively well-funded higher education system in the US. Most students and scholars do not have access to the full range of databases that exist behind high and costly pay-walls. So, yes, what about Benin, what about India, what about many other parts of the world, even Latin America, for instance: how will they get access to these tools and techniques? That is a question that goes beyond the capacity of academics, but that is a one that we have to consider in so far as the promise of the digital revolution is universal access to things

that had so far been allowed only to the privileged and accredited few. Open-access journals, creative-commons licences and the various efforts to digitise vast numbers of books through the Internet Archive, Google Books, the Digital Public Library of America, the Europeana project, as well as national projects in countries such as France and Germany, will in time all help to create that universal access to the world's knowledge.

*Do you consider your work to have moral implications? The reason I am asking this is your contribution to a recent symposium in the journal Political Theory (2011) on the work of the Canadian political theorist, James Tully. In your contribution, you appear to criticise Tully, a major defender of the rights of indigenous peoples, for ignoring 'the tens of millions of people [in the global South] who still lack some of the most basic forms of human security.' Should historians leave it to philosophers to consider these moral issues?*<sup>35</sup>

It was certainly meant as a friendly provocation to Tully, very much in his own critical spirit, to say we should not settle with the boundaries of moral and political philosophy as we have inherited them; we should always be seeking to expand them, if we believe that there is any transformative potential whatsoever in our use of historical knowledge to enlighten contemporary society and open up new questions. I was pushing the boundaries of what he had done. His work has been absolutely fundamental, not just in Canada or North America, but more broadly in bringing indigenous rights to the centre of discussion in political theory. That is a huge achievement in itself. I was just pushing the logic of that further by saying: 'So what about those people who cannot make claims within the context of settled and constitutionalised societies like Canada, the US or Australia, those for whom the struggle might not be about recognition, but for simple, bare human survival?'. How can this be made relevant to them? How can we think about other kinds of inequalities on a global scale which are parallel to and to some extent intersect with the kinds of inequalities which Tully himself was mapping in the context of a very large and very important set of communities, but only one congeries of communities on that global scale?

*Should historians consider these questions as well?*

How can we not? It depends on your choice of topic, of course. But the topic I am working on at the moment, competing conceptions of civil war,<sup>36</sup> is something that affects hundreds of thousands of people around the world, not just in Asia and Africa, but now in the Middle East as well. To ask about the boundaries of humanitarian law and civil law, to ask how

external powers should react to conflicts called civil war, this can literally be a case of life and death for tens of thousands of people, perhaps even millions of people. If one encounters a topic like that, I think there is a moral responsibility to consider the wider ramifications of one's academic work. Anything that one writes may be taken up in these contexts. One therefore has a duty to get it right, to consider the potential implications, what uses it might be deployed for.

*Finally, how might you define the future of Intellectual History?*

My answer is three-fold: 1) International/Global, 2) *Longue Durée*, and 3) Digital, which facilitates 1) and 2). I have been writing recently on all three of these futures.<sup>37</sup> In regard to all of them, my preference is for short books on big topics. They are more readable; they have more of an impact. One can move more rapidly. At some point, somebody has to digest the findings of the big books, to put them into a bigger picture. And to do that within the compass of, let's say, between 30,000 words and 150,000 words for a wider audience is absolutely essential if we are going to have any kind of impact. And also to do that in other fora. We are still talking in terms of the physical dimensions of the codex. Again, the Digital Revolution means that we are now writing in different genres and reading in different genres. Now, much of the most exciting stuff that I read is in blog-posts, it is not in journals, to some extent it is not in monographs. Very rapidly moving, suggestive, deeply researched scholarship is coming out in very different formats now. I joined Twitter recently: the amount of information, fabulous information, one can get from that is absolutely mind-boggling. I have learned an incredible amount from the links that people have put up—there's very serious material to be found there if you follow the right people.

*The problem is that in Britain they have not caught up with this.*

Of course, they have. Many of the people I follow are in Britain. They put up links to the Folger Shakespeare Library, to the Institute of Historical Research, to digital projects at the University of London, etc, etc—an incredible amount of stuff. And much of the most important digital work is being undertaken by scholars in Britain: King's College, London, has a Department of Digital Humanities, Oxford has an increasingly prominent and integrated programme in the field, and the world's largest digital archive of subaltern sources, the Old Bailey Online, comes out of three British universities.

*But none of this counts for the Research Excellence Framework (the United Kingdom's regular process of academic assessment)!*

This is the problem, a really interesting and critical problem. How do we evaluate digital scholarship in non-traditional formats? The American Historical Association—following the Modern Languages Association—has just set up a committee to create protocols for evaluating digital scholarship.<sup>38</sup> That is at least a start. That is one of the things that I have asked our Digital Working Group in the Department to do, to create standards for the evaluation of digital work for junior faculty, graduate students and undergraduates—we are likely to get increasing numbers of undergraduate theses that involve digital work. And we have no standards for evaluating that at the moment. In a year's time, we have got to have them. That is a real imperative.

*According to Neil Jefferies, the Bodleian Library in Oxford will soon make its entire catalogue open-source, thus allowing scholars to make changes in the catalogue.<sup>39</sup> But there is an incentive for people to do this only if they are going to receive some sort of recognition for it.*

Not necessarily. Go to any rare books library in the US or Britain and you will often find a slip of paper in the front of a book—or people have made annotations—about where extracts have been published, about other manuscripts, attributions, and so on. We always have had an informal version of that sharing of scholarly knowledge in and alongside the physical objects. But the planned changes in the on-line catalogue of the Bodleian Library will massively increase that possibility. Harvard Libraries have made available the meta-data on 12 million—*12 million!*—objects in the Harvard collections—manuscripts, books, physical materials, etc.<sup>40</sup> If you can wait a couple of hours, you can download the whole ZIP file of, basically, two-thirds of the library collection. And then the kinds of searches you can run on that, the way that you can manipulate that material... the sky's the limit. It is up to you. That is all open-source now, that is all there. That is like being able to see inside the whole card catalogue all at once, but on a ten-fold scale.

*Is there anything you would like to add to conclude our interview?*

I am sorry that I do not have the standard stories of how I spent six months on a banana boat, chatting to the Indonesian crew. I have read a few of these *Itinerario* interviews: I am sorry I do not have more glamorous or romantic stories for you!

I would however like to mention the Cambridge University Press series, *Ideas in Context* which I co-edit and about which I feel very strongly. Speaking of the future of intellectual history, we are pushing the series very much in the direction of doing more on imperial ideologies and global intellectual history. We just published Chris Bayly's recent book on Indian liberalism: the hundredth volume in the series, symbolically to show a new direction for the series and for the field of intellectual history as a whole.<sup>41</sup> Chris talked about the first glimmerings of this project in an *Itinerario* interview a few years ago.<sup>42</sup> I am happy to link up to that.

I am also convinced the next frontier for oceanic history is Pacific History. We are very glad to convene the conference at Harvard in November 2012. I think this will be the first conference ever to take a truly pan-Pacific perspective. It will include scholars who work on the indigenous Pacific, the histories of Australia and New Zealand, the history of Asia, including China and Japan, and also the North-Pacific, Russia as well as the Americas. The participants will see the Pacific whole for the first time, on the models of Atlantic History. We will need to figure out whether the models forged for Atlantic History have any relevance to an arena that is so much bigger, i.e. one-third of the earth's surface, one-sixth of humanity within its borders. The Pacific is a sea of islands—in the way that the Atlantic by and large is not—as well as a sea of rims and borders and connections. It is very exciting to see how that comes together. A volume should emerge from that by 2014, designed after the British Atlantic World volume.<sup>43</sup> The conference is the workshop for the volume.

It is important in terms of my global trajectory to say that I feel in some ways that I am repaying a debt to the Pacific world, and even carrying on my father's legacy. I hold an honorary professorship at the University of Sydney in Australia, where I like to visit as often as I can. There one sees the world from a very different perspective, a Pacific perspective. I have also been lucky enough to have two extended visits to Japan in recent years as well, where one gains another Pacific perspective. Putting together those perspectives and the conversations about Pacific history that I have had in both Japan and Australia over the years, it seemed to me that this was a topic whose future had very much come.

You asked earlier about the future of Atlantic History. I think one of the futures of Atlantic History is precisely joining it to other oceanic and trans-regional histories. That is part of the logic of what we discovered about the limits of Atlantic History: it can be too broad to encompass things but also too narrow to deal with trade flows, migration flows

and flows of goods and ideas. We need to think about the interrelations between these oceanic arenas and how in some sense they add up to a global or proto-global history. And there I end!

## Notes

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- 6 David Armitage, 'John Milton: Poet Against Empire,' in Armitage, Armand Himy and Quentin Skinner (eds.), *Milton and Republicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 206–25; see also Armitage, 'Literature and Empire,' in Nicholas Canny (ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire, I: The Origins of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 99–123.
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- 38 [http://www.mla.org/guidelines\\_evaluation\\_digital](http://www.mla.org/guidelines_evaluation_digital). The AHA 'approved the establishment of a Task Force on Digital Scholarship' at its June 2012 meeting.
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## Lessons from African History: between the deep and the shallow ends of social theory and historical empiricism. Interview with Frederick Cooper

*In the first week of December 2013, Fred Cooper was in Leiden to participate in the conference 'South Asia and the long 1930s: appropriations and afterlives.'<sup>1</sup> Iva Peša and Alicia Schrikker caught him on the day that he was giving a public lecture on his current work, entitled Beyond Empire: France and French Africa in the Post-World War II Context. The interview took place in the chilly mediaeval dungeons of Leiden, now one of the more fancy conference locations of the university in the historic city centre. Fred Cooper is well known for his work on African history and his studies of colonialism and empire.*

*Your early work was on Eastern Africa. How did you become interested in the region?*

Well, going back to the beginnings... I studied African history because of the Vietnam War, paradoxical as that may sound. This was in the late 1960s when the Vietnam War was a hot topic and a source of mobilisation amongst the students, certainly at Stanford University in California where I was studying. I naïvely thought that Southeast Asia was becoming a total mess because of American imperialism. South America was a mess because of its class system, but Africa seemed open, with a future ahead of it. Young leaders there were taking the initiative on behalf of their nations who had come out from under the yoke of colonialism. By the time I got halfway through my first course on African politics I learned that this was a very naïve perspective, that Africa was constrained like any other part of the world. But by then I was hooked.

So that is how I started out as an undergraduate in the late 1960s, and my interest in Africa has not stopped ever since. The work I am doing now focuses on open political possibilities and the way these get narrowed down over the course of conflicts over the consolidation of power in certain regimes. But there is always the chance that these political possibilities

might open up again. Ever since the late 1960s, I have been interested in exploring these possibilities and constraints at different historical moments in Africa.

*So when did you first travel to Africa? Was it while you were an undergraduate student? We read in one of your articles that you spent a year at the University in Nairobi in the late 1970s.*

My first trip to Africa was in 1970 after my first year in graduate school, so I was committed to African history before I had seen the place. I went back for dissertation research a couple of years later and back again in the late 1970s. The first time I was mostly on the Kenyan coast doing fieldwork and archival research. The second time I was mostly in Nairobi working in the archives; but I also spent much time at the university.

The 1970s was an interesting time to be there. There was a very lively academic community among historians, and in particular among political scientists. This was just after Jomo Kenyatta had died and people hoped vainly, as it turned out correctly, that there would be an opening in Kenyan politics. When I was there the writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o<sup>2</sup> was released from detention. I was there when he made his speech to the students and faculty at the university after he came out. There was a sense of an opening occurring. Over the course of the early 1980s, the Moi regime<sup>3</sup> cracked down on universities. This resulted in professors being detained and student demonstrations being broken up. Again, constraints outweighed possibilities. But in 1978–79, when I was there, that was an exciting time.

What became known in Africanist circles as the Kenya debate began in that period.<sup>4</sup> Left-wing political scientists and historians tried to conceptualize the relationship of the Kenyan state to capitalism. Those were intellectually very stimulating times to be in Africa.

*But this did not lead to disappointment? You say you kept returning to the themes of openings and constraints.*

I think these are continuous tensions. Kenyan politics has been in a difficult situation pretty much ever since the late 1970s. There have been periods of hope, certainly when Moi finally quit the presidency, and during some of the elections. But then the 2007 election was clearly rigged. There was cheating going on and very few people had confidence that the outcome represented the real choice of the Kenyan people. After the last elections, many people were disappointed with the results, given the involvement of the leading candidates with the conflict and, as a result, violence ensued. On the other hand, people still try, and there are Kenyans who have been

trying to open up politics. There have been people of strong will and good conscience, genuine democrats. So that is why one cannot give up.

Since the 1980s, I have been doing my research in Senegal. Senegal has had two elections in which the incumbent lost and accepted his defeat, in 2000 and 2012. So politics and citizenship in Africa has not disappeared. What these governments have yet to demonstrate is what they can do with the mandate that they have gotten from the electoral process. That is what remains to be seen. But real citizenship mobilizations in African countries have never really stopped. There have been periods during which they have been eclipsed, but they have never disappeared from the scene entirely.

*You mention Senegal; this has become a second regional specialisation of yours. When and why did you become interested in Senegal?*

It came out of a sequence of historical projects. My earlier research was on slavery, slave emancipation and agriculture in coastal Kenya and Zanzibar. I wrote a couple of books coming out of that research.<sup>5</sup> Then the research I was doing in the late 1970s was on dockworkers in Mombasa, and after finishing that project, or really before I had finished writing that book,<sup>6</sup> I came to the realization that even doing a micro history—there were only about 4,000 dock workers in Mombasa; it is a history of a small number of people—what shaped that history could not be limited to Mombasa. One important side of that history was the imperial actors, and for the people in London Mombasa was a very small part of a very big empire, and this influenced their perspective on how the colonial government should act and how to change its policy.

That book was really about a considerable change in labour policy. But the overall perspective of one set of actors was very much at the level of empire, whereas another set of actors, people in Mombasa, had a very different framework in which they were thinking—not necessarily confined to the local area, but quite a different one.

By the mid-1980s or even the early 1980s, when the book was still in gestation, I was thinking that the pendulum in African history had swung so far away from looking at anything colonial. It was so much focused on doing a history that was indigenous that one was actually not able to understand fundamental elements of how the history was actually unfolding and that one had to do both [indigenous and colonial history]. And having been very much part of a movement towards a very African approach to African history, I increasingly came to see that this had to be complemented by studying the shifting nature of colonialism in more

complexity and not to see it just as a background, a force against which people were pushing, but as something that is itself historically shaped and changing.

And that is how I started thinking about African responses to colonialism and colonial responses to African mobilization. When I tried to figure out how to go further in that kind of a project I did not want to get stuck in assuming that the British colonial thinking could stand in for colonial thinking in general. I did not have the linguistic capacity to do everything, but I did have a good knowledge of French, and France and Britain were the two biggest colonial powers in Africa, so the next phase of what I wanted to do was to do a comparative study.

I wanted to study labour and development together and I pretty much did that. In the end the focus became more on the labour side, so I ended up writing a comparative study of labour and decolonization in French and British Africa, which was published in 1996.<sup>7</sup> I had done a lot of research in British Africa—in Kenya—and sources in Great Britain, so what I had to do was to bring my work on French Africa to a comparable level and so I spent a lot of time doing research in France and Senegal. And since then, that has been the axis of my research. I have continued to work on this and what I have done recently is specifically on French Africa.

*Can you enlighten us more about the art of doing comparative history? Did you find it problematic to work with such different sets of written sources, oral traditions, and memories? How did you approach your material? For instance, we imagine that your ideas and questions had been shaped already by what you had read in the British archives or in Kenya.*

At the most abstract level of methodology the problem is quite simple. It is similar for historians all over the world. It comes down to a critical analysis of your sources. Both oral and written sources have to be read in the context in which they were produced, read in a way that is sensitive not only to what one's line is at the time, but to what arguments were in their own time, to see the framework in which people were operating. The big danger is always to follow one thread as if it were the only possible course of history and not to deal with alternatives that people tried to pursue. So at that level of abstraction the methodology is similar, whether you do British or French or Asian history.

But there are a lot of specifics; there is a lot of detail. You have to find out how archives are organized, and that varies not only by colonizing party, but it varies according to individual archives. And in some archives

it is very hard to get to what you want. Archives are not necessarily obvious in the way you have to get through to the material you need. And so I had to learn again. But I got a lot of help; lots of people were there before me and people were generous in providing advice, and I got quite early several Senegalese historians who tutored me in the nature of historical scholarship in Senegal, particularly Mamadou Diouf,<sup>8</sup> Mohammed Mboj,<sup>9</sup> and Babacar Fall,<sup>10</sup> all of whom I saw a great deal of when I was in Dakar for the first time in 1986. And I have been in touch with them ever since.

*Do you think that there are certain topics that lend themselves better to parallels, perhaps across space or time, than others?*

Of course, it is important to realize that not all topics lend themselves to parallels. But I think that it is important to have a certain empirical openness to it. If you suspect connections, do they exist? Are people talking to each other; are they reading each other's work? Which places are connected to which?

You do not want to start with assumptions that some topics produce parallels and others do not, because then you can find parallels only where you are looking for them. These types of questions certainly come up when you are studying political movements that take place at the same time in different parts of the globe: are they connected or are they not? I think that one needs to be open to look for connections, but not presume them. At the same time, one should not presume that particular politics are self-contained, because they might turn out not to be.

*You have been successful in linking these specific empirical case studies to a broader theoretical framework. What you have been telling us just now, about issues of capitalism, citizenship, seeing these through the micro case of perhaps the 4,000 workers in Mombasa, how do you link the specific to the more general?*

Well, I think there is an interplay between issues of theory and issues of historical practice, and I have always been interested in social theory. I started doing bits and pieces of it as an undergraduate, and one of the virtues of the American undergraduate education system is that you do not just do one subject. So as a history major I did a fair bit of political science and anthropology. I continued to do some of that in graduate school as well. I then started to read more and more, in particular Marx.

So as an undergraduate, I was not just taking African history, but I was also taking European and US history. I was particularly influenced

by a course I took on the history of the American South. This was in the late 1960s, when scholarship on slavery in the US got really interesting. People like Eugene Genovese,<sup>11</sup> whose early work was published at the time, and Professor David Potter had us read this kind of work and read C. Vann Woodward's brilliant book about reconstruction after the war—about slave emancipation and what happened after that.<sup>12</sup> So eventually, after a couple of years in graduate school, I started my Ph.D. dissertation about slavery. I already knew some of the literature on slavery in other parts of the world and at that time the slavery topic—the study of slavery in Africa—barely existed. A whole bunch of work came out in the 1970s, but when I started there was very little.

So, I was very much influenced by the study of a topic, slavery, in a completely different context, that of the cotton-growing South and the sugar-growing Caribbean islands. So right from the start, my thesis was comparative, and that was really the result of the kind of education I had, and particularly that the system in which I was educated encouraged us to study more than one thing. What I did was to keep pursuing that in one way or another, and I spent a lot of years working in the slavery field and keeping in touch with the literature in different parts of the world, and with more theoretical material that kept coming out and which eventually I was contributing to.

Once I got on to a different topic, I repeated, in a way, what I had done as a younger student, and I tried to read about that topic in other parts of the world. When I did that project on dockworkers in Mombasa, I read everything I could at the time on dockworkers in other parts of the world, which was actually not very much. It has since been quite a lot. In fact, a number of years ago I went to a conference at the International Institute for Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam about the comparative history of dockworkers, which has since produced two quite fat volumes.<sup>13</sup>

But that also got me into theoretical work—or this was even earlier, when I was doing work on post-emancipation and agriculture in Zanzibar and coastal Kenya. That is when I got very interested in the Marxist analysis of agricultural transformation, partly because there was a lot of implicit Marxism in the British colonial office of people who understood something about what it took to make a wage labour economy and they could not get their way. They could not do what they wanted to do, and that poses the questions in a very interesting way—in the way that we cannot write the history of capitalism by studying England or Germany or even more recently Japan, where we see the transformation going forward quite radically.

We have to see what happens when people try to push the economy in a capitalist direction but it does not get there. We have to have the negative side or otherwise the positive side does not mean a whole lot. So the theoretical approach seems to me important as a two-way street both in getting insight into a certain body of empirical material I was generating through research in archives and interviews, but also in using empirical research to interrogate the theory and see how one can think in richer terms theoretically. So that was the work I was doing from my second book, which was on post-emancipation agriculture in East Africa, through to the dockworkers book, and the comparative study of labour in French and British Africa. All were very much inflected by theoretical work on the nature of capitalism.<sup>14</sup>

*How does your work with Ann Stoler fit in this picture?*

That project in turn developed into a more specific engagement with colonialism. I was not trying to reduce colonialism to a narrative about capitalism, because I do not think that reduction works. But I was trying to think of colonial societies as an object of analysis in and of themselves. Both Marxist and other approaches and recent theoretical models coming out of South Asian scholarship are all relevant to such a view. It was at that time that I met Ann Stoler, an anthropologist whose first work was on Sumatra and who worked on agriculture as well.<sup>15</sup> And we realized that we had written very similarly-framed books, with mine on East African agriculture and Ann's on plantations in Sumatra, and both of us had moved in the same direction.

The puzzle we were left with was the colonial side of the picture. So that is when we started to compare notes, to develop a project and to have these conferences about history and anthropology. It took years to organize and it took years to digest. Eventually we first published some of the papers in the *American Ethnologist*,<sup>16</sup> and then we decided to put together a rather different collection of essays, and that became *Tensions of Empire*.<sup>17</sup> But what we were doing later was trying to develop a research agenda and ways of posing problems about the history and anthropology of colonialism.

We were doing this while I was simultaneously working on the book on the comparative study of labour and decolonization, which became *Decolonization and African Society*. So, I was doing this project with Ann Stoler, which was very much oriented towards theory and conceptual issues, and I was doing my empirical work at the same time. And this was producing two very different kinds of writing, different kinds of books.

Doing these two at the same time was mutually informative; it fed both ways, and certainly the fact that both Ann and I have a commitment to doing empirical work kept us from going off the theoretical deep end. We wanted to deal with concepts that were useful and not to write about abstractions in relationship to other abstractions. On the other hand, you can go off an empirical shallow end and pretend that facts speak for themselves, which they of course do not. So, the interplay of the two I found very fruitful.

*This reminds us of your introduction to your Colonialism in Question, where you discuss the problem of concepts starting to live a life of their own. When we were preparing this interview, we were thinking, where should we place Fred Cooper, if we were to label him? Of course, we know that this is something that you are very much against, but still... How should we label you? Where do you fit in?*

I think you are right, as regards labelling. There is no purpose to be served by labelling me. I am certainly influenced by Marxist theory, but it is a particular thread of Marx, very different from what other people who consider themselves Marxists would do. And I was very much influenced by a lot of people besides Marx. But I haven't given up on the relevance of the Marxist analysis and capitalism. I think it is still highly useful as a start of investigation.

I think one of the important lessons that you see when doing the history of different parts of the world is that people push back. And that invoking capitalism doesn't mean you've got it. There may be some mechanisms that operate with some human understanding, but go beyond it—beyond an understanding of what is going on. But identifying their importance is not the same as seeing them as the truth. And going in that direction leaves room for empirical analysis, but that kind of thought does not leave you with empiricism that is empty of other kinds of considerations.

So one of the difficult questions is, then, the scale on which you analyse phenomena. On the one hand you have very good reasons to follow what European historians have called *microhistoire*, but on the other hand you have people who talk about global history, whereas most history occurs somewhere in between the two. The microhistorians are more likely to recognize that, but a lot of the talk about global history actually misses that point, that connection. The more interesting and more difficult task is to find ways to deal with historical processes that are big but finite, to see how the actions operate in different parts of the world. That is a study

of the limitations of the exercise of power, as much as it is a study of the extent of the deployment of that power.

*Does this mean that you would rather not call yourself a global historian? Would you rather opt for historian of Africa?*

I think in one sense we are all global historians; but then to say that we are all global historians doesn't mean very much. The term is used in two senses. One is that the framework of history is global, and that that is the only framework and everything is on a global level. And that is basically not true. The other one is true, which is that most histories connect two or more places. And it is in that sense that everybody is a global historian. But you can also say that everybody is a historian. So I would not identify myself as a global historian, but I am certainly interested in being a historian of connections, connections across space among others. And I am interested in both the limits and the extent of these connections.

As far as being an African historian, I remain true to that endeavor. I am perfectly well aware that Africa, America, Europe and Asia are all problematic constructs, but they are constructs that people live with and that are important for people's lives. I think one can be aware of the constructed and problematic nature of these concepts, whilst still sharing the use of them. The area concept, whether it is African, South Asian, East Asian or whatever, remains very useful. It is important to know something about some place. The way I think about the history of other parts of the world outside Africa is very much shaped by my being a historian of Africa.

I have worked with Jane Burbank, who is a historian of Russia who thinks about empire in a quite different way than I do, coming from a different place, and I think that makes collaboration particularly interesting.<sup>18</sup> An important thing for people at the earlier stages of their career to consider is that it really helps to start with your feet on the ground. It is very hard to do research that covers long distances. Certain research has to, but you can actually use micro-historical methods to study macro-historical processes. But what is important is to know something about some place. That place may be in motion and there may be problems in doing research that traces the motion, because the researcher has to move too. But the best argument for area studies is the one that goes back to its early days, namely that one has to know something about some place.

*For you, the level of empire has proven a fruitful unit of study, more than the nation state or globalization or the microstudy?*

Yes, empire works better for me than any of the ones which you just named, but still it poses a limited set of questions. One should not pretend that it is a new framework that is going to replace other frameworks. I came to the study of empire with a couple of new perspectives in mind. One of them quite directly was that I found the analysis of colonialism, colonial studies, very interesting, but it had reached its limits. The colonial unit of study, which posits a strong dichotomy between metropole and colony, has limitations within itself (and this is one of the themes of *Empires in World History*). But it has further limitations in that the spectrum of imperial power itself is much wider than the colonial form.

The construction of colonial empires at the end of the nineteenth century existed in parallel with other forms of empire, such as the Ottoman Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, etc. All of these were coexisting in the nineteenth century and some of them had very long histories. The Ottoman Empire goes back to the fourteenth century, etc. And one doesn't want to narrow the spectrum from the start. And a great deal of very interesting work that has been done is limited in focus on the Western European empires of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Now I think in the last ten years this has changed. There has been a great deal of scholarly interest in different empires. Jane Burbank draws on a lot of this scholarship. One of the very specific moves we made was to emphasize that broader category of empire, broader than the Western European colonial empire, and emphasizing the fact that they coexist. There is an interplay between them; it is not that one is a successor of the other. And there are new forms of empire too, the Nazi, Soviet, and the Japanese, these are all different forms of imperial power. So all of these need to be analysed in relationship to each other.

That said, one has to talk about limitations. Now some argument about the nature of limitations is internal to the discussion on empires. Empires are big but they are finite. They exist in relation to the places that empires try to incorporate, but these push back; and they exist in relationship to other empires, which prevents infinite expansion. And they have all sorts of complications in how you run an enterprise that is big but spread out and has all kinds of counterforces and people who resist in very different ways. So, the logic of empire is about expansion and it is about power, it is about long-distance reach. But it is also about the limitations to all of those.

Then the topic is limited in another sense, in that empire should not be seen as determinate of all long-distance relations. A trading relationship may develop in the context of empire, but it cannot be reduced to the study of empire. Ideas may have imperial circuits, through acculturation or through the movement of people in an imperial context, but ideas also cross imperial lines and some of them may long outlive the empire. Just to take one example, early Islam is very much an imperial project, the caliphates were very much an imperial structure, but you cannot talk of the history of Islam as the history of empire. It transcends that, although it is very much connected to it. Even within the context of the caliphates and the Ottoman Empire, one cannot reduce the history of Islam to the history of empire. Each has to be studied in its own way.

And I think you can say that, too, about a lot of networks. There is a real tension in the way in which you write history between how you write the history of world economic relations and the history of empire. You cannot reduce one to the other, and that goes in both directions. You don't want to subordinate the history of empires to the history of global economy. That doesn't work, and it certainly doesn't work in the opposite direction.

If you are going to have a comprehensive history of processes that connect the world, you have to do this along different lines. One line might tell you a lot, but it is not going to tell you everything that you need to know. I think the empire perspective has told us a lot, but I don't think that one should be under the illusion that this is the law of all historical practice.

*Going back to African history and global parallels and connections—you told us at the beginning that you were inspired by historiography of the American South to study slavery in Eastern Africa. What does African history have to offer for historical practice elsewhere?*

Well, you cannot understand capitalism if you don't understand capitalism in relation to Africa. That is true in relation to all the obstacles that people encounter in relation to capitalist action in Africa, and it is also true in relation to the rise of the slave trade in relation to the rise of the Atlantic economy. So you can't study that without studying Africa. There are a number of other ways in which it comes into different kinds of history. Can you understand the twentieth-century world without understanding the different kinds of politics in colonial situations, of which Africa is an important example, but so, too, are India and Indonesia?

One can come back to an argument which was very important to Leopold Senghor, both in his earlier writings about negritude and in his political writings from the 1950s. If you want to consider the way the world is, you have to consider multiple civilizations, and none of these civilizations exists in isolation.<sup>19</sup> Now, the word civilization is in some ways problematic. But what is not problematic is that history is not the history of isolated populations; it's an interactive history throughout, and all parts of the world are important in that. Nothing is determined by the course of a particular history. In that sense there is no European history, there is no African history; there are Euro-African histories and there are Afro-Asian histories. And if you are going to take that perspective seriously, then one has to study all parts of the world. We can't do original research in all parts of the world, but one has to be sensitive to the fact that history is interactive in all parts of the world. There is no pristine history; one should not see history as something that one possesses. And certainly, the study of Africa helps remind people of that.

*I like your idea that studying capitalism in places that are not considered as being at the centre of capitalism can teach us more about capitalism itself than studying investors in Manhattan. Joan Robinson said that 'the only thing worse than being exploited by capitalism is not being exploited at all.'*

Well, that tells you a lot about African history.

*What stands out from what you have been telling us so far is that you are very good at choosing unfashionable topics, such as colonialism in the 1980s. But another thing that strikes from your Colonialism in Question is that you dislike research that is led by historical 'schools'—for example, people who say that 'we are now all "cultural turn" and we are turning that way.'*

I don't like choosing what I am going to do based on the fact of going against the grain—or following it for that matter. I certainly have been influenced by trends in historical scholarship. I started out very much influenced by scholarship on slavery. Particularly people like Eugene Genovese,<sup>20</sup> David Brion Davis,<sup>21</sup> Emilia Viotti da Costa<sup>22</sup>—people who were very much at the centre of a historical trend when I started out. So being influenced by what other people are doing is perfectly fine, the question is what one does next—whether you want to jump on a bandwagon because it's a bandwagon, or to see where it takes you and to jump off when the time has come to jump off it.

And that's why I don't like the concept of 'cultural turn,' or even 'imperial turn,' although in a way one could easily classify my work as

‘imperial turn,’ because I work on empire. And I think Ann Stoler and I started to write about colonialism a little before other people started to do it, but other people were doing it for reasons that had absolutely nothing to do with Ann and me. They were doing it because it was interesting.

But the idea that everybody should be moving in one direction I find rather frightening.<sup>23</sup> And people complain that the only topics students want to do with regard to French history or British history have to do with empire. There are a lot of interesting topics with regards to French and British history, and if one wants to interrogate what ‘French’ and ‘British’ actually mean, that is quite useful. But one can do that in all sorts of ways.

It is certainly not a good idea for everybody to do everything simultaneously. Because, for example, the notion of a ‘cultural turn’ was a reaction to people going into excess in seeing social and economic history as the type of history everybody should be doing. And then some people said, let’s go beyond the cultural turn. In some ways people were saying, well let’s go back to do the kinds of things that used to be done to excess, but let’s do them again.

Well, let’s do good history, and whether that is cultural, social, economic, or intellectual, those are not particularly interesting categories. There are no reasons to keep turning from one to the other. The only reason why one turns in one direction is because one previously turned in another direction, I think. And this is particularly striking to a scholar of Africa, where our colleagues have worked under considerable constraint both material and political.

Here we are in Western Europe or the United States, where we have an incredible amount of freedom to say what we want to say and do the kinds of research we want to do. We should take advantage of that, and we shouldn’t impose conformity on ourselves as academics. Yet I think that there is a very strong tendency in academia towards conformity, despite the fact that we are not constrained to conform.

*So far we have spoken about your research and writing, but part of your work also involves teaching, in New York and presumably in Africa?*

I’ve done some short teaching in Africa. I have given talks and lectures in Africa, but I have never taught a course. The kind of job I have had was typical of American professors; it involved both researching and teaching, and it did not involve a sharp separation between the two. It is, in a way, a very privileged position, in that it is very fruitful. Being a teacher forces you to think about how you can explain something to people who don’t know anything about the topic. As a researcher you might write things for

the ten people who are closest to what you do in terms of research; as a teacher you can't do that.

The book that Jane Burbank and I did on empires came out of teaching. The course was not a consequence of the book project; the book was a consequence of the course. It is a two-way street and I think that is a fruitful connection. In fact, I like ideas to come from the students. I do not like to lean on students to do particular kinds of projects. When teaching I like to react to what they propose. The structures that exist in some countries of separating the research track from the teaching track is not a very good idea in my opinion.

*In relation to African academia, you were mentioning that the 1970s was an exciting period and you have been going back since, giving talks, etc. Do you think that digitization and globalization of scholarship impacts African academia in a positive way?*

The heyday in the field of African history was certainly in the 1960s and 1970s. There are real strong efforts to bring this back. The organization CODESRIA [Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa] has been trying since the 1980s to do that. It is a difficult struggle, because of funding reasons and also politics. South African universities have become strong and have attracted faculty members from other African countries, but it's an on-going struggle.

Digitization has potential. After all, it is very hard to duplicate a library, while it is not so hard to set up a computer with access to digital resources from elsewhere. It requires the right equipment, but also involves intellectual property rights. The technical side is feasible; the big obstacle is the copyright. Also the owners of the rights of dissemination of publications insist that they get their cut and that others do not get them. It is a real problem that most African libraries have few means. It is for this reason that I support Open Access.

*What are your plans for the future?*

Well I have had two books coming out in 2014. One is this one I have been working on for twelve or thirteen years on citizenship in France and French Africa from 1945 to 1960, and then another one that is a series of lectures that are basically a reflection on Africa and the world. That is the title of the book and also the title of the lectures that I gave at Harvard a few years ago.<sup>24</sup> After that, the next big project I think I will do is a book about the end of empires, with a question mark.

## Notes

- 1 For a report on this conference see C. Stolte and S. Sunderason in *IIAS Newsletter*, spring 2014: <http://www.iias.nl/the-newsletter/article/south-asia-and-long-1930s-appropriations-and-afterlives>.
- 2 His most famous novels are *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) and *Petals of Blood* (1977). He fell into disgrace with the Kenyatta regime after writing the critical play *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (1977). He was detained without trial and his books were forbidden. After his release he taught at various universities in the US.
- 3 Daniel Arap Moi ruled as president between 1978 and 2002. For a history of post-independence Kenya, see Daniel Branch, *Kenya between Hope and Despair, 1963–2011* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).
- 4 G. Kitching, 'Politics, Method and Evidence in the Kenya Debate,' in H. Bernstein and B. Campbell (eds.), *Contradictions of Accumulation in Africa: Studies in Economy and State* (Berkeley: Sage, 1985).
- 5 Frederick Cooper, *F–1925* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980); *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).
- 6 Frederick Cooper, *On the African Waterfront: Urban Disorder and the Transformation of Work in Colonial Mombasa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).
- 7 Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Also in French translation.
- 8 Mamadou Diouf is now Leitner Professor of African Studies at Columbia University.
- 9 Mohammed Mbodj formerly taught at the Université Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar and is now at Manhattanville College in New York.
- 10 Babacar Fall teaches at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, part of the Université Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar.
- 11 Eugene Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and the Society of the Slave South* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1965).
- 12 C. Vann Woodward, *The Origins of the New South, 1877–1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971).
- 13 Sam Davies et al (eds.), *Dock Workers: International Explorations in Comparative Labour History, 1790–1970*. 2 vols. (Farnham: Ashgate, 2000).
- 14 For two interventions into the relationship of capitalism and Africa, done at two different career stages, see 'Africa and the World Economy,' *African*

- Studies Review* 24:2/3 (1981): 1–86, and *Africa in the World: Capitalism, Empire, Nation-State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), chapter 1.
- 15 Ann L. Stoler, *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt, 1870–1979* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).
  - 16 See *American Ethnologist* 16:4 (1989). Contributors were, apart from Ann Stoler and Frederick Cooper, Partha Chatterjee, John L. Comaroff, Randall M. Packard, Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Scot Atran.
  - 17 Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
  - 18 Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History, Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).
  - 19 Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Négritude et Humanisme* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1964). Senghor (1906–2001) was a Senegalese poet, philosopher, writer and president (1960–80).
  - 20 Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974).
  - 21 David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966); *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975).
  - 22 Emilia Viotti da Costa, *The Brazilian Empire: Myths and Histories* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).
  - 23 Such a tendency can be called ‘the conformism of the avant-garde.’ See Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). Also in French translation.
  - 24 Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014; also in French translation), and *Africa in the World* (see above, note 14).

## ‘Being speculative is better than to not do it at all’: Interview with Natalie Zemon Davis

*Jessica Roitman and Karwan Fatah-Black meet Natalie Zemon Davis outside the University Library in Leiden for lunch and an interview. Although Davis is eager to study a Sranan-German dictionary she retrieved from the library the three of them sit down for an engaging conversation on the historian’s craft, its societal relevance and the future of early modern studies. Jessica laments that she discovered what she thought was an incredibly original idea for her dissertation—Sephardic intercultural trade—was already being done by Yale historian Francesca Trivellato.<sup>1</sup>*

That happened to me, too. Some fifty years ago, I wrote an essay on the French *charivari*. At the time I did it, as far as I knew, there was no literature on it. This was partly because *charivari* seemed very folkloric, and to the French, folklore was still associated with the Vichy regime. It seemed to them like a fascist topic, so historians stayed away from it for quite a while after the war. In fact, I found out much later that one of the only articles discussing *charivari* was in a Vichy-sponsored publication called *Études agricoles*. It was actually a good article on rural folklore—ethnographic rather than historical. Anyway, I sent my *charivari* essay to *Past & Present*. This was around 1970, right after 1968, when I had been in Berkeley during all the student uprisings and political action. I got a letter back from E.P. Thompson, whom I had not yet met, but whose work of course I knew, saying: ‘I was absolutely delighted to receive your paper on the Reasons of Misrule. I have myself been working for some time on a short study of “rough music” (our version of *charivari*).’ I didn’t mind. I thought, ‘That’s great!’ And he was doing it in England and I was doing it in France and we had different takes on the subject. But these things happen because there’s something in the air . . .

*The Zeitgeist?*

Yes, if you will. Political events, cultural problems at the time, current styles of action along with the issues being raised in one’s scholarly field—these lead attentive people like yourself and Francesca, or like me and

Thompson to ask the same questions. In our case, you can sort of see the political trajectories at work—the world was being turned upside down around us—though I was maybe more into the New Left than he. But this kind of mutual discovery happens and it's even a good sign.

When I joined the Renaissance Society of America (RSA) in the 1950s, we were a little bitty group. Now there are 4,000 members. They come from all over to the meetings—three thousand people just attended the most recent one in New York. I think it's really important for Renaissance scholars to situate themselves in a non-European space some of the time. Some of the young people are doing this: I went to some very exciting sessions on Christian-Muslim relations—looking at both Latin and Arabic texts and exchanges. And though I didn't get to hear them, the papers on Jewish-Christian relations also seemed to be expanding the very concept of the Renaissance world. But many sessions were on traditional themes being discussed for decades—say, Florentine poetry. Fine—do Florentine poetry! I'm sure these papers were excellent. But at this juncture, don't think about the world as if it were only Florence or only Italy. Young people are doing this now—working on, say, Italy and Africa. But even if you don't *do* Italy and Africa, you can bring a wider mentality to your poetry—and who knows what surprises you might find, even while you're reading the very same texts.

In 2001 I was planning a book with a chapter on the Muslim Leo Africanus, a chapter on Stedman and the slave Joanna, and a chapter on the Suriname Jew David Nassy, all of them examples of people between worlds. Then 9/11 happens. I said to myself: 'I'm just going to do this book on Leo Africanus.' I didn't publish it until 2006 because I had a huge amount of research to do. I did a lot more work with Arabic. I didn't learn to read it, but I learned to recognize the letters and to identify words with a dictionary. I travelled to European libraries. I found manuscripts by him I didn't know existed. That was the first time I had really taken time to work on a non-European. I'm sorry I still have to call it my 'Leo Africanus book.'<sup>2</sup> I tried to recreate him as he was, reinvigorate him as an Arab and a Muslim, give him back his Arab name. But people who don't know Arabic can't say the name al-Wazzan. I probably don't even pronounce it right. Or they won't say it. They just keep calling him 'Leo Africanus'. The purpose of the book was to say, 'No. That's not how he looked at himself. That's how the Christians remade him.' Anyway, people are reading it—the Turkish translation has come out—and I have a couple of wonderful spinoffs from the book that are really quite exciting.

*So we met you outside the University Library on the Leiden University campus. Why were you there? What were you reading?*

Well today I was reading the Sranan–German dictionary created with great care in the late eighteenth century by the missionary Moravian brother Christian Ludwig Schumann. A Dutch doctoral student named André Kramp did a really excellent edition, and I have been waiting to see it. As I said to you when I came out of the library, over the years I have been profiting from Schumann’s Saramacan–German dictionary, which was published almost a century ago. Schumann did this first one with help from the great Saramacan Maroon chief Alabi, who became a Christian under the name Johannes. Language is an avenue into the mental world of the past. Schumann, with Alabi’s help, gave context for the words—words like *kangra*, which is an ordeal Africans used to establish guilt or innocence after someone had been accused of a crime.<sup>3</sup> And now I’ve got Schumann’s Sranan–German dictionary for the other main Creole spoken—with lots more words. Schumann had six or seven Blacks serving as his informants. He doesn’t give their names but he quotes directly from them all the time. ‘We black people say...’ It’s like listening to an eighteenth-century conversation. I’m so happy to have this book—I can’t tell you. I’m going to use it for a talk I’m giving next week on language in Trondheim, Norway. The talk is called ‘Dealing with strangeness: Language and information flow in colonial Suriname.’ I want to look more closely at the creation of these dictionaries—Schumann’s and others. Dictionaries usually come out under one person’s name. But there’s no way that a man like Schumann could find out about these Creole languages without collaborators who speak them. There is a flow of information about language and life, despite the situation of asymmetrical power between them. I mean, some of Schumann’s informants were slaves.

*In preparation for your lecture at the Norwegian Institute of Science and Technology at Trondheim, you started investigating the Sami.*

It turns out that eighteenth century Trondheim was a really important scholarly and religious center, and being so far north, some of the priests got the idea of converting the Sami to Christianity. The first book on the Sami language was written by a missionary from Trondheim—not too different in time from when Schumann was working on his dictionaries in Suriname. And so I’ve added a little section to my lecture on these Sami dictionaries and ethnographies to show where you can see input from the Sami themselves—sometimes even their own names are there. When I’m in Trondheim, I’ll go to the Academy library there, which was founded

in the eighteenth century. I've already ordered some books, including by the first Sami to become a priest. He wrote about the language, too. He converted, but always stayed loyal to his language.

*Is it fair to say that boundary-crossers are a recurring theme in your work?*

I'm working on this manuscript on the four generations of a family in Suriname. I am hoping to have a draft by the end of the year, but as I work I see new issues, new problems I'd like to resolve. It's so hard, to get evidence about individual slaves, about how they thought and felt and made choices when and if they had a chance. It's hard, but I'm stubborn and quite committed to my decision to write about an individual family, rather do a general social study of masters and slaves. A general study is important, for sure... but I want to capture the slave experience in its complexity up close. The struggle for direct evidence has come up occasionally in my earlier books—in *Martin Guerre* and also in the *Leo Africanus* book.<sup>4</sup> For al-Wazzan—that's the real Arabic name of 'Leo Africanus'—I was able to find several manuscripts. But even there were aspects of his life he didn't talk about. He didn't say anything about whether he had a wife or not, or whether he ever had more than one. Just because he was silent, am I not going to broach the subject of marriage? How could I do that? I write about the history of women and gender—it's against my principles not to pose such a question. So you take what clues you have from his writing and collateral evidence from others around him and you make a 'thought experiment.' You speculate and you make it clear you're speculating. But even if you can't resolve the matter, it's important to venture it. Resorting to speculation is better than not asking the question at all.

How do you tell the individual biography of enslaved persons when you don't have a self-narrative? How do you do it? How do you try to construct a life? I'm enjoying it. But, you know, sometimes it's like trying to squeeze water out of a stone.

There are things that I've been looking for years for my history of the Suriname family, such as deeds of manumission. I have an ironic experience, when I turn to the white people in my story—it's really a braided history—since three of the slave women have long intimacies with white men. The minute I start working on these white men, a world of archives and source materials opens up on them individually and their families. The difference between slave and free is so reflected in this disparity in direct sources. It's an experience I should be used to by now. But every time it happens, I chafe at the difference. I say to myself that the extra work I'm doing for the enslaved persons is a rightful act of reparation.

I also have a modern project going on a Jewish Romanian linguist—a man named Lazare Sainéan. Another crosser of boundaries. I first knew his name because he wrote a big book on the language of Rabelais back in the 1920s—still a classic. But then I started working on Glikl, and I was trying to get background in Yiddish, because that’s the language in which she wrote her autobiography.<sup>5</sup> So I’m reading a collection of essays by a Yiddish specialist and I suddenly see an essay entitled ‘Lazare Sainéan’s contribution to Yiddish.’ ‘What?’ I said. ‘What’s he doing here?’ And sure enough, Sainéan had a whole other life as pioneering in the Yiddish and Romanian languages and folklore before he came to France and ended up writing about Rabelais.

Though it may not seem like it, the Leo Africanus book, the Suriname project I’m working on, and the project about the Jewish Romanian linguist have a lot in common. The thematic concern has been to look at what happens when people find themselves in unusual places or are crossing some kind of boundary—a linguistic boundary, or a religious boundary. What happens? Sometimes this is very transgressive. I’m very interested in both the maintaining of separate identities in separate spaces but also in crossovers. That’s a common theme.

*I think we’ve all had wonderful accidents where we’ve come across things that have surprised us, startled us, but also inspired us. What was the most serendipitous discovery that you’ve had?*

Serendipitous? I’ve certainly had that happen, including early along, when I was working on my doctoral thesis on ‘Protestantism and the Printing Workers of Lyon’—a social history approach to the Reformation. This was during the Red Hunt of the 1950s, and my passport had been taken away. So instead of getting to the archives in France, I was working in the rare book libraries in New York and using books published in sixteenth-century Lyon. At the Columbia University Library I came upon a fabulous collection of early modern books on commercial arithmetic and accounting. Looking at the catalogue, I came across a name I knew—during my six months in Lyon before I lost my passport, I had found this man on a list of Protestants. I decided to take a quick look at the book, even though it wasn’t on religion. Sure enough, it turned out be written by the man who had been described as a modest ‘reckonmaster’ on a list of heretical Protestants drawn up by the Catholic authorities of Lyon. But here in a book published only a few years later, he was presenting himself as a ‘noble,’ with a fancy author portrait and Latin poems—and this in a book designed to teach commercial arithmetic to merchants and traders.

Now this may not seem so surprising today, but in the sixteenth century in France, nobles were not supposed to be involved in business, buying and selling. Some of them actually were, but it was considered lowering, and they could lose their status. And here was their teacher presenting himself as a noble. And the book also had unapologetic sections teaching how to calculate interest on loans, even though that was condemned by canon law as ‘usury.’ I thought, ‘this is a surprising text.’

So I put aside my thesis research on the Protestant printers for a while to do a study. Since we were far away from my university at that point, I didn’t have a thesis director to so say ‘Don’t do it.’ I published an essay, one of my earliest, called ‘Sixteenth-Century French Arithmetics on the Business Life.’ I took the whole genre and related it to both the history of business and its validation and to the history and teaching of arithmetic. It was quite interesting and is still useful to people in the field. I’m married to a mathematician and so I had extra fun in writing it.

The Martin Guerre story certainly came as a surprise—a total surprise. I heard about it in 1976 from a wonderful graduate student in Chinese history, who decided to take my seminar at the University of California at Berkeley on ‘Family, kin, and social structure in early modern France.’ She was going to do her dissertation on the history of adoption in China. I said: ‘Why don’t you do your term paper on adoption in early modern France? It’ll give you some ideas for your thesis.’ I sent her to the rare books at the law library, and she came back and said: ‘I came across a book on a criminal case you’ll find very interesting.’ It was Jean de Coras’s book about the Martin Guerre case!<sup>6</sup> She had used it for one sentence on adoption. I read the book and thought, ‘This has got to be a movie!’ I had two interests at that point: one was anthropology, the other was outreach to a larger public through film. And here was this book that fell into my lap—I could use it to make an ethnographic study of peasants and it could be the basis for a great movie. Then when I was trying to contact a film director in France, by good luck I heard about Jean-Claude Carrière and Daniel Vigne, who coincidentally wanted to make a movie on the Martin Guerre story. They asked me to work with them from the start. I helped them with the scenario and tried to make it as plausible as possible—a wonderful experience, I learned so much. But when I saw some of the directions the film was going to take, I realized I had to do a history book as well. This whole thing was serendipity. Completely. Other examples... I got interested in Stedman because I was working on Maria Sibylla Merian in Suriname.<sup>7</sup>

*That was one of our questions. How did you get into Suriname? Or just outside Europe?*

Well... outside Europe. In a way it grew out of the course I had been teaching since 1971 on the history of women in early modern Europe. Right from the start, I knew I was not going to do only European Christian women. A literary friend of mine told me about Glikl, a seventeenth-century Jewish merchant woman, who left us the first major autobiography we have from a Jewish woman, besides being a very important text in the history of Western Yiddish. So I had the students read an English translation of Glikl's autobiography from the beginning. And then I was living in Canada in 1971. I wanted to bring in a person who could connect the students with the Canadian world of women. I came upon Marie de l'Incarnation, who started off as a French artisan, and then became a nun and founded the Ursuline house in Québec to try to convert the aboriginal women to Christianity. She left letters and an autobiography, and I translated some of this into English for the students. Meanwhile feminist scholars were just beginning to produce books on women artists, and I came across Maria Sibylla Merian. She was an artist and an entomologist and she used her skills to represent the world of insects and the plants they ate. And her most important book was on the insects and plants of Suriname. She was a natural for me, and I loved telling the students about her.

I lectured on these women for years in my courses. Then around 1990, I decided to put them together in a book.<sup>8</sup> Up to then, women had had a role in my books—especially, Bertrande, the wife of Martin Guerre—but now I wanted to do a book where women were at the center of the narrative. I wanted to show how varied women's lives could be. The three were all seventeenth-century city women, but they had different occupations and religions. Glikl Hamel, a Jewish merchant who lived in Hamburg and Metz; the Ursuline Marie de l'Incarnation, who went from Tours to Québec—and by the way, my husband has told me she has just been declared a saint—too late for my book! And the German Maria Sibylla Merian, who started off as a Lutheran in Frankfurt, became a radical Lbadist for a time in the Netherlands, and then spent two years in Suriname before coming back to Amsterdam. I loved writing about them, and yet, as I was doing it, I began to think about the non-European women in their lives. Glikl told a moralizing story about a cannibalistic 'savage' woman and her intimacy with a pious shipwrecked Jewish man. And what about those Algonquian and Iroquoian girls and young women whom Marie de l'Incarnation was trying to convert to Christianity? How

were they reacting to her efforts? And what about the Amerindian and African slave women who went into the rainforest to find insects and plants for Merian? Was I going to write a book celebrating the adventures of European women and simply glide over the others? I did what I could to give these other women a voice. So I tried to imagine how the African slave women, with their story-telling Anansi the spider would have looked at Merian's picture of tarantulas in a guava tree.

That book really changed me. It was published in 1995, just before I retired and had more time to go in a new direction. I was already crossing boundaries with those three women. Now I wanted to try to write a book that would be located in a non-European space. I wasn't going to pretend to an expertise I didn't have, but I wanted to situate myself mentally in a place that wasn't just Europe. From then on, even when I'm doing a totally European topic, I try to look at it from a wider point of view—to turn it around, ask what a non-European would make of it.

*You have an abiding interest in people on the margins—women, Jews, Muslims, Protestants in Catholic France—was that a conscious choice?*  
It just happens. That's what I get interested in.

*They find you?*

Yes, they find me! They jump at me out of the sources. That's what happened with al-Wazzan. I knew he was a character. I knew he was unusual, in some ways like Martin Guerre, a sort of impostor. Al-Wazzan had been kidnapped from North Africa by Christian pirates in 1518 and taken to Italy. After a time, he converts and spends the next seven years as a seeming Christian. He learns Italian and Latin well and to write from left to right, and then composes all these books to tell Europeans about the lands and religion he's supposedly left behind. And then he goes back to them. I called the book *Trickster travels: a sixteenth-century Muslim between worlds*. I did not start out thinking of al-Wazzan as a trickster, but I was trying to figure out what patterns of legitimation he had for the role he played for seven years—performing as a Christian while planning one day to go back to Africa and Islam. How did he justify this dissimulation, I was asking myself. And I found out that there's an Arabic genre like the European picaresque and its medieval equivalent called the *maqâma*. It's always written in a characteristic form called 'rhymed prose.' The story is always about a vagabond poet who disguises himself in different ways. A storyteller meets him in all these different places and ends up recognizing him when he starts to recite poems. The vagabond poet gets into scrapes,

but he uses his wits and his tricks to land on his feet. The storyteller recounts all this to his friends. It's a beloved Arabic genre, copied and recopied, and I knew that al-Wazzan had read one of the most famous examples because he refers to it in his writing. There are also fool figures in the North African tradition, and, like the vagabond poet, they use their tricks to truth tell. So I decided to use them to help me to interpret al-Wazzan.

You asked about people on the margins. Al-Wazzan is a kind of marginal figure. He was on the margins of Roman elite life, and he had relations with two learned Jews, who were as marginal as he was. I didn't know anything about this before I started doing research on him. To start off with, I just knew he'd been kidnapped and had written a big book about Africa. But only when I started the research and found other manuscripts did I discover that he had collaborated on an Arabic–Hebrew–Latin dictionary with the physician Jacob Mantino. And then I also found out that in the household of al-Wazzan's Christian godfather, to whom he was teaching Arabic, there was also a Hebrew teacher, who turned out to be a fabulously interesting man. So, given 9/11 and all the Palestine–Israel issues, I was delighted to discover these relationships. Of Jewish background as I am myself, I ran with it. I felt like it was a gift. Thank you! Thank you, al-Wazzan!

*Your new book will be about Joanna?*

Not just Joanna. Four generations in her family.

*But Joanna was the starting point?*

Initially, Joanna and Stedman were the starting point. And I was planning to do something on the son they had together. But then I started reading about Joanna's mother and her twenty-year relationship with Joanna's white father. They had five children together. So I've devoted long chapters to them. Ah... but what about the African generation? The ones who were kidnapped and came to Suriname on a slave boat? Already back in 1996, when I had just started thinking about Joanna, the wonderful Africanist Paul Lovejoy asked me: 'Where was Joanna born?' 'She was born in Suriname,' I answered firmly. But his question remained in the back of my mind in the years when I turned to al-Wazzan and learned so much about the Land of the Blacks (as they called sub-Saharan Africa) during the sixteenth century. Then a few years ago, when I was back to Joanna's family, some young colleagues at Toronto—of course, everyone is young to me—asked me to do a paper for them on the Suriname slaves'

experience of crime and punishment. And to do that, I realized I had to look at the memories of African crime and punishment that the slaves had brought over with them across the Atlantic. Once I saw how important those memories were in shaping Suriname ways of living, I realized I really must try to do it for Joanna's family, no matter how hard it was, figure who her grandparents were and where in Africa they came from—what gods and customs they brought with them. I was able to get strong evidence for Joanna's African grandfather. I'm OK there. It's much more speculative for Joanna's grandmother. But I think I've got the right person. A very interesting woman—another gift from the past.

The narrative of the book is hard to construct because I'm trying to show lots of cultural entanglements, especially in relations between black and white, slave and free. It turns out that three of the slave women had relations of some duration with white men. These are delicate to interpret. Today, some people simply condemn them, seeing the women as either forced into these relations or as 'sell-outs.' But if you look into the eighteenth-century evidence, it's more complicated, more interesting, even more poignant than that. I'm trying to tell the story the way Joanna and her family saw it.

*In the Slaves on Screen, you talk about movies and how they're able to reach a far larger audience than historians mostly reach.<sup>9</sup>*

In *Slaves on Screen*, I concentrated on films about forms of slave resistance—*Spartacus*, *Burn* and *The Last Supper* (both great films about the Caribbean), and *Amistad* and *Beloved*. Today there are important new movies which are bringing the story of slavery to even larger audiences, films like *Twelve Years a Slave*. Many people have said they never realized how brutal a slave regime could be until they saw that movie. I went to the premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival with Henry Louis Gates, who heads the W. E. B. Dubois Center at Harvard and was one of the historians who read the script for director Steve McQueen. It was packed, really exciting. I wrote two reviews of the film, one for the African-American online daily *The Root* and the other for a round table in *Civil War History*, where I was the only Caribbeanist and the only one who had ever actually worked on a film. Some of the historians were critical because McQueen had done nothing with slave resistance. All you see in the movie is Solomon Northup's individual struggle to get back his liberty and Patsey's desire to get away from the horrid sexual abuse of her master by suicide—though she doesn't end up doing it. It's true that there are accounts of slave uprisings in the book Northup published

after he was restored to freedom, though he himself did not participate in them. But that's not the kind of movie McQueen wanted to make. He wanted to follow in a slave context the themes from his earlier films—on the individual, his body, his moral struggles. So the movie focuses on Northup, how he reacts to punishment and how he gradually realizes that, free-born though he was, he was not that different from those around him born into slavery. This is so beautifully shown in the acting of Chiwetel Ejiofor. I thought McQueen missed a few points from Northup's books that would have strengthened his own focus on the individual's moral struggle. I mean Northup was actually black driver on his plantation for eight years. Some of the ways he and the other slaves devised to get around his whip would have made great scenes. But still, it's a powerful film. I felt that one of the reasons McQueen decided to use Northup's book for a movie was not only that he was descended from West Indian slaves, but also that he lives in The Netherlands, where much public attention was finally—belatedly—being given to the history of slavery in the Dutch colonies.

*It seems to be a commonplace among historians that we should stay away from community debates and the opinions of the public about what history is. How do you feel about that?*

What would be an example of staying away from a debate?

*Well, for example, in the Netherlands, the reparations debate and the debate about slavery and how it connects to the present.*

OK. I'm glad you mentioned that. I mentioned this question at the end of my review of the movie in *The Root*. The historian has to understand the period he or she is dealing with. You have to work within it; you look at the judgments within the frame of the time—what were the people who lived then accepting or rejecting? What were *their* voices of criticism? But that doesn't mean you're inattentive to the issues in your own time, and how the past may help you understand contemporary struggles. Wherever you come down on the question, the subject of reparations is a great one for debate—it really opens up a lot of important perspectives. In the eighteenth century, the vast majority of people in many parts of the globe accepted and practiced forms of enslavement. The kidnapping of Africans and the Atlantic slave boats, including those of the Dutch West India Company, were particularly ghastly—with huge loss of life—but, as the Martinique movie *Passage du Milieu* and other African movies and African historians have pointed out, African rulers and traders were

complicit with and benefitted from the dreadful European trade. What kind of reparations can the twenty-first century best make for these cruelties and set-backs of the past? And how would you figure out whom to compensate and how much to give? On the economic side, the wealthy countries should simply give to African countries—and forgive their existing debts—not only because of the damage wrought by imperialism, but because of inequities and racism in our own day. And the aid should not be benefitting already rich African elites. For reparations specifically for slavery, I like the approach of Ruth Simmons, the recent president of Brown University and the descendant of American slaves. It turns out that Brown University was founded in the eighteenth century partly with money from the slave trade. So Simmons founded an Institute for the study of slavery and the history of abolition at Brown University, and set up fellowships for young people from the Caribbean to come to Brown. Historians can certainly be helpful in the current debates.

*One of the staple Itinerario questions is how did you become a historian? What attracted you to history? We wanted to know what attracted you to the early modern period?*

I was already attracted to it an undergraduate at Smith. I thought it was a wonderful period. I think it had to do with the origins of modernity, which was so interesting to me. Now I have a different take on it, because ‘modernity’ gets you into stage theory—which brings so many problems. But I was making these decisions in the late 1940s early 1950s. I was engaged in politics and so I wanted to think about the origins of modern capitalism and the modern ethos, modern values. And also it was the sixteenth century and I thought it was such a wonderful century. It was such an inventive period. Shakespeare and Rabelais lived then. I would read about these printing workers and their strikes in the sixteenth century and at the same time I’m caring about strikers in the twentieth century—handing out pamphlets for them and such. I was so interested. I came across these fabulous cases concerning them. Many of the Protestant printing workers fled from Lyon to Geneva, where they got into huge amounts of trouble for the clandestine trade union they were organizing. They were carrying this on from their days in France, and it wasn’t going to be allowed. The trial records revealed the secrets they had—their rules, their secret ceremony, their secret nicknames, their passwords. I think if I met one today I could get into their union. I could do the secret handshake. So I published one of my earliest articles about that—I called it ‘A trade union in sixteenth-century France.’ They didn’t use that term—

they called it a ‘Company’—the French called it a *compagnonnage*. But it was the origin of modern trade unions. So I guess it was the sense of origins that got me excited about the early modern period—I thought of it as the beginning of so many modern things. It was also a period of much violence, but it wasn’t till later that I turned to the violence of the Reformation. At the start, I was caught by the excitement of the new movement. At the time, back in the 1950s, I would have called it ‘progressive’. This wasn’t just because of my political leanings, it was also the language of the time, even though the Protestants thought they were restoring the church to what Christ had wanted in the beginning. I have long since stopped using that as a descriptive term, but even though I’m now working on the eighteenth century and afterward, I still think of the sixteenth century as endlessly interesting. Just endlessly interesting.

*You’ve mentioned that your outlook on the early modern period has changed. Where do you think this field of early modern studies is going? It’s not looking for the origins of the modern world. It’s not looking for change.*

By the mid-1960s, I became dissatisfied with the term ‘early modern’ because it went along with the theories of ‘modernization’ that emerged after World War II. And these carried with them a picture of stages of development by a western model, and other parts of the world had to catch up and follow it. ‘First the West, then the rest.’ Already when I was studying working people and artisans, I had wondered about this—the Reformation did not quite give them their due, and early capitalism had its costs for them. And then when I started to work on women, I realized that the stages of change were very irregular. Catholicism and Protestantism couldn’t just be put on some simple ladder of improvement or backwardness. They had different meanings and problems for women; and there were changes in both religions. There was no single ‘right path’ to the future. No single definition of ‘modernity.’ Another thing about a Western-defined ‘early modern’ as a category or chronology—it doesn’t fit with the world of Islam, it doesn’t fit with the chronologies or periods in Asia. If we want to think of history in different parts of the world, either we need a new terminology or we have to redefine our terms so they can apply much more widely. And the best way to do that is in collaboration with historians from other parts of the world. What do you all think?

*One scholar I know in America uses ‘First global age,’ but, of course, that has problems as well. It can be clunky.*

I have questions about that, too. And global is becoming a publisher’s cliché. It makes it sound as though ‘global connection’ is the most important thing, but much of life in the past is carried on locally. To me, being conscious of the larger world historically does *not* mean you’re just looking at trade connections or travel or diasporas or encounters or maps and the like, important though they are. It means you think of different ways that people live and change in different places during the same time period. You don’t assume that only one place is important. You think comparatively. I tried an experiment in a paper I wrote in the wake of publishing about Marie de l’Incarnation. I called it ‘European women, Iroquoian women.’ I tried to think of interesting parallels between certain processes of a cultural kind that affected women and that were operating in both the Canadian forest and the European city at the same time. Oratory was a male preserve in Europe—public speech. Among the indigenous people along the St. Lawrence River, oratory was a male preserve as well. Women were very active in these tribes, but not in public speaking and treaty making. They prepared the wampum belts for the treaties, but didn’t voice them. I wondered whether the interest of a few of these women in Catholicism was to have a public voice. Marie de l’Incarnation describes one of them as a woman preaching in her long house. And Katherine Tekakwitha did the same thing. You see something similar with European women in Catholic and Protestant movements. Of course, in both places the men tried to shut them up. You can also do diplomatic history which shows parallels in treaty formation. The Iroquoian league is created in treaties at the same time as certain European formations are made. The Maroons in Suriname and Jamaica. These should be looked at as equivalent forms of diplomatic history. I think you can talk about these processes comparatively, extend the same respect to them as historical events as you would to those going on in Europe. I think that there are ways in our historical practice that we can make it expansive and inclusive. Even if we don’t have the chronological terminology that quite fits, we are making ourselves be part of the same world.

*Without reducing it to a word game.*

Yes.

## Notes

- 1 Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).
- 2 Davis, *Trickster travels: a sixteenth-century Muslim between worlds* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006).
- 3 Davis, 'Judges, Masters and Diviners: slaves' experience of criminal justice in colonial Suriname.' *Law and history review* 29:4 (2011): 925–84: 957.
- 4 Davis, *The return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).
- 5 Glikl bas Judah Leib (Hamburg 1646, Metz, 17 September 1724), also known as Glückel von Hameln, or Glikl Hamel, was a Jewish-German businesswoman. Natalie Zemon Davis wrote about her extensively in Davis, *Women on the margins: three seventeenth-century lives* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).
- 6 Jean de Coras, also called Corasius (1515–1572) was a French jurist. In 1552, Coras became a member of the Toulouse parliament and participated in the famous trial of the man claiming to be Martin Guerre, of which he wrote the best-known record, *Arrest Memorable du Parlement de Tolose* (1560).
- 7 John Gabriel Stedman (1744, 7 March 1797) a Scottish–Dutch soldier who wrote *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796) and who had a relationship with the slave woman Joanna. Natalie Zemon Davis refers here to the entomologist Maria Sibylla Merian, who went to Suriname in 1699 to 1701 and was one of the figures in her *Women on the Margins*.
- 8 Davis, *Women on the margins: three seventeenth-century lives*.
- 9 Davis, *Slaves on Screen* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).



## Map-Making in World History: Interview with Kären Wigen

*This interview took place at Harvard University, where Kären Wigen, the Frances and Charles Field Professor in History of Stanford University, gave the 2015 Reischauer Lectures. This year's theme was 'Where in the World? Map-Making at the Asia-Pacific Margin, 1600–1900.' Carolien Stolte and Rachel Koroloff interviewed Professor Wigen to the tunes of Persian music at the Kolbeh of Kabob restaurant on Cambridge Street.*

*How did you come to work on Japan?*

I grew up in the Midwest, in Ohio, so it was certainly not an automatic thing. No one in my environment knew much about East Asia, or went to East Asia. But my father was a physicist and when I was 13, he got an invitation to spend half a year in Japan, and decided that we were going. So he took his wife and three daughters and spent six months on the outskirts of Kobe. My sisters and I went to a Canadian school where we studied Japanese, and that was the beginning of my introduction to Japan. I turned 14 the day we arrived. It was so romantic in my mind—some strange Japanese man walked up to me in the train station and handed me a flower. Somehow Japan just resonated with me. You two will know what I mean—we have all chosen places to study through various processes. It is still somewhat mysterious to me how that happens exactly. I think that in my case the sober, melancholy aesthetic of Japan is what pulled me in. It is a very quiet, reflective mood that is celebrated and condoned, and which has matured within Japanese poetry, arts, tea ceremony, gardens and so on. I think that Americans generally do appreciate these things in middle age, but in the teenage American culture of the 1970s there was no space for that. It was brash and loud: we were supposed to wear smiley faces and fluorescent colors. So it was a revelation that there was a place in the world where you can be quiet and even sad, and that this mood was considered to be the wellspring of Japanese poetry.

*How did this move beyond your teenage years?*

I started studying Japanese seriously, and it never really let go of me. I went back to Japan in my senior year of high school. I was only 16—I lived with a Japanese family and went to a Japanese high school. I was quite in over my head, but the one subject for which I needed credits in order to graduate from my high school in time back home, aside from PE, was history! So that became the subject I studied, even though I did not particularly care about history at the time. I loved math, I loved chemistry, and I loved music. I had never paid any attention to social studies at all. But I took this class with a very gifted young teacher. He was from a particular generation of pacifist social activists, and he instilled an appreciation of the hardships of the Japanese peasantry. He made history come alive for me.

*How was history taught in Japan at the time?*

They had just started on the Tokugawa period when I got there. I had no idea what ‘Tokugawa’ meant—I didn’t know the Japanese equivalent of George Washington. I sat in the heat of July in Osaka, poring over dictionaries, trying to make sense of the first pages of the textbook that we were to start reading in school that fall. In hindsight, it would have been smarter to ask for a children’s history book with glosses and pictures and simple stories. My fellow students had of course had years with such books before they hit the one we were using. But it just didn’t occur to me, or to my host family, that it might have been helpful. So it took me a long time to get oriented, but there was something about that experience of slow reading that... who knows?

*Is that the adventurous approach to history that you took back with you to the US?*

I came back to the States, and became an undergraduate at the University of Michigan. I majored in Japanese, but soon discovered that Japanese language becomes Japanese literature at some point, after you have taken a number of years of instruction in it. But literature never felt quite right to me, so I kept veering towards history classes. And then, towards the end of my undergraduate years, I discovered geography. Michigan was one of those universities that still had a vibrant geography department at the time. It closed a few years later.

*What did a geography perspective contribute to your training?*

We were shown—and I will never forget this—an aerial photograph of a suburban cul-de-sac. It was presented to us as an analogy to the capillaries

in the human body. The cul-de-sac was the endpoint of the circulatory system: it was where the oxygen was being delivered. The heart was driving and bringing people their supplies. On the map, it was all laid out—this is where people rest, this is where they eat, and this is where the trash comes out. It was an aerial view of how our society is put together. I found it so compelling at the time. Without even really knowing it, you are following a muse, seeing pieces of a puzzle that is not yet put together. This was one of those pieces. So I graduated from college with a degree in Japanese language and literature, an advanced understanding of Japanese, a beginning exposure to geography, a real interest in history, and no idea what to do.

*So what was the next step?*

I worked in the original Borders Bookstore before it franchised. I saved up just enough money to go hitchhiking in Japan the following summer. I had received a small translation prize for my honors thesis, which was a translation of a Japanese novella. The prize was 1,000 dollars, and I basically lived off that for a whole summer. It was embarrassing, really. I mooched shamelessly, slept on people's floors, hitched rides, and rode night trains. But I had a great time. I worked at an organic dairy farm, and I talked to all kinds of activists trying to figure out the biggest question I had at the time: if you are a moral person in this polluted capitalist-industrialist environment, what can you do? How do you contribute? What could an outsider, an American, possibly do? But by the end of the summer this question had shifted. It had turned into: where can I go to really, fully master Japanese and learn something useful? Otherwise, it just didn't make any sense to me to try and plug into the Japanese world. I knew I had to be able to read and understand more than I did. So I started looking for graduate schools. I came back from Japan somehow convinced that this was the next step.

*And you ended up applying to geography programs.*

I liked geography because it was earthy in the most literal way. I had taken a course in economics as an undergraduate. I don't know if either of you ever did that, but I found it an eye-opening experience, although perhaps not in the way you would expect. I walked up to the professor about halfway through the course, because I was concerned about the energy crisis. I mean, just imagine the Detroit environment of the late 1970s. There had been oil shocks, serious competition from Japan, and the auto industry was starting to collapse. So I asked him how one deals

with the energy shortage as an economist. And he looked at me with great surprise and said, well, as long as the supply curve and the demand curve are allowed to meet at the natural price, there is no shortage. I more or less just turned around and walked away, and decided that economics had nothing to offer me. I thought, if that is the limit of our horizon and vision—the price as it is today—you take the future out of the equation. Burn it up, burn through it, it doesn't matter. Geography, by contrast, was a very different world. It tackled similar questions but approached them differently, and approached them in a way I had not encountered elsewhere. And the people were fascinating—telling stories of walking through the jungle on fieldwork, of learning new languages, but mostly of having a holistic view of how the world is put together.

*Is there perhaps also something about the perspective of geography that allows for a 'larger,' or at least a transnational, approach to history? You were given different tools than most. Did it help you to develop a perspective that was not confined to particular areas or timeframes?*

That is a really good question, and one I have not thought about in quite those terms. The one thing that was consistent for me through my very eclectic training was Japanese—all the way from the age of 13, all the way through college, and into graduate school. It stayed with me through shifts from literature into geography, and eventually into history. Japanese was my language. But I do think you are onto something. Historians are anchored by their archives. And archives, for better or worse, are often national. They were created by states, and are preserved by states. They are traditional institutions. But the geographers I trained with at Berkeley included men like Jim Parsons, the last of an earlier generation with an old-school field orientation. In their view, your working materials include not only texts and interviews, but everything you can see with your eyes. Parsons, the senior professor who taught the field methodology course, had a background in journalism. He and his friends occasionally challenged each other: to pick a spot on the map, fly there for one weekend and come home with a story, with material for an article. We used to jokingly call it 'lunch-stop geography.' But there was something to it. They pressed us to realize how much we could learn by being really attuned to the environment around us, by asking sharp questions about the economy, and by being fearless about driving down dirt paths if that is where we needed to go ... it was really quite an experience. Mr. Parsons' philosophy was, go in with your camera, smile at whoever you see, and retreat if you are unwelcome. There was a sense that the archive extends outdoors, that it

includes material artifacts, living plants, built environments and patterns that you can study at many different scales. You can walk through them, drive through them, study them on aerial photos and maps, or talk to the people living in them. As long as you have one key: the relevant language. As long as you have the right language for where you are going, the field geographer's archive is open and public in the most fundamental sense.

*That must have helped to move your scholarship in a broader, more encompassing direction.*

In that sense you are right—I could not have skipped that formative period. And my timing was very fortunate. I had a historian of the first order on my Ph.D. committee at Berkeley, Thomas Smith, who had written a brilliant book on the agrarian origins of modern Japan.<sup>1</sup> He was of the generation who had been trained to work in Japan during the Allied Occupation. Having someone like that vouch for me when I entered the job market was invaluable. But also, I finished my dissertation in 1990 right as Japan was peaking. The Japanese real estate bubble had actually burst in 1989, but I don't think people knew that when they were funding academic positions. Interest in Japan was at an all-time high in the United States—it was probably similar to being a Russian historian entering the field in the 1950s, with the Cold War just starting, leading to a voracious academic interest in this powerful and potentially dangerous country. I still have notes in a folder somewhere of my first lecture in modern Japanese history. It includes a graph showing that if the Japanese economy would continue growing at its current rate, it would surpass the United States' in another ten years or so. That is what it looked like at the time. What really happened, of course, was that Japan plunged into a recession that it still has not come out of.

*But meanwhile you had a job. What was Duke University like at that time?*

The timing was fortuitous in more ways than one. Around the time I started at Duke, the spatial turn was taking hold. I was a young professional in the first years of my career, and Duke was a hotbed of social theory and cultural studies. It exposed me in a very bracing way to a lot of new questions about epistemology. Critiquing metageography was a project that was conceived there for good reason, because people were very boldly tackling other big received notions—they were confronting orientalism, 'mediterraneanising' the academy by connecting disciplines and areas... it generally was a time of excitedly unpacking inherited wisdom in a cultural and spatial vein. Spatial thinking started to be appealing to a lot

of people—and I had just come out of a geography department! So really, I had been reading spatial theory just a few years ahead of other people. I was in a perfect position to jump on that train.

*Was this the start of the Myth of Continents?*<sup>2</sup>

That is hard to say, but it was certainly a great environment in which to continue the conversation about metageography. Right after we published the *Myth of Continents*, there was a call issued by the Ford Foundation for innovative proposals to ‘revitalize area studies.’ The Ford Foundation, analysts now say, was suffering from donor fatigue after funding foreign languages and regional concentrations for many years through the Cold War. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall, it was less compelling to channel grants toward centers designed to teach about world regions that had been constructed along Cold War lines. Area studies centers had turned into impressive institutions of higher learning that had an amazing ability to produce scholars who knew a great deal about some place in the world, but they were very expensive to run. All that language training is resource-intensive, and the Ford Foundation in particular had provided a lot of funding to make it happen. So under the rhetorical umbrella of looking for new ideas and innovative approaches for redesigning area studies, they put out a call for proposals.<sup>3</sup> Only one proposal was allowed to go forward from each campus, so there had to be a campus selection committee. All campuses in the United States could apply, and they were going to fund around thirty proposals for two years, and that pool could reapply for an additional three years. Martin [Lewis] and I submitted a proposal at Duke that managed to survive through all those hoops. Our idea was simple: oceans connect. As I metaphorically put it, area studies is like a dinner party, and most of us we have been sitting at the same table for decades, talking to other people over our shared interest in some continentally based region. But what if we all turned our chairs the other way? What if, for instance, a Japan scholar like me started talking to the Latin Americanists, who know something about the Pacific? Like them, I also knew something about the Pacific. There was this large body of water between us, but what if we rearranged the map so we could talk across that ocean? It did not take massive new resources to start those conversations—all we needed in the short run, really, was what our administrators liked to call ‘tea and cookies’ money, enough to pay for some dinners and speakers. It worked; people did come together around novel zones like the Mediterranean, the Pacific basin, or the inland seas of Eurasia. In the last case, we had a group of politically

minded people interested in questions around the Aral and Caspian seas. We also had a very vibrant group working on the Atlantic. This was a fascinating experience and interesting training ground for me in a lot of ways.

*Is this project what made you into a world historian?*

Over the course of this five-year project, I learned that who shows up when you offer tea and cookies, as well as who among the faculty are on board with the initiative, determines what kind of conversation you have. For the Atlantic, there were a lot of anthropologists and people from the English department who were interested in circum-Atlantic performance, the black Atlantic, and the history of slavery. That monstrous event, the slave trade, set in motion a massive migration across the Atlantic that truly tied all the continents together. The forced movement of Africans out of their homeland, and their subsequent contributions to music and food and art and the economy, had reverberations all the way around the region. The legacy of their presence is as vast as the crimes committed against them. This has left incredibly rich material for the anthropologist, the student of literature and the historian, so what happened in the Atlantic group was really interesting to me. Their cultural history approach was very substantive. The Mediterranean group brought together a subtly different group, including classicists and literary people with a strong postmodern bent. They read poetry and critical theory, and talked about mediterraneanizing knowledge, so that group kind of spun out in a different direction. The Pacific, interestingly, was in some ways the hardest group to keep together. And it was only then that I realized that while we may work on countries around the Pacific Rim, few of us at that time really faced outward across the Pacific in our thinking or our research. And it is not easy to do so, either.

*You said in your Reischauer lectures that the Pacific is still in the process of being discovered.*

Yes! One of the things I suggested that the Pacific group read in the first year was a then new historical atlas of the Pacific by Colin McEvedy.<sup>4</sup> Do you know his atlases? They are a little dated now, but there is nothing like them. McEvedy traced the migrations of peoples and the rise and fall of states in very clear, simple color schemes. He made four atlases for Europe and the Mediterranean region, focusing on ancient, medieval, early modern and modern history, all in great detail and very fine time slices. After finishing this series centered on the Mediterranean, he decided to

try his hand at a historical atlas centered on the Pacific. It was one of the few works out there at the time. But some of the people in the group rightly pointed out that nobody who lived there in the 1500s or 1600s had that Pacific orientation. To them, the Pacific did not exist except as an imposed framework. They considered it imperial knowledge construction, an imposed history. And I thought, yes, you are right—but we also need to try on that framework, as historians, if we want to know what was going on! We do need to plot the migration of peoples from East Asia. If you look at McEvedy's population distribution map for 1500, on the eve of the Pacific region being knitted together, 90 percent of the people are on the Asian side. The imbalance is so dramatic. That side has peopled the Pacific Rim. So reading McEvedy and others exposed me to empirical material I had never been exposed to. But learning the reactions of this critical group of scholars, hearing why they thought that was an inadequate framework, was likewise unforgettable. And I think all of that represented a kind of working-out of some of the ideas we had posed in the *Myth of Continents*.

*Did you write the book in order to get more regional specialists to 'turn their chairs'?*

Part of what we were saying with the book, was: 'Look, let's treat geographical constructs as critically as anything else. As academics, we have all been trained to subject our texts to critical analysis. Interrogating social concepts has become ingrained in the DNA of the social sciences. In history, we teach students to think critically about the veracity, the truth-claims, and the different interests behind our documents. We know how to do these kinds of operations. Now we need to do that with our mental maps as well.' Maps are the tools with which we think about the world, but we do not often focus on their categories. They are so readily at hand that we simply do not turn that lens onto them. I think Martin was really writing a manifesto in the first chapter when he said that big geography is not taken seriously as a scholarly endeavor. On many campuses, the teaching of world geography is an assignment nobody wants—it is generally the course given to the most junior faculty member, because 'Geography 101' is considered rudimentary. But if you interrogate the canon as you teach it, really pertinent questions arise: why do we teach the world in these regional categories? Do they cohere? How did these regions (the areas of area studies) come into being? Basically, we wanted to open a new terrain for this kind of critical project—one that was already familiar to people in history, among other fields. Interestingly, the response to the book has been warmer from historians than it was from geographers. It

still gets assigned a lot—people use chapters from the book in their history courses because it still strikes a chord, creates a teaching moment.

*What about the reception from critical geographers or historical geographers? One would imagine that they would be more comfortable with this sort of critique.*

I imagine so, and they may well have been. But Martin and I were institutionally separated from geography by then. Partly for social and institutional reasons, and partly for intellectual reasons, *The Myth of Continents* primarily opened doors to further conversations with historians. I was invited to participate in Jerry Bentley's and Renate Bridenthal's AHA Conference, 'Interactions: Regional Studies, Global Processes, and Historical Analysis,' held at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, in March 2001, which in turn opened the door to a subsequent workshop on Seascapes.<sup>5</sup> And then they asked me to co-edit the volume that came out of the Seascapes project, which I felt was an amazing opportunity.<sup>6</sup> All those things were a direct result of writing *The Myth of Continents*.

*Is this also how the AHR Forum Oceans of History came into being?*

Well, when I served on the editorial board of the *American Historical Review*, the editor encouraged all of us to brainstorm for issues the AHR could run a forum on. And I offered that oceans were emerging as an interesting new locus for history, and that we should do a forum on ocean history. It took a few years to pull it together, but we ended up with ambitious essays surveying and commenting on quite different developments in the fields of Mediterranean, Atlantic and Pacific history, as well as a thoughtful response.<sup>7</sup> I am still very proud of that issue, and it came at a great time.

*We find that young scholars in the humanities are often warned against doing collaborative work as something that can hurt one's career track. Your experience seems to have been quite different.*

For me it has been very valuable. Martin had built up an empirical understanding of world history that is somewhat unusual in the American academy. As scholars, we are usually not generalists—we are trained to specialize, and we are rewarded for specializing. But Martin wanted to do something different. He came to me one day and said: 'Let's write this book. Let's be daring enough to do a critique of metageography.' My initial reaction was: you must be kidding—you want to write a history of the universe? I mean, how much bigger can you get? And I was a geographer

of Japan who had recently started teaching at a history department and had a new baby. But we were operating in a larger environment of postmodernism, which may have emboldened us. I had area knowledge and an interest in maps, and Martin had world history knowledge and vision. And had we not worked together on this, a lot of other things might not have happened. I have since done a fair amount of collaborative work with other people and I really value it. You learn so much. In conversation, but also in writing together—you have to grapple with other people's epistemologies, training and style. It really is demanding, and for the same reasons it can be deeply rewarding intellectually. But you are right that the profession (at least in the humanities) does not reward collaborative work in the same way that it does single-author scholarship. I am well aware that encouraging young people who do not have tenure yet to do collaborative work is risky, because we do not yet have the metrics and mechanisms for recognizing it. But as more and more young scholars do fascinating collaborative work, even more conservative institutions will have to acknowledge this at some point, or they are going to lose a lot of dynamism. It is true that many universities will not promote you on the basis of a co-authored book. But you know what? *The Myth of Continents* has had ten times the readership and twenty times the impact of anything else I have done.

*Could you tell us a little more about your last book, A Malleable Map?*

The subtitle is 'Geographies of Restoration in Central Japan, 1600–1912.'<sup>8</sup> It explores some of the ways in which all kinds of people across Japan, first under the Tokugawa and then during the Meiji period, began to restore the provinces as meaningful units of local identity and, ultimately, of top-down administration. The provinces were created in the seventh century as part of a central government that Japan tried to build on the model of the Chinese state—which was at that point already a massive and long-lived imperium. They had tried to import that blueprint and overlay it on what was basically a clan-driven society, and it never really quite took hold. Different warrior clans colonized the remains of this central government for centuries in shifting configurations. But the idea of a unified state—and the map of its sixty provinces—persisted. Beginning with the unifiers of the early modern era, and accelerating in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, rural thinkers and policy makers turned back that old model. The term 'restoration' has gone out of favor, but I try to rehabilitate it because it captures an important dimension of people's thinking at the time. Not everyone, but some really looked back to the Tang dynasty

ideal. They even restored Chinese titles and wore Chinese robes for a brief period in early Meiji. As the new regime progressed, much of this was discarded pretty quickly, but just as European empires styled themselves after the Roman Empire, so the Japanese at the dawn of the Meiji era styled themselves after the classic empires of East Asia. In that connection, I have become curious about the reception of European classics in Asia, wondering whether an awareness of the extent to which Americans and Europeans modeled themselves after the Roman Empire in the nineteenth century played any role in Meiji Japan. I mean, look at the neo-classical revival in architecture, in fashionable clothing, in statuary ... Europeans and Americans alike took their classical models pretty seriously. There is a wonderful book called *Imperial San Francisco*, which chronicles how the founding families of San Francisco imagined their city as the new Rome.<sup>9</sup> Rome had silver mines, they had gold mines. Rome had aqueducts, they had aqueducts. Rome had the Mediterranean, they had the Pacific. This was deeply ingrained in their world-view, and it shaped their actions on the world stage. I guess I saw traces of a similar spirit in Japan, so *The Malleable Map* tackles a long history of rehabilitating an ancient map for modern purposes.

*And what about the forthcoming project, Cartographic Japan?*<sup>20</sup>

I'm so glad you asked. This is a co-edited collection, modeled on a wonderful recent book entitled *Mapping Latin America*.<sup>11</sup> *Mapping Latin America* is a collection of short essays aimed at students and the general public. Each essay, basically, is a close reading of one map. The editors had the idea of reproducing the chosen maps on a pretty big scale—it is an eight by eleven inch book—and then calling upon a variety of experts from all kinds of fields who have an interest in maps. The essays are great. They make old maps, which may be beautiful but puzzling, accessible and legible. As soon as I saw it, I thought: the Japan field needs this. But the challenge for making Japanese maps legible is very high. First of all, we cannot expect to have a readership that reads Japanese, whereas with Spanish you can expect at least some. But we have a treasure trove of material. And there are a lot of talented scholars who write about maps for specialized journals. We wanted to bring these people together and ask them each to explain one favorite map. These turned out to run the gamut from the 1580s all the way to the recent tsunami of 2011—there is a lot of interest in disaster mapping. We have fifty contributors and fifty-eight maps. Maybe I am overly enthusiastic about this project—we will see what the reception is next year—but I am very excited about this book. Many

people my age, at this stage of their careers, are writing textbooks, so there are great textbooks out there. I thought it would be good to have a map reader to go with them. Teachers in the field know that there are many digital maps available, but they don't always know what to do with them. It takes concerted effort to puzzle out these images. So the short essays in *Cartographic Japan* may be quick to read, but they were not simple to write—people have really taken time to figure out the back-story of a particular map, and it has been great to harvest that effort. Our Japanese co-editor, Fumiko Sugimoto, is a spectacular and learned reader of maps, and was able to bring her network of Japanese scholars into the project. They make up about a third of the book. Then there is myself, based on the West Coast, with a Tokugawa-centered history network. The third co-editor, Cary Karacas, is a young geographer based on the East Coast who works on wartime mapping. And the fourth member of the team was our research assistant, Sayoko Sakakibara, a recent Ph.D. whose deep knowledge, technical wizardry, and fluency in English and Japanese was critical to making this kind of transnational project possible. Not a few of the insights I have shared in the Reischauer lectures over the last few days have come out of this project.

*We can imagine that a work like that would be useful regardless of national or regional focus, because it can be hard to fully read a map. Many historians lack a cartographical lexicon. You have to know what to look for, and it is hard to do that responsibly. To have a volume of fifty scholars, with fifty different voices explaining their way of reading maps, their visual and spatial analysis, would be interesting on that level alone.*

Part of reading maps is learning how to put them into context. And because we are historians, we bring knowledge to a map and have an idea of which questions to ask. We have an idea of what a map might have meant to the people who made it, and the people who read it. But I think in metaphors, so I will leave you with one. There are people whose job it is to detect ingredients in liqueurs and perfumes, whose job it is to figure out what particular blend it is, what secret ingredients make up a particular taste or smell—professional sniffers. They say they do this by having a checklist in their minds of things to smell for. You go through once, looking for clove. And then you clear your nose and go through another time, looking for nutmeg, or something else. Something analogous to that is a good basic strategy for reading maps. It wasn't until I started creating a checklist of things to look for that it occurred to me that not all map-makers put labels on the oceans. That is where a large part of my 'Picturing

the Pacific' lecture came from in the Reischauer series—the different ways in which mapmakers in East Asia configured sea-space. I tried something similar to figure out how different mapmaking traditions grappled with the European continental scheme, and the most challenging one of all has been to come up with a list of things to 'sniff' for with historical cartography. In all these projects, as well as in teaching, it turns out you can discover fresh things in familiar maps, just by approaching them with new questions in mind. I don't know about you, but I find it irresistible. I hope I can keep doing this for a long, long time.

## Notes

- 1 Smith, *The Agrarian Origins of Modern Japan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959).
- 2 M.W. Lewis and K. Wigen. *The Myth of Continents—A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
- 3 The initiative was entitled 'Crossing Borders: Revitalizing Area Studies'. In the words of the Ford Foundation, its goal was: 'first, to enhance in-depth study of particular areas, and to activate new, visible, and significant streams of funding; second, to foster innovative approaches to the field's intellectual foundations and practices in light of a dramatically changed, and increasingly interconnected, world.' Ford Foundation, *Crossing Borders: Revitalizing Area Studies* (New York: Ford Foundation, 1999).
- 4 C. McEvedy, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of the Pacific* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998).
- 5 'Oceans Connect: Mapping a New Global Scholarship,' Duke University, October 1998; 'Seascapes, Littoral Cultures, and Trans-Oceanic Exchanges,' Library of Congress, February 2003.
- 6 J.H. Bentley, R. Bridenthal and K. Wigen (eds.) *Seascapes – Maritime Histories, Littoral Cultures, and Transoceanic Exchanges* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007).
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- 8 K. Wigen, *A Malleable Map: Geographies of Restoration in Central Japan, 1600–1912* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).
- 9 G. Brechin, *Imperial San Francisco: Urban Power, Earthly Ruin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

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## ‘My favourite source is the landscape’: Interview with Robert Ross

*Emeritus professor Robert Ross is one of the leading historians of African history. Friends and colleagues know him as an amiable person, a fervent birdwatcher and Morris dancer. It is a year after his retirement when Jan Bart Gewald and Alicia Schrikker meet Robert Ross in a homely setting in Leiden and ask him to look back at his career and ahead to South Africa’s future.*

*When preparing this interview we thought we could go one of two ways. One would be: ‘Robert, tell us about your life.’ The other one would be to take a look at your books and follow through from there. We did not really decide which approach we were going to take. But one of the things we think is extremely important is your experience as a 17-year-old in Botswana in the 1960s. And one of the things that surprises us now is why you did not take on board the racist sentiments which were prevalent at that time in Great Britain and in South Africa?*

Why did I not do that? Well I suppose, in the first instance, I was the son of a biologist, which helps not to be racist in some senses. Secondly, I was the nephew of a missionary, who worked in Nigeria, which probably also helps to some extent. And, when I arrived in Botswana, I was dumped in an environment in which the most interesting people around were black South Africans, which made it perfectly obvious [that racism was not an option]. The students at Moeding College (Otse Botswana) who were mainly older than me and whom I attempted to teach something—teaching is a slight euphemism—made it impossible to take it on board. In addition it was not only a black South African group, but also a LMS (London Missionary Society) missionary school and so racism just was not one of the possibilities.<sup>1</sup> And also growing up in London, I was not growing up in the parts of London in which racism was highly prevalent, I grew up a long way from Notting Hill or Brixton or such places—there was certainly no black ghetto in Sidcup.<sup>2</sup> So in that sense that sort of racism did not arise.

*When you travelled to Botswana did you already have an idea about what you were going to study?*

I knew I was going to study history. I do not know why, I have always been fascinated by history. I seem to remember winning a school prize for history when I was 9. That should not mean very much, I also won a school prize for scripture at the same time. They are both history, I suppose. So in that sense I knew I was going to study history when I got back from Botswana. My choice for African history was made essentially in my third year as an undergraduate [at Cambridge University]. I had had a relatively unsuccessful career until then doing European and English history, slightly more doing the Expansion of Europe paper, slightly less doing the history of political thought. And so in my third year, when I had to take two papers and a special subject, there was one paper of African history and one of Indian history. And so it was quite obvious that I would do African history. It was at the time one of the larger papers; it had about sixty people doing it. It was taught by Ivor Wilks, John Lonsdale and Sydney Kanya-Forstner. I was supervised by Sydney who was Canadian and had written a book on the Western Sudan. He was at that time research fellow, in his mid to late twenties.<sup>3</sup>

*And the others all had a colonial background?*

Wilks had just come back from Ghana and taught in Cambridge for three or four years till he got a job in Northwestern. And Lonsdale had come back from Dar es Salaam. And so they and Kanya-Forstner gave the lectures and you would not have been able to find a better team anywhere. I started a Ph.D. after that year on the basis of a research proposal that I still know off by heart: 'The social economic history of an African tribe,' full stop. I convinced them over the telephone. The faculty in those days had a number of Ph.D. places to distribute and I got one of them. It was £850 a year, that was 1970. It was not a lot, but enough to survive and I began my Ph.D. under Ronald Robinson who had been away on leave in the year that I did my undergraduate in African history. So I worked under him for a year, and in the beginning of my second year, just before I went to Africa, Robbie went to Oxford, Ivor Wilks went to Northwestern and John Iliffe came back from Tanzania to take over and I was moved to work under him. And so I met him briefly before I went to Africa for nine months, and I only really got to know him when I got back to write the thesis.

I went to South Africa largely at the suggestion of Ronald Robinson. When I was still thinking about which African tribe I was going to write

that socio-economic history of, he said: ‘Why don’t you take a look at the Griquas, they look interesting and come back in two weeks’ time and tell me everything there is to know about the Griquas.’ So I really did and went down to Sussex where Martin Legassick was teaching. He had written a thick thesis on the Griquas.<sup>4</sup> I talked with him for a while and thought they were indeed rather interesting and decided I would work on them. Initially I thought it would be something on the Tswana, but the Griquas seemed more interesting, and I wouldn’t have to learn a language. Well I had to learn some amount of Dutch and Afrikaans, but that wasn’t so difficult. And so I first spent two or three months in the archives of the London Missionary Society in London, commuting up to central London. I spent nearly a year in South Africa, mainly in the archives, and having one beautiful field trip from Cape Town to Kimberley and then through Philippolis to and through Lesotho via Ongeluks Nek down to Kokstad.

*That is interesting: in contrast to many Ph.D.s at the time, you actually went to look at the various places that you were writing about?*

Well I certainly went to look at them, but I am not sure whether that is in contrast to many Ph.D. theses—I mean Shula’s [Marks, who taught at SOAS, University of London] students like William Beinart, Pat Harries, Phil Bonner, Peter Delius, Jeff Guy. They, all that lot, went to see places they were writing about and did quite a lot of oral history, which I never did or hardly any.

*Why didn’t you?*

I could have spent more time in Kokstad and I might have learned something, but part of it was scepticism and part being chased by the South African Special Branch. Which was our own fault. I was travelling with a man called Jeff Lewenberg, an anthropologist who worked on the Le Fleur Griquas, and we arrived in Kokstad when the *Kokstad Advertiser* was asking for suggestions as to how to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the town, and we wrote a letter to the *Kokstad Advertiser* which went more or less like this: ‘Dear madam, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the foundation of Kokstad, the son of the first missionary, a man called Dower, gave a sermon in the Griqua church with the text: “The wells that were delved by your fathers have been filled in by the philistines.” In view of the recent expulsion of the Griquas in the centre of Kokstad under the Group Areas Act, might we suggest that a similar service is held and might we suggest with the text: “and is this place, which was built in my name become a den of robbers.”’ The South

African police did not actually appreciate this and followed us around East Griqualand for two or three days. This was 1972, at the end of high apartheid.

*You refer to various historians whom you consider to be your contemporaries: Beinart, Harries, Guy... You are the only one who is not South African.*

Phil Bonner was brought up in Kenya, Kevin Shillington is not South African—but, yes Colin Bundy, Charles van Onselen, slightly later Saul Dubow, Deborah Posel, Susie Newton King and Bill Nasson are all South Africans. Indeed very few of us were not South Africans, and most of the ones who were not went to live there. I reckon that in 1994 I was one of about two or three serious South African historians who weren't eligible to vote one way or the other.

*So going back in time, you completed your Ph.D. in 1974?*

Yes just before my 25<sup>th</sup> birthday.

*How did you end up in Leiden?*

When I got my Ph.D., probably because I was not very efficient at those sort of things, I did not manage to organise myself a research fellowship in Cambridge or in Oxford. There were not that many postdocs around anyway. I was at that stage keeping myself in beer money by working in the Harrods perfume and cosmetics department (moving boxes around; I did not sell the stuff). I decided that this was not a good thing to do in the long term, and thought I might as well do the same in Holland and learn Dutch in the meantime. So I did. I moved flowers around in the Aalsmeer flower auction when I needed money and said hello to the people in Leiden, and after a while got some sort of job translating into English and slowly worked my way in, I think it took me 19 years to get a *vaste aanstelling* [permanent position], something like that anyway.

*So, in 1975 you got your first job at the history department?*

Yes by the end of 1975 I started editing and translating. The Series—Comparative Studies in Overseas History—were publications of the *werkgroep* [seminar group] History of European Expansion and Reactions, later called IGEER.<sup>5</sup> The 'reactions' were included in the title but not taken too seriously.

*That means that you were present at the birth of Itinerario.*

Yes! And I edited for two or three years, mainly with George Winius, and I did some of these interviews. I did Mathieu Schoffeleers, Dharma Kumar, Clifford Geertz among others. There is little to say about it. We sat in a room in the history department and chatted for one and a half hours as one does with interviews.

*Geertz interests us, because we wanted to work out what or why you take the approaches you do take to history. We think of you as an eclecticist, but others might say other things. And you have just spoken about Clifford Geertz, who has an interesting approach to history. Looking at your own career, would you say there is a constant and what would that constant be?*

The virtual constant is that I have been trying to understand colonial Cape Colony and people who left it and were in connection with it—take the Griqua book, the thesis, is just outside the Cape Colony, but it was completely dominated by the Cape colony—the problem with the book is that it had a whole set of hypotheses which depended on knowing about the Cape colony, which I didn't, so I decided I needed to find out more about it.<sup>6</sup> Then within that, I have looked at the Cape in a whole variety of different ways—economic, demographic, religious, various forms of social, but not a lot of politics. That is the constant—eclecticism—I don't know—most of what I have been doing until the 1990s, after the thesis, was based on very short visits to South Africa, very short archival bursts in the Cape archives. *Status and Respectability*<sup>7</sup> was written, if you look carefully, on hardly any archival basis at all, and a lot of the mission stuff was based on published material, because many of the French and German mission journals<sup>8</sup> were at that stage available in Oegstgeest<sup>8</sup>—and thus even closer to home than the Archives in The Hague—and the archives in The Hague formed the basis for the slavery book, *Cape of Torments*,<sup>9</sup> and also the economic history with Pieter van Duin.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, I have gone off in a whole variety of different directions, but within a geographical and temporal unity—I do not know why, it is just what seemed to make sense. And a lot of it, certainly *Status and Respectability*, has a lot of anthropology, but not Geertz. Also not Adam Kuper,<sup>11</sup> though I was close to him when he was here. I would say that a lot of the stuff I have done has been about finding individual stories which fit to illustrate a particular pattern. Certainly the slave book is full of individual stories. *Status and Respectability* is about individual stories, to some extent *Adam Kok's Griquas* is at the beginning,<sup>12</sup> and certainly the Kat River book.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand I can add up and so I am quite happy with numbers and am very happy with maps. It is the relationship

between individual stories and the world of social events which very often interests me. And then the more general books, the *Concise History of South Africa* and the *History of Clothing* came basically because people asked me to do them.<sup>14</sup>

*So your excursion into global history was on assignment?*

Yes I got this letter from Polity [press] saying ‘Dear Dr. Ross, we have this series with books about various things and we would very much like you to write a history of clothing.’ I am not quite sure why they asked me; it was fairly soon after *Status and Respectability*, and once I stopped laughing—for those who remember how I was dressed in the 1990s and 1980s will understand—I began to think yes, one can do something really quite interesting about that. So I did.

*When I [JBG] was an undergraduate I remember you once talking about clothing in class and sort of saying ‘clothing is a conscious choice and signals who you are.’*

It does not signal who you are as much as it signals who you want other people to think you are.

*One of the things that strikes—when you read Cape of torments, there is an incredible anger in the writing, an anger, which is right there on the surface, at the top, and which disappears from your later work.*

*Kat River* was not quite as angry? I don’t know, if it is how you read it, it is how it is.

*Kat river is subtle.*

Yes *Cape of Torments* is not subtle. I am just trying to remember the details as to when *Cape of Torments* got written—how much of that is in a personal thing, how much of that is from spending several months reading court cases with people getting put to death for whatever they did, which is not likely to make one happy about the thing, and how much is my experiences of living for short periods of time in South Africa, though I never lived there for more than nine months at a time. But, then, it is probably a consequence of maturation. *Cape of Torments* was published when I was 33.

*A totally different question: how did you manage to steer clear of the back-biting and incredible feuding that existed among South African historians in the 1980s and 1990s?*

Well that is because I was not a South African historian. It makes a lot of difference.

*And yet you are the most respected of the historians of South Africa.*

Maybe... well, as I said, I did not have to re-fight the rugby matches between Bishops [Bishops Diocesan College] and SACS [South African College Schools]. These are two major secondary schools in Cape Town to which a number of my colleagues went, and that competition is still there. It is that we know who went to Bishops and who went to SACS. But I did not have the fight going back to my youth, and the colonial Cape work that I was doing was somewhat away from others. Also, I am not a particularly combative sort of type, and I mean those debates were a lot about politics by some other name, continuation of politics by other means, the *Cambridge History of South Africa* describes its history—I know because I wrote it—and in that sense I did not participate. I did not need in the same way to demonstrate that clearly who I was and where I came from.

*But that doesn't mean that the type of history that you wrote was apolitical.*

You can't get a more political book than *Cape of Torments*. No, I was not apolitical, but I was not part of any given sect and that was the sort of way I worked. I was not a theoretician either, which made life easier, in the sense of the way some of them were theoreticians. I did not enter into the massive Marxist debates, mainly because I could not understand them, not sure if all participants could ...

*Whereas your work is very much informed by theory, anthropological theory mostly.*

Yes I suppose so, such as symbolism. But that anthropological theory varies and that gets absorbed by osmosis. I got slightly more theoretical as I got older.

*You are undoubtedly the most productive historian of South Africa of your generation. Why is that?*

I think, I have three things which mean that I work very efficiently as a historian. First, I read at the speed of light—I once found one of these books saying 'read better read faster' and I did the test at the end and discovered I read twice as fast as the best possible result they suggested. Secondly, I have a very good memory. Thirdly, I somehow learned to write in a draft and a half, most of the time. I don't know how that happened,

but I think a lot of that had to do with being brought up listening to good English prose at least once a week. Anyone who has been brought up in the old days of the Anglican Church recalls saying general confession once a week, with the classic sentences ‘we have done those things which we ought not to have done and we have left undone those things which we ought to have done.’ It does not matter about the message, it is a wonderful sentence with one word of more than one syllable—‘and there is no health in us’—it goes on. You cannot be a postmodernist if you have done that, or a theoretical Marxist. Well, you probably can, but then you were not listening.

*So you are basically saying it is because of your background, because of your parents, you are a Bildungsbürger.*

I was brought up with my sisters in an academic family, and that with as good an academic education as you can get. I went to a high-class academic English public school and then to Cambridge. That made it a lot easier and, as I said, learning what an English sentence sounds like helps.

*Since the 1970s you have been returning to South Africa regularly in a turbulent period. How did you experience that and how is that reflected in your work?*

How one experiences such changes? It is obviously a much less tense place than it was when I first arrived. The first weekend I arrived in Cape Town, on a Sunday morning all the lefties of Cape Town were woken up at five in the morning and house searched; nothing more than that, I don’t think. These were academics, Ph.D.s and researchers, basically UCT [University of Cape Town] left.

So, I mean South Africa is a much easier place to live in than it used to be. You still have a reasonable chance of getting murdered or being wiped out in a car crash. I must admit that I have never experienced violence in South Africa ever; you must know where not to go, and possibly I have been naïve. And the amount of change at the top, the political top, is considerable, but if you are not racist the change is very little, because the society has not changed very much. It has just got a lot of black faces at the top, which were not there earlier, if you don’t notice it. Well of course you have to notice, but if you ignore that, you wonder what has changed: Bishops and SACS still exist; there are still people who make money from tenders for the telephone books as Verwoerd’s cousins did. That the National Party got subsumed into the ANC shows that there is absolutely no difference...which it really did.<sup>15</sup>

*We looked at your thesis and thought of your latest book, The Borders of Race and noticed parallels between the books. But, the circumstances under which you could do research there were different. You weren't chased by the police this time.*

I wasn't chased by the police around *Kat River*, but we were certainly involved in political competition. It is a very tense place still. I mean we never quite worked out whether it was the mayor who dropped his main opponent off the Seymour Dam or whether it was the mayor who got dropped, but there was an enormous amount of communal tension in the valley between the Xhosa and the descendants of the settlers. That is what we were pulled into. The place is tense and highly politicised because there is competition for scarce fertile irrigable land, and that still goes on. Obviously the relationship between *Adam Kok's Griquas* and *The Borders of Race* is considerable in some ways it is practised and the theme is very much the same and a number of characters appear in both, so even at that level the connection is there.

*Historians are not supposed to predict the future, but they always do.*

Probably better than others. What is going to happen in Southern Africa—probably more of the same in the coming ten years, and I cannot see any serious shift in the political dispensation in the relatively near future. Part of that means that the current political dispensation backs up and profits from the current economic dispensation even though people who run the economy are not the people who run the politics. Some of them may be, there are clearly people who form the bridges, Ramaphosa and Sexwale, but the people who run the politics are sufficiently dependent on the people who run the economy not to cock up the economy in the way it has happened in Zimbabwe. At least that is my probably unduly optimistic view.

*Would you attribute that to the rapid growth of the African middle class?*

Yes. The black middle class has an enormous stake in its future. The black middle class is at least twice as large as the white middle class. Those are the people for whom the ANC in government works, which is what pisses off people who vote for the Economic Freedom Front of Julius Malema. But I think that they want their own part of the pie; they are not going to let the pie disappear. And there is this incredibly complicated relationship between the black middle class and the ANC top which, as I see it, is basically because the ANC cannot say they are supporting the middle class, and have to keep their relationship with the unions and the

communist party running, but nevertheless that is the—it is good for the ANC to have people like Malema around; when they were still in the ANC it was a lot easier for them, because he could shoot his mouth off and pretend, and everyone thought that the ANC was being radical whilst it was just getting on with its business.

Yet it has delivered over the past twenty years rather more than could be expected of it: quite a lot, in terms of electrification, social grants have been enormous and boomed many poor communities. There has been a form of redistribution towards the bottom of society, which perhaps does not show up in income or inequality measures, but there are other things like health care and education. These are unquantifiable forms of income which probably have improved the lot of South Africans substantially. There are obviously many very poor South Africans still and there will continue to be so in the foreseeable future. But I do not think it will explode—famous last words.

*One of the other extremely important things is the end of formal racial discrimination*

That makes an enormous difference. I think there is a lot more social mobility than people realise.

*In the introduction to Beyond the Pale<sup>16</sup> you reflect on questions of continuity and change as you did just now. In the same text you passionately declare your love for South Africa—so what is it that you love about South Africa?*

I love the countryside, I love the country—I love landscapes anyway, the South African landscape has always got me—and I love trying to work out how society works. There is also the sense in which South Africa is a place of incredible social complications, and I said nothing has changed. Obviously that is not really true, but there are an enormous amount of social complications and fascinating people around them. Understand them and make sense of them, that is what I love.

*You retired last year, but did not stop working of course. We know you are working on three projects at the moment. Can you elaborate?*

One of them is a spin off to the *Kat River* book. It is an anthology of Khoi political thought, which is to see what there is when putting it together. I have collected 85,000 words of text so it will get cut down. Not that I have written it myself. These are various texts which together give a running commentary on how the lower class saw colonial South African racists from about the 1820s to the 1870s, and I will have to contextualise

it and write little essays on why it is that they were objecting to Cape separatism and such. And the second one, which I should have finished long ago, is not a Cape book. It is on black material culture: it is about tables and chairs, knives and forks and those sorts of things, and how they have been adopted in black homes, which is not easy to find literature on. A lot is going to be based on market research from the 1970s onwards, and before that just picking things up in various places. The third, which I haven't done much on yet apart from collecting a certain amount of information, is an ecological history of a single valley in the Eastern Cape, the Gamtoos. This is about the work of the developmental state and about solving ecological problems, but also it is about missions and such like.... I shall have to go and do some interviews and find someone to work for me in the deeds office in Cape Town. It is about an area which since the 1970s has become a very flourishing agricultural district. Before that, for a number of reasons, it was rather run down, poor white. Since the 1970s it has become very rich on the basis of Afrikaner economic empowerment. After 1994 it benefitted enormously from the end of sanctions. These are citrus producers, and it is an island of high productivity and a certain amount of wealth and prosperity certainly at the farms and substantial employment.

*Moving from South Africa to the Netherlands, to Leiden where you spent quite a large part of your life. You entered academia there through the history department. But you managed to put African Studies on the agenda in Leiden.* I have lived in Leiden longer than anywhere else. Yes, I set up an African studies degree course—in fact I think I set up five degree courses in my life at various levels. I have never quite worked out why African Studies as a degree course never attracted many students. There are difficulties about area studies, which include African studies, Southeast Asian studies and South Asian studies alike, slightly less for China and Japanese now, slightly less for Latin America as well. Somehow they do not attract very many students, at the top end in the research Master's we get ten students a year, which is not enough. But over the last years Africa has been given a larger place within the history department, which is a good development. For most of my career, the history department did not look for cooperation. When I was working for African Studies, they had to make use of me from time to time, but they tried to discourage that because of the way finances worked. It is cynical, but that is how it was. The credits of students who came to me were not counted towards the history department; that changed about five years ago. But it is still ridiculous that Africa is now

within history and China is not, but that also has to do with how the Sinologists think about these things. They do not see themselves in the first place as historians, but as Sinologists.

*Do you feel that academia has changed much over time? You have revealed yourself as someone who emphasises continuities over change but...*

Leiden has changed since I arrived in 1975; it has got better. It got much more professional, which in general is a good thing. I suspect that the power of what a friend of mine calls *the crows*—because they walk about in black gowns—has decreased somewhat. This is a good thing. There were few people who, when I first arrived, were too powerful. I benefitted from one of them enormously, but that is another matter, not that I approved of it. There are those whom I hated and those whom I enormously appreciated, though I did not get anything out of them. Overall Leiden has become much more professional and much more productive, in part because there are some brownie points to be gained by being productive in terms of writing, which in the past there were not. And now slowly Leiden is beginning to realise that the university has the broadest selection of historians probably outside North America, and they bloody well ought to make use of it and they do not, not enough. The only places which probably have a wider geographical range of historians are UCLA and Wisconsin, and that's about it and this is not exploited enough.

*Is it policy that creates institutional boundaries?*

It is not so much policy; the boundaries are internal too. But on the other hand, if you look objectively at what the potential strength is of Leiden or of our institutions, it is in the breadth that could and should be exploited. The linguists managed to do so in a way that the historians never did. The original IGEER [Institute for the History of European Expansion and Reaction] idea might have worked, but in the end it was too Eurocentric to get everyone on board. Henk Wesseling had the right idea, but in the end there were some historians within the history department who rubbed some who were outside the department up the wrong way. Which meant that the symbiosis which was possible never happened. Part of it was personality, part of it was the institutional question. But whatever the linguists or the sinologists thought they were doing, they did not realise that what they were doing was so close to what was being done in the history department. That has to some extent changed, but probably not enough. There was a potential there that was not exploited.

*In relation to your last remark on Eurocentrism among historians we have one more question. Looking at your work, you have experimented with a great range of sources, through a variety of approaches. We have already spoken about your eclecticism. Now African history, and of course this counts for other regions too, is a difficult history to write. Often one has to depend, maybe not exclusively but to a large extent, on European primary sources. Do you feel that you have developed a way to tackle this problem? And, on a lighter note, what then is your favourite source?*

No I have not. I have worked almost entirely on a colonial society, and you have then to think about how collections of written sources, which are filtered, which came into existence through the colonial society, through the colonial government, can tell you things about what is going on among non-colonial people, basically Africans and slaves, and that is essentially what nineteenth- and twentieth-century African history is about, in a technical sense. And the idea that you can't actually say something about the subaltern classes of colonial society because the sources are colonial is of course a mistake. It is one-sided, but I have not found any better way out of it than anyone else. And I have always been a historian of colonial societies rather than of Africa, rather than someone who deals with Africa as before colonial times.

My favourite source is the landscape. The most enjoyable bits of being a historian I have had are walking and driving about various bits of southern Africa and working out how they came to be, to look the way they do. Trying to reconstruct the irrigation system and such like. The W.G. Hoskins type of history is wonderful.<sup>17</sup> I don't manage to do enough of it now. I spent more time reading archives and books and newspapers than I do walking around the countryside, but that does not mean to say I prefer doing it.

## Notes

- 1 Moeding College was established in Botswana by South African exiles after the Bantu Education Act of the apartheid government effectively scuttled academic teaching for black students.
- 2 Sidcup is a suburban district of south-east London, England, in the London Borough of Bexley.
- 3 S. Kanya-Forstner, *The conquest of the Western Sudan: a study in French military imperialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

- 4 The thesis was completed in 1969 and published in 2010. It is accompanied by a Preface by Ciraj Rassool, and an Introduction by Robert Ross: ‘Martin Legassick, the Griqua and South Africa’s Historiographical Revival: An Appreciation.’ M. Legassick, *The politics of a South African frontier: the Griqua, the Sotho-Tswana, and the missionaries, 1780–1840* (Basler Afrika Bibliographien, Basel, 2010).
- 5 IGEER stands for *Instituut voor de Geschiedenis van de Europese expansie en reacties daarop* (Centre for the history of European Expansion and reaction.)
- 6 R. Ross, *Adam Kok’s Griquas: a study in the development of stratification in South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).
- 7 R. Ross, *Status and respectability 1750–1870: 1750–1870: a tragedy of manners* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- 8 The archives of the Dutch protestant mission were then located in Oegstgeest. They have since moved to the Utrecht provincial and town archives (*Het Utrechts archief*).
- 9 R. Ross, *Cape of Torments: slavery and resistance in South Africa* (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1983).
- 10 Duin, P. van, and Robert Ross. *The Economy of the Cape Colony in the Eighteenth Century*. Intercontinenta, no. 7 (Leiden: Center for the History of European Expansion, 1987).
- 11 Adam Kuper was professor of Anthropology in Leiden between 1976 and 1985, after which he moved to Brunel University. He has worked mainly on Southern Africa.
- 12 Ross, *Adam Kok’s Griquas*.
- 13 R. Ross, *The Borders of Race in Colonial South Africa: the Kat River Settlement, 1829–1856* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
- 14 Ross, *Clothing: a Global History; or the Imperialists’ New Clothes*; Ross, *A Concise History of South Africa*.
- 15 National Party founded in 1915, in power from 1948 to 1994, and the party that implemented apartheid in South Africa. ANC (African National Congress) founded in 1912, in power following the holding of the first non-racial democratic elections in South Africa in 1994.
- 16 R. Ross, *Beyond the Pale: essays on the history of colonial South Africa* (Hanover etc.: University Press of New England for Wesleyan University Press, 1993).
- 17 W.G. Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape* (London: Hudders and Stoughton, 1955).

# History as Renegade Politics: Interview with Ann Laura Stoler

*In May 2016, Professor Ann Laura Stoler visited Leiden University as the Spring 2016 Global Asia Scholar. On the last day of her stay, Amrit Dev and Sanne Ravensbergen—historians affiliated with the Leiden Humanities Faculty—met Stoler on a sunny terrace situated alongside one of the canals for a conversation about the developments in her scholarly work, career choices, sources of inspiration, and the motivations for doing history. Professor Ann Laura Stoler is Willy Brandt Distinguished University Professor of Anthropology and Historical Studies at The New School for Social Research in New York. She has published extensively on the colonial history of Indonesia and the sexual and racial epistemologies of imperial politics. Her recent research addresses how colonial histories matter and manifest in the world today.*

*We would like to go back to the year when you started your studies as a student. What were your plans and dreams for the future back then?*

I'm not really sure that I ever thought in terms of plans and dreams. As for so many of my generation, what dominated the air around us was the war in Vietnam. The war saturated our imagination, and even if one wasn't hugely political we were all in this place where we agreed that we shouldn't be in Vietnam long before a large majority of the country turned against it. We marched, we attended rallies, we had study groups, we got arrested, and we marched again, not really sure where to go. The war changed my reading habits from the poetry of T. S. Eliot and Robinson Jeffers to Lenin, Marx and Rosa Luxemburg—all seemed so relevant to the imperial order of things, though I wasn't quite sure what to do with what they said. Unlike our teachers, whose Marxism had to be tempered, we wore our strident Marxism and political protest as a badge of honour—McCarthyism of the 1950s was far away. Within that environment, pursuing a 'profession' was never really on my radar. I imagined that there were things I had to study, needed to do, and being an anthropologist seemed to offer the most license and fewest restrictions. In fact it seemed implicitly to endorse, while not itself subscribing to, what I thought mattered—some incipient critique of

a politics of knowledge that was animated by what I was then learning about US counterinsurgency and ‘strategic hamlet’ studies in Thailand, project Camelot, USAID<sup>1</sup> programs that promoted themselves as reaching ‘the poorest of the poor’ and that invariably—with respect to the Green Revolution in Java—not surprisingly, advantaged the rich.

It was feminist politics and Marxist categories that seemed to guide my way. From my junior year as an undergraduate at Barnard, taking grad seminars at Columbia, the subjects of my papers ranged from class politics in the history of Ireland to the rural roots of the Chinese revolution for my undergrad thesis. In winter 1972 I went to Java, imagining I would study the effects of the ‘green revolution’ on rural women (however absurd that seems in retrospect, since I couldn’t speak Javanese and had only the most rudimentary market Indonesian to go on) and to visit my then partner, Ben White,<sup>2</sup> for what I thought was a brief interlude before starting graduate school at Berkeley in Chinese studies. I was taken with Java, put off grad school, married Ben in Singapore, and studied everything and anything—gleaning and rice harvesting, the meagre items women exchanged in small-scale trade, house gardens, arduous palm sugar production, cassava consumption in homes where rice was a luxury they could not afford—about how landless families in the central Javanese village where we lived survived during those years. It was ethnography and the making of inequalities I was after, and jointly Ben and I sought to dispel Clifford Geertz’s distorted fiction of ‘shared poverty’ as the prevailing condition of the rural poor.<sup>3</sup>

When I finally returned to New York and to Columbia University’s Anthropology Department in 1974, I read more political economy and history than anthropology and knew I wanted to study what colonial capitalism had carved out on the ground—which is how I ended up living with Javanese plantation workers in North Sumatra between 1977 and 1978. I didn’t yet know how much of that ‘village’ land had been seized from the estates by those in the squatter movement in the 1950s. What I did know is that alleged communist labor union members of Sarbupri were killed by the thousands. Over a decade after 1965, fear was still palpably in the air.

*How did you go from your work on the labour movement and the political economy to the colonial system?*

Doing history always seemed to me to be a subversive act and a renegade politics in a discipline once so committed to the ‘ethnographic present.’ I learned Dutch by avidly reading about the colonial history of Deli

before I arrived and it didn't take long for me to realize how much of the topography, the system of labor recruitment, the very infrastructure and administrative apparatus were deeply embedded in colonial systems of coercion, persuasion and control. Recruitment was gendered, as were the pay scales, and in the history of plantation 'development' sexual politics was key. The contemporary social ecology of North Sumatra was saturated with colonial relations, multinational monocrop priorities, and gendered labor policies that were not mere leftovers. As we've learned since in the ever-expanding and destructive palm oil industry, gendered pay scales and policies that condoned or condemned family labor recruitment—depending on the moment—were fundamental to agribusiness strategies and have not gone away.

After fieldwork, I ended up in Amsterdam with my partner Larry Hirschfeld (Ben and I had decided that conjugality wasn't for us), whom Claude Levi-Strauss invited to work with him in Paris. Maurice Godelier, a prominent Marxist anthropologist, invited me to join his seminar and I settled in Paris to agonize through my dissertation with migraines, despair and bursts of excitement.<sup>4</sup> It was a pretty arid place for someone studying Indonesia and multinationals, but help came from unexpected quarters: I met Jacques Leclerc, probably one of the most knowledgeable researchers on Indonesia's left and labor movements,<sup>5</sup> and through him a circle of Indonesian leftists who themselves, or their parents, had been in China in 1965 and were stuck there until some made their way to Europe. Both they and Jacques taught me so much, and it was they who procured an invitation for me to visit and interview the score of Indonesian activists—women and men—who were still exiled in China about the early years of the labor movement they helped to forge.

There were already two trajectories to my work: one was about 'subaltern' politics and our knowledge practices; the other one, deeply historical, that kept me traveling back and forth to The Hague and Amsterdam and Leiden from Paris to work at the KIT,<sup>6</sup> to the KITLV in Leiden, and to the archives in The Hague. I was frustrated by what I couldn't find, but utterly taken by what was there, and more than ever amazed by what Dutch historians seemed to so assiduously circumvent and dismiss—but could not have missed. I was just starting to read Foucault then. *The History of Sexuality* came out in 1976, and in 1978 Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Both hit like bolts of recognition, making sense of what I was already writing! Feminist friends in England looked askance at—and questioned—my referencing Foucault. I remember responding defiantly (and probably defensively) that gender was different than the history of sexuality, and

as feminists we had better know it. I realized I had probably stayed away from the US too long when I was cycling in Amsterdam to the KIT one day in the opposite direction of a protest march and didn't know what it was about. I stayed in Paris until 1983 and then took my first job at the University of Wisconsin, my first encounter with teaching, the politics of scholarship and the great Midwest.

*From how you describe this, it seems that the course of your career was merely decided by the people you met. Were they that influential?*

It's interesting that you say that. To have 'influence' is a word that Foucault reminds us hides, and I would argue steals, meaning from the practices that make it up. I'd say that those places where I hadn't expected to go were provocations that compelled me to do something in a way I might not have otherwise, caught me productively off precarious balance, and exposed me to the vulnerabilities of operating on unfamiliar terrain. When I first arrived in Paris in 1979, I was terrified to buy a tomato: now I love lecturing in French because something different happens that is beyond mere translation. I actually find myself saying things in ways that I think I could not have quite said with the same force in English. So it is true in a sense that people who have entered my life have graced and shaped its course: my sister first and foremost.<sup>7</sup> When I was in graduate school one of my fellow students was married to a historian whose Marxism was in his bones. I would plant myself in the grim hallway of their apartment reading Marx until they politely kicked me out. Sure, I would have and could have read those books elsewhere but there was something about being utterly surrounded by so much literature on labor history and political economy and talking with someone who cared so much about it that probably held me differently than it would have otherwise and elsewhere.

The interviews I did in China with such vibrant former Indonesian political activists stayed with me as well. One of the first questions they asked me (I was 32 at the time) was about my children, which I didn't yet have. But how can you be part of a revolution without children? I was baffled and retorted that you can't have time for children if you're doing political work. They laughed at my stubbornness and naïveté. I was starting my first job in Madison, Wisconsin, several months later and had my first child on the first day of classes the following year and my second, the year after!

Choices were to be made. As I realized I couldn't write about the people I interviewed (many with close family still in Indonesia), I set aside those days and hours of interviews among an underground Indonesian

old left and those still in China. We still don't have an account of that rich history of left labor activism and cultural creativity in 'postcolonial' Indonesia of the 1950s . . . Many thought Ruth McVey would write it—or was writing it.<sup>8</sup> Maybe we were all just hoping she would. I don't know. It's a history that waits to be done, not to be written as part of an inevitable teleology leading to 1965 but as it was lived during those Bandung years of imagined possibilities. Ideally, this should be written by some collective of young Indonesian historians and artists and filmmakers who can imagine what something like LEKRA was, as it infuses their own creative and political energies today.<sup>9</sup>

*When you were in this sort of developing stage of your career, did you still consider yourself an anthropologist? Was that important to you?*

I never identified with the discipline, but it offered a pass that allowed room for Marx as much as Foucault. I got my first job in Madison (1983) despite doing 'too much' history. Seven years later, I was courted at the University of Michigan precisely because this was one consolidating moment in which the synergy between history and anthropology took hold. A group of us hybrids fashioned one of the most exciting joint Ph.D. programs in the two disciplines, recruited fabulous students, and produced a new generation of wondrous young scholars.

I left Ann Arbor in 2003 for the New School for Social Research in New York, where I imagined a philosophically inflected critical scholarship with a different bite and edge. My work has been nourished by being in New York (where I was born) and by the environment that the New School faculty and its eclectic graduate student body offer.

*Your story is very much about being open to people, but also to disciplines. You would never stick to one discipline; you prefer history but in fact you were not choosing.*

I care about disciplined, careful work, but not about disciplines in any way. My most enabling interlocutors are philosophers, students of literature, law, geography, architecture and political theory. Historians would say: fascinating study you did of the archives . . . for an anthropologist. Anthropologists would say: fascinating history you're doing but it's not anthropology. Neither thought I was doing what they were. I probably cultivated that stance more than I realized at the time, knowing then that if certain rules were ignored, I had better do what I was doing with sufficient breadth and depth, with transparency, with vigilance—and well.

*To me it seems a very brave thing to do, to not be part of something, but it seems you were feeling comfortable in not fitting in. I get the feeling, the word 'renegade' is a very good word.*

I think it was probably more brazen than brave. Those connections were energizing, especially those that were counter-intuitive and not considered the proper 'cases' for comparison. Virginia Dominquez, a thoughtful and now eminent anthropologist, once called an essay of mine on racial regimes of truth 'gutsy'—and I've often wondered what that actually meant and what about the venture seemed so. I think there was something disturbing to me (and to my readers in turn) about the ways in which the racialized domains of knowledge production in which I was working crumpled in my hands—the historiography on racism was folded through the meanings given to race; discrete categories of scholarship and social practice collapsed into one another, recursively producing racial fictions and mythologies of racism's origins. I love the kind of work that resists one's intrusions, and almost invites one to rough up smooth ground and smooth passage.

*That's obvious from every text you've written. You're kind of part of it. You're so in the text. I have never read anything that's written the way you write. You developed your own language. I wonder how that developed?*

I love the writing, not only what you say but how you say it. I write for content and clarity, but for tone and timbre as well. I want the writing to be so compelling that you have to attend to it even if it's not what you wanted to hear.

*Do you still feel that way?*

More than ever and in ways I might not have dared to do as a younger scholar. The politics of knowledge remains one of my bottom lines: how you teach, what you teach, what you write, what counts as a 'source', what is deemed credible and trustworthy or not. Relations of power course through the presences and absences in what we write and how it matters.

*Have you ever considered fighting for your causes outside of academia? Why is academia the right channel for you to disseminate your thoughts?*

You have to do what compels you, stirs you into sleepless nights, then gets you—however reluctantly—there to your desk the next day. When I was writing *Race and the Education of Desire* in 1993, I would get dressed in the morning and put on my boots before sitting at my desk: one day I sat down and inadvertently started searching for something behind me, my

arms hitting up against the back of my chair. Do you know what I was doing? Looking for my seat belt, to hear the click that it was secure, before I took off! There's not much more to say on that score—or so much. It was lift off and I was excited.

But you were asking about other channels. I've taught in a maximum-security prison, loved it and would do that again. I've participated in art installations at museums and found that wanting. I've marched in Washington, been tear-gassed in Palestine, put in jail (overnight) in New York. I'm not sure these are any more effective ways of speaking out. I suppose it depends on how one thinks about action and practice. I don't like meetings. I would not be up to the day-to-day endurance that organizing entails.

*You don't like the environment of being an activist. But still you want your political message to be heard. Do you remember the first time or the times when you were receiving the most resistance to your work? When did your work provoke people and how did you deal with that?*

It was probably in 1976 when I published my first article as a grad student in the feminist journal *Signs*.<sup>10</sup> It opened with a provocation that 'class was analytically prior to gender' with respect to agrarian reforms in Java. I was responding to what I saw as a pernicious focus of development agencies on 'the role of women in X' that seemed to me at the time to deflect attention from the broader pacifying politics of development aid. But there wasn't really 'resistance' to the work so much as surprise, and from others a resounding affirmation.

For in fact I'm not of the feminist generation that bore the worst brunt of exclusion and attack. That was more forcefully the case for a generation earlier. I had no trouble publishing. When I was in Madison, a stolid World Bank consultant on the faculty criticized my work for being 'political' and not 'scholarly,' and with avuncular largesse counselled me to cease the former if I wanted tenure. Clifford Geertz was to agree as he wrote in my tenure promotion letter: 'It is not that she should not get tenure now, she should never get it.' His letter was dismissed as *ad feminem*, but it certainly said something about Geertz's willingness to skewer a young woman academic on the grounds that the work was again 'political,' not 'serious' and not 'scholarly'. I'm sure there are many other instances about which I don't know; in the Netherlands, the silence was sometimes deafening.

*For me Carnal Knowledge and also Race and the Education of Desire were total eye-openers as a young student.<sup>11</sup> But here in The Netherlands it was considered so out of the box. Would ignoring someone's work also count as a way to resist it? I sometimes feel that is what happens to your work in The Netherlands.*

There is rumour that Leiden's colonial historians would prefer that Stoler's work not be followed, barely cited, and better not mentioned at all. *Race and the Education of Desire*, a book very much about Dutch colonial history, has never been reviewed in the Netherlands, nor has *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* as far as I know . . . strange when both have been reviewed in so many other places and translated into other languages across the globe.

*How do you look at Race and the Education of Desire yourself?*

It was a project that took me on a journey I had not thought to go on. . . It grew out of a new seminar I was teaching in 1991, began as an essay but was more than anything a puzzle that I was compelled to figure out: how Foucault could write about sexuality and not about race, and then race but only loosely tied to sexuality, and how could he write about both with colonialism and empire so utterly effaced? His 1976 lectures at the Collège de France were startling to me, and the project of tracking his insights and those moves he chose not to make . . . It was with a passion that I tracked the appearance of race on the scratchy recordings at the Saulchoir Library where his archive and recordings were stashed.<sup>12</sup>

But there was also something uncanny in that venture: that twisted helix of race and sexuality was already emerging from the Dutch colonial archives, and my own treatment of those occlusions in historiography, *Race and the Education of Desire*, traced those convergences, opening the possibility of thinking and writing differently about practices that were seen to be so utterly distinct in metropole and colony—and where the political had no place. Fred Cooper and I were simultaneously finishing up *Tensions of Empire* (1997) and I had already done the archival work for and written 'In Cold Blood' on hierarchies of credibility in colonial Sumatra<sup>13</sup> that in a later rendition was one of the final chapters of *Along the Archival Grain* (2009). I suppose it's superfluous to say that there has never been anything linear about my writing. Problematics reappear at new moments; 'knowledge things' emerge at new sites to be worked though differently again.

*Why specifically do you think Race and the Education of Desire is so barely acknowledged in the Netherlands?*

It was dismissed as ‘about Foucault’ for those who neither read nor cared to read him. *Homo academicus* as we know is *homo hierarchus* in the Netherlands, and perhaps it is not surprising that junior scholars who might have thought to engage the actual substance of the work did not, or did not acknowledge doing so. It was only when *Along the Archival Grain* came out that my decades of work on the Netherlands Indies as a racial formation was marginally engaged. But then I don’t write for a Dutch academic audience of a certain generation. I write across connections that seem not to be made because they puzzle me and I want to figure out what impasses make some ways of thinking more accessible than others.

*You refuse to be part of one single group or discipline. On the other hand, you called yourself a Foucauldian yesterday during the lecture you gave.*

I rarely do that and laughed (at myself) when I did yesterday. I still read Foucault avidly, as I do so many other philosophers, historians of science and literary scholars, but it is Foucault who confirms my own sense that philosophy needs history, that ‘fieldwork in philosophy’ is a political and historical project, and that writing history is a political act. Foucault, Gaston Bachelard, Merleau-Ponty, Judith Butler scramble what I thought and think I know over and again.<sup>14</sup> I read for those striking moments of eruption, disruption and disintegration.

*Is this the reason you decided to establish the Institute for Critical Social Inquiry (ICSI) at the New School for Social Research in New York?*

The ICSI is more than a labour of love: I wanted to create a space where it was possible to learn about what you felt you should already have known—whether that be the work of Fanon, Hegel or Marx—and to learn about how to think with those thinkers today and to do so with ‘masters’ who had taught and studied those thinkers for years, and then to come together with fellows from all over the world to think those thinkers differently again. It’s been a wondrous set of occasions the last two years and I imagine that the third—with David Harvey, Anthony Appiah and Michael Taussig—will be as well.

*You’ve told us how you see history as your political act, and this seems to be your focus now. But if you had, say, three months right now without obligations and you were given the choice to go to an archive, which archive would you go to and why?*

That's a hard question since I rarely know in advance where I want to get or go. I know that I want to write about the politics of sentiment in a different register, that I want to explore what it would mean to pursue what I set out as a challenge at the end of *Along the Archival Grain*, writing history in a 'minor key,' or what Ralph Ellison saw as 'the lower frequencies' of human experience . . . My new book, *Duress*,<sup>15</sup> takes its measure from that, but I still have a long way to go.

*Where do you get your awareness for language from? Does it have anything to do with your early study of Japanese? Or with the way your family interacts with language? How does this develop in a person?*

Insecurity, perhaps, doubting what I know and how to know it. My sister was a terrifying presence and inspiration. She often shared with me her translations from Sanskrit when I was still a small girl and made me alert and attentive to the multiple senses and sounds of words. I tend to write aloud, I want to hear the lilt of a sentence, the cadence of a word. These are not distractions or embellishments; there is analytic content not only in form, as Hayden White would have it, but in writerly style.<sup>16</sup> This is no screen of deception as those who condemned the sophists would have it, rather an effort to capture the very ambiguities, brutalities and pleasures that language affords. I'm taken with George Steiner's notion that philosophy is the poetry of thought,<sup>17</sup> and that concepts are the potential poetry of philosophy, as Giorgio Agamben has put it.<sup>18</sup> There is conceptual labor in the language, the images, the metaphoric weight we can bring to questions that matter—in our prose.

*How does the writing itself interact with the development of your thinking into book projects?*

Writing is not for me putting something down that has already gelled. Outlines have always paralyzed me. Writing is an exercise in limits and extensions, of small victories and failures to touch, to get close to what you think you want to say—and then, in the writing, something kaleidoscopic can happen: the affirmative turns into a question, the assertion into its opposite, the figure and ground are suddenly inverted and you are humbled, and lose any sense of total control.

All of my books loop back on one another. As I said earlier, there is nothing linear, no trajectory outlined in advance. My points of entry are usually very small, puzzling moments, jarring turns of phrase, minor incisions that stand out as what Roland Barthes would refer to as a 'punctum' with respect to photography, but that I try to remain alert to

on an archival page. Abstractions offer no inspiration. They are limpid, produce pallid insights and pallid prose.

*Do you know what lies ahead for you? Do you have one or two big issues left that you feel you want to be working with in the next years? Do you have a plan or is it completely open?*

Yes, in some minor way. No, in the grand scheme of life choices. I fear becoming soft around the edges, slipping from the quest for an 'ethics of discomfort' unknowingly, fearless speech receding as a goal. Each of these has probably pushed my work to more explicitly engage the present and the confounding temporalities of it: colonialism in the raw in Palestine, a politics of sentiment that pervades the assessment of remorse, death penalties and the recesses of the law today, the 'taste' (and distaste) of racisms colluding and in collision with what it means to be French in France today.

*To return one last time to what you are doing at the moment, why is it now law that you are working on?*

In many ways, it is where I began: I was intrigued nearly thirty years ago by how much mixed-marriage regulations needed and butted up against international law, *intergentiel recht*,<sup>19</sup> and how deeply international law was entwined with the making and securing of imperial concerns and the distinctions that were their supports and on which they would depend. Dutch colonial legal texts contain more 'ethnographic' detail than most colonial texts designed to do so. But more striking is how much 'feeling' and 'sentiments' (inappropriately directed or properly displayed) permeate those legal documents. Law is where sentiment harbors a commanding force. Not in the histrionics of trial soliloquies or in the theatrics of *Law and Order* reruns, but deeply in a moral economy of retribution and remorse, repentance and vengeance, the affective scaffolding on which the law's claims to dispassion, rules and rigid non-partisan rulings operate so inequitably, securing the resilience of racial formations today. Foucault did not turn away from law as a site of rule as is so often thought to be, but rather sought to show its powerful diffusion. What he did not do is offer what seemed to be a promise when he argued in 1972 that every sentiment has a history. Whether there is an affective analytics, or the potentiality for one, in Foucault's treatment of subjugation, subjectivity, the care of the self and the coercion of the other is a subject I'm grappling with in my work today.

## Notes

- 1 The United States Agency for International Development is a government agency that provides support for a variety of development initiatives worldwide, including agriculture, education, trade and political programs.
- 2 Ben White is Emeritus Professor of Rural Sociology at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS, The Hague, the Netherlands). His anthropological and sociological work focuses on Indonesia in particular.
- 3 Clifford Geertz, *Agricultural Involution: The Process of Ecological Change in Indonesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).
- 4 Ann Laura Stoler, *In the Company's Shadow: Labor Control and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation History, 1870–1979*, Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1983; Ann Laura Stoler, *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt, 1870–1979* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).
- 5 See, for example, Jacques Leclerc, *La pensée des communistes indonésiens: l'indonesianisation du marxisme-leninisme à travers les textes d'Aidit (1962–1965): essai d'approche et d'interprétation* (Paris, 1969).
- 6 Library of the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) in Amsterdam. In 2013, the library was closed and its colonial collections transferred to the Leiden University Library.
- 7 Barbara Stoler Miller (1940–1993) was a professor of Sanskrit literature at Barnard College, New York City.
- 8 Ruth McVey (1930– ) was a founder of the journal *Indonesia* at Cornell University's Southeast Asia Program and taught Southeast Asian politics and government at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies.
- 9 LEKRA (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat or Institute for the People's Culture) was a left-wing literary and social movement founded in 1950 and banned in 1965 along with the Indonesian Communist Party.
- 10 Ann Laura Stoler, 'Class Structure and Female Autonomy in Rural Java,' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 3:1 (1977): 74–89.
- 11 Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995); Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).
- 12 The lectures have been published based on the audio recordings. See, for instance, M. Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, translated by David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003).
- 13 Ann Laura Stoler, '“In Cold Blood”: Hierarchies of Credibility and the Politics of Colonial Narratives,' *Representations*, Special Issue: *Imperial Fantasies and Postcolonial Histories* 37 (1992): 151–89.

- 14 Key publications include Gaston Bachelard, *La poétique de l'espace* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1957); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945); Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham Press, 2005).
- 15 Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).
- 16 Hayden White, *The Content of Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).
- 17 George Steiner, *The Poetry of Thought: From Hellenism to Celan* (New York: New Directions, 2011);
- 18 *Qu'est-ce qu'un dispositif?* (Paris: Payot, 2007).
- 19 The study of the application of (international) law within one state in which each population group lives according to its own laws and normative orders. The term was introduced by *adat* law professor Cornelis van Vollenhoven. For recent literature on this subject, see, for example, Ratno Lukito, *Legal Pluralism in Indonesia: Bridging the Unbridgeable* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).



# Bibliography of World Historians

*For this bibliography, the editors have selected six important contributions that each of those interviewed has made to World History. With this, we have done them all an injustice, as they are, without exception, prolific authors. In addition, there is a bias towards monographs, although we have also sought to include articles which have had a major impact. Source publications that have made understudied materials available to researchers worldwide, as well as important works in languages other than English, have occasionally been privileged over other contributions.*

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*The following texts were named by the interviewees as seminal works of the discipline, as works that informed their own thinking, or as works they disagree with but consider important nevertheless. Historians named here are cross-referenced with the interviewees, which sheds further light on some of the networks covered in the Introduction. When a historian's body of work is mentioned in a general sense, the editors have selected his or her most appropriate monograph. This is not a comprehensive bibliography of World History, but a deliberately selective one. The interviews were not intended to cite lists of inspirational books, nor to suggest schools or lineages, but the editors think this list is revealing precisely for that reason.*

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