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**Forum 34** (2022) on the Importance of the Scholarship of Dorothy Borg

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## Introduction by Warren I. Cohen, University of Maryland, Baltimore County and Michigan State University, Emeritus

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*Dorothy Borg: Founder of American-East Asian Relations Specialization*

Born in 1902, a granddaughter of the banker Jacob Schiff—who bequeathed \$1 million to each of his grandchildren—Dorothy never had to work to pay the rent. Her family was part of the famed *Our Crowd: The Great Jewish Families of New York* and she appears as a young woman in a photograph published in Stephen Birmingham’s book so titled.<sup>1</sup> But she rebelled against the family ethos, hated being dragged to Paris every year for new clothes. After graduating from Wellesley, she found work as a journalist with the *New York World*.

Inspired by the career of her uncle, George Louis Beer, who had been a prize-winning historian of international relations, a member of Woodrow Wilson’s Inquiry, and a delegate to the Paris Peace Conference, she decided to attend Columbia University for graduate work, developing a particular interest in Chinese-American relations, especially the role of public opinion in influencing American policy. Her research also resulted in a deep interest in historiography, specifically writings about American-East Asian Relations.

In the late 1930s, after passing her Ph.D. orals, she joined the staff of the American Council of the Institute of Pacific Relations (IPR) as a research associate. Her dissertation, written during the war, was published in 1947, by the IPR, as *American Policy and the Chinese Revolution, 1925-1928*. In its systematic examination of congressional and public opinion, newspapers and special interest groups, the book revealed the climate of opinion in which Secretary of State Frank Kellogg functioned. Previous writers had contended that American policy had been rigidly committed to the “Open Door,” a policy peculiar to China that was attributed to Secretary of State John Hay at the close of the previous century. Borg demonstrated that Kellogg and his advisors adapted policy toward China toward the same conditions that affected American policy generally, primarily the dominance in the 1920s of the peace movement. She also provided readers with an understanding of the Chinese context, without which much of Chinese-American relations in the 1920s is incomprehensible.

In late 1946, she went to China for the first time, representing the IPR in Shanghai and Peiping for two years. She taught one semester at Peking National University where faculty friends and students explained why they had turned against the Kuomintang (KMT) and were prepared to accept Communist control of their country. At least one of her students went on to be a high-ranking diplomat for the People’s Republic (and reached out to me as her friend when I was in Beijing in 1980). An article she wrote suggesting that it was a mistake for the United States to continue to support the KMT in the Chinese Civil War reached the desk of Secretary of State Dean Acheson (one of her admirers), which may explain the course of action he recommended to the president.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Birmingham, *Our Crowd: The Great Jewish Families of New York* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967)

<sup>2</sup> Dorothy Borg, “America Loses Chinese Good Will,” *Far Eastern Survey* (February 23, 1949), 37-45.

In China, Borg confirmed her suspicion that America's China hands were an inbred lot. American missionaries she met had often spent their entire careers in the country and had raised their children there. The children went on to be academics or journalists or government officials, but frequently specializing in Chinese affairs. Foreign service officers and journalists, unlike their colleagues stationed elsewhere, seemed exempt from rotation and spent unusually large parts of their careers in China. She suspected that long residence in China and insulation from the United States and the rest of the world had allowed these people to develop and disseminate an unrealistic conception of a special relationship between the United States and China—that Americans felt particularly close to China and obliged to assist and protect the Chinese. Borg, on the other hand, was convinced that most Americans, in or out of government, were indifferent to China, that China was a peripheral concern of Americans. This idea permeates her work and that of a generation of scholars influenced by her. She could never have imagined a powerful China emerging as a strategic competitor of the United States.

After the war, before she had gotten very far with the research for her next book, the IPR came under attack from Senators Joe McCarthy (R-Wisconsin) and Pat McCarran (D-Nevada). With help from Alfred Kohlberg, “the China Lobby man,” they promoted the idea that Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi) had lost China because of the activities of the IPR. In particular, McCarran went after Owen Lattimore, a close friend of Borg's. She put aside her own work and spent the early 1950s preparing materials for the defense of Lattimore and other IPR colleagues. As a result she was denied access to historical records of the Department of State. Although she spoke often of the influence of World War II on her life, it was clear that McCarthyism also left its impact. In her second book she omitted the name of a foreign service officer she praised cautiously for his careful reporting of the Chinese Communist movement—lest he, O. Edmund Clubb, be victimized.

Her second book was the Bancroft Prize winning *The United States and the Far Eastern Crisis of 1933-1938*.<sup>3</sup> She focused on the climate of public opinion in which President Franklin Roosevelt and his advisers worked. She demonstrated the constraints imposed on foreign policy by the primacy the administration had to give to coping with the Depression and by the pacifist and neo-isolationist sentiment that followed the inability of the United States or the League of Nations to respond adequately to Japan's seizure of Manchuria. Intending to write a book on Chinese-American relations, she found China a marginal concern of the Roosevelt administration. Avoidance of war with Japan was the heart of the administration's East Asian policy. Suggestions of American responsibility to help China were met with indignation. American interests were best served by conciliating (appeasing?) Japan. When US policy began to shift toward collective security in 1938, it was the threat to the world order in Europe, not Asia, that was central.

For most of the 1960s and 1970s, Borg devoted herself to historiographic concerns and development of the field. In 1966 she persuaded the Association of Asian Studies (AAS) to hold a session on “Historians and American Far Eastern Policy” at its annual meeting. She compiled the papers and comments and had them published by the East Asian Institute at Columbia, where she was now an unpaid research associate. In her introductory remarks she called on diplomatic historians to learn to use Asian sources and on East Asianists to work on relations between the United States and Asia. And in 1969 she arranged for an extraordinary binational conference at Lake Kawaguchi, the papers for which became the prize-winning *Pearl Harbor as*

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<sup>3</sup> Borg, *The United States and the Far Eastern Crisis of 1933-1938* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964).

*History: Japanese-American Relations 1931-1941.*<sup>4</sup> The conference paired Japanese and American scholars in sessions that dealt with their respective leaders, militaries, business, public opinion, political parties, the press, and intellectuals.

In the years that followed she devoted much of her time to working with younger scholars who were attracted to her conception of American-East Asian relations. Among these I would include Bruce Cumings, Rosemary Foot, Lloyd Gardner, Waldo Heinrichs, Michael Hunt, Akira Iriye, Steven Levine, Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, Marilyn Blatt Young, and myself. She never stopped looking for bright young men and women to recruit to the field. All of us have raised the kind of questions Borg demanded. Most used East Asian language materials—and all are more understanding of the Asian context than was an earlier generation of scholars. Much has been accomplished, but Borg would be the last to argue that our work is done.

One last characteristic to which I would point was her unending search for new questions to ask, new methods to use. Not realizing that she, too, was mortal, I assumed that long after those I've named had retired to defend the interpretations of our youth against the next generation, Dorothy Borg would be urging our grandchildren to answer the questions we never asked, using the methods we never mastered.

### Participants:

**Warren I. Cohen** is Distinguished University Professor, Emeritus, at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County and Michigan State University. He has written 13 books and edited eight others. He is currently preparing a new edition of *East Asia at the Center*. He has served as editor of *Diplomatic History*, president of the Society of Historians of American Foreign relations, and chairman of the Department of State Advisory Committee on Historical Diplomatic Documentation. He has been a consultant on Chinese affairs for various governmental organizations

**Akira Iriye** is Charles Warren Professor of American History, Emeritus, Harvard University. His publications include *Cultural Internationalism and World Order* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (University of California Press, 2004), and *The Globalizing of America: American Foreign Relations, 1913-1945*, Volume III of *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations*, ed., Warren I. Cohen (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

**Lloyd C. Gardner** is Professor Emeritus of History at Rutgers University. A Wisconsin Ph.D., he is the author or editor of more than fifteen books on American foreign policy, including *Safe for Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 1984), *Approaching Vietnam* (W.W. Norton, 1988), *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Ivan R. Dee, 1995), and *The War on Leakers* (The New Press, 2016). He has been president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations.

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<sup>4</sup> Borg, *Pearl Harbor as History: Japanese-American Relations 1931-1941* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973).

Essay by Lloyd C. Gardner, Rutgers University, Emeritus

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*Meeting a Legend*

I was sitting in my office in Bishop House, the nineteenth-century mansion that had once belonged to the man who lost out in the patent fights for vulcanized rubber to Harvey Firestone. Mr. Bishop's family had given the White Elephant to Rutgers University. Thus it became, appropriately enough some would argue, the home of a discipline concerned with past failures. So much for that. At any rate I was there for office hours—that time when students are supposed to bond, however briefly or inconsequentially, with their instructors. As was often the case no one had yet stopped by.

During some of those vacant times, I had stepped from my office, leaving the door open, to the one next to me on the third floor where Eugene Genovese and I played an occasional game of chess. Once I remember, Gene was quite agitated. The FBI had paid him one of its frequent visits seeking information about his contacts within the Communist Party.

But again, enough of that. The phone rang and I picked up the receiver. “This is Dorothy Borg, am I speaking to Lloyd Gardner?” For a second or two I could not answer. A flood of memories of graduate school simply blotted out present reality, the early spring of 1968. Instead, I was thinking about a book Fred Harvey Harrington had assigned in my first semester of graduate school at the University of Wisconsin in the fall of 1956. It was by my caller, and the title was *American Policy and the Chinese Revolution, 1925-1928*.<sup>1</sup> The book was among the very first I read in the fall of 1956 as I began a graduate and professional career deeply involved in the responses to twentieth-century revolutions. My senior thesis at Ohio Wesleyan had been on Woodrow Wilson and Mexico. But now I wanted to see how policymakers viewed and tried to cope with the challenges presented by Russia and China as well.

Those first books one reads in graduate school often leave lasting impressions, and this was certainly the case for me in grasping for a hold on how American policymakers attempted to deal with the Chinese Revolution as it developed over what the French might call the *longue durée*. Her book was a beginning point for understanding why Americans had moved to “contain” Japan in the 1920s within the structures of the Washington Naval Conference, and why that effort was doomed to fail. She thus became one of my mentors for life. But I never expected a phone call inviting me to participate in a conference with other American and Japanese historians on the subject of Pearl Harbor as history.

After I said an astonished yes, Dorothy turned the phone over to Ernest May, the famed Harvard historian, who was one of the American organizers of the proposed conference to meet at Lake Kawaguchi in July 1969. I was to prepare a paper on the Commerce and Treasury Departments in the decade 1931-1941. Apparently, one of the two had read my book, *Economic Aspects of New Deal Diplomacy*, and determined that was the proper topic for me to undertake. My book appeared the same year as Dorothy's great second book, *The United States and the Far Eastern Crisis of 1933-1938*.<sup>2</sup> The idea of this binational effort, with teams of

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<sup>1</sup> Dorothy Borg, *American Policy and the Chinese Revolution, 1925-1928* (New York: American Institute of Pacific Relations and Macmillan, 1947).

<sup>2</sup> Borg, *The United States and the Far Eastern Crisis of 1933-1938* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964).

scholars taking up matching topics in government departments and some private interests, was to approach the subject of Pearl Harbor as an endpoint in the big picture of Japanese-American competition across Asian frontiers.<sup>3</sup> After I responded to Professor May, he turned the phone back to Dorothy who explained that the American side of the conference would be organized by the Columbia East Asian Institute, and that a preparatory conference would be held in New York later in the year.

In the meantime, she said, she would come out to New Brunswick on the bus to talk specifically with me about what was expected of participants. Would I be available to meet her at the bus stop the following Tuesday? Or maybe it was Wednesday, or Thursday, for of course I can't remember after all these years exactly what day was set for this dramatic meeting with the author. *But what I do remember with absolute precision was my first view of this slim, elegant, woman getting off the bus.* She came down the steps dressed in a black coat, her white hair held in place with a ribbon and a cameo, spotting me with piercing eyes that seemed to see right through you.

“Where can we get some ice cream?” those were Dorothy's first words to me. I hardly knew where the bus stop was in New Brunswick because we always went to New York by train in those days. As for knowing where to get ice cream within walking distance of the bus stop, I was flummoxed. Fortunately, I did spy out a luncheon spot that proved the answer and allowed me to breathe a sigh of relief at not failing this first test. Back in those days before much of the rebuilding of downtown New Brunswick had taken place it was not the easiest thing to find in a hurry.

Once we were seated and had settled into ice cream, Dorothy put down her spoon and began a lecture on the do's and don'ts for the conference. The big don't was that we were not allowed to take any money from the U.S. government to travel around Japan and East Asia giving lectures. “The Japanese are very particular about that,” she said with an especially stern gaze that riveted me to the booth cushions. I was informed that the Conference would fund airfare and hotel rooms for my wife and myself. It was, to put it simply, the first big invitation of my career to participate in such a project.

We then enjoyed the rest of our treat and she noted the time for a returning bus to the City. I had not worn an overcoat to meet Dorothy, and by the time we left the dinette it was getting quite cool. As we waited at the stop, I shuffled my feet a bit, prompting Dorothy to ask with some emphasis, “Do you always move around like that?” I could have sunk into the ground, six feet or more. No, I assured her, just a bit cold I guess. She nodded and then the bus came and our first meeting was over.

Frankly, I feared I had failed the test. But from the first night in Japan I realized I had the wrong impression. Dorothy was by turns serious, solicitous, and just plain fun to be with at all times. She did not give a paper at the conference, but she was in every one of them. This was the beginning of a relationship that lasted until her death—and after, along with the dozens of others that she had come in contact with, aided, and befriended. We saw each other but a few times over the years, but always on memorable occasions. We went to dinner with her in Greenwich Village once or twice, I lectured for some of the students at the East Asia

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<sup>3</sup> We were later told by someone after the conference that the Japanese historians approached the subject as fated to end the way it did in war, while the Americans looked for escape routes along the way. And that we convinced one another. Post conference positions were reversed! I don't know if that was really the case, but it is an interesting comment.

Institute, and I went to New York to see her with another great friend, Christopher Thorne, when he came over and stayed with us at the time he received the Bancroft Prize for *Allies of a Kind*.<sup>4</sup>

They chatted together after I left, and I learned later from Chris that a big topic of discussion was about Sir John Pratt in the British Foreign Office. Dorothy, according to Chris, had been upset at an Institute of Pacific Relations meeting during World War II, when she told Sir John that Britain would have to give up Hong-Kong. He had said, “Dorothy, in my heart I believe Hong Kong must be British.” But, replied Chris, what you don’t know is that in Foreign Office debates, Sir John had in fact advised returning Hong Kong to China. She smiled and the conversation ended on a good note. I have never asked anyone about whether Dorothy Borg had been a key voice in nominating Chris for the prize. I have long suspected that she might have been.

Over the years we corresponded and talked on the telephone. A second time she came out to Rutgers was to attend a seminar given by Owen Lattimore. She was accompanied this time by her good friend in the Columbia History Department, Carol Gluck. Lattimore and Borg had known one another for a long time, perhaps from pre-World War II days, and it was a delightful afternoon as Lattimore recalled at one point a trip on a train with many American missionaries heading someplace in China. Suddenly the train stopped in the middle of nowhere, and the Chinese passengers got out and stood admiring of a mountain view. When told that the mountain was sacred, one of the missionary wives commented that she “would not honor some heathen mountain.” I remember Dorothy’s smile, and her smiles other times about friends in the IPR, Frank Merrill of Merrill’s Marauders fame, and Frederick V. Field.

Later I would learn of those (not all, of course, because there were so many) she had befriended and aided over the years from their graduate student days and in their academic careers, perhaps best of all, my collaborator on several edited books and great good friend, Marilyn Young. Dorothy Borg was a very special person, and I feel privileged to have known her and learned from her. She reached out and touched the lives of more than a generation of young scholars with a magic wand of friendship that would create an informal group today known as the “Borgians.”

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<sup>4</sup> Christopher Thorne, *Allies of a Kind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

**Essay by Akira Iriye, Harvard University, Emeritus**

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I first met Dorothy Borg in September 1957, when I started my graduate studies in history at Harvard University. She had been invited by John Fairbank, professor of Chinese history who was a member of a newly established program in what was then called “American-Far Eastern Relations.” The program had been designed to bring together specialists in US history and East Asian history, and to encourage students to study both fields so that they would eventually write dissertations dealing with US relations with one or more of the East Asian countries. The initial membership on the committee included John K. Fairbank in Chinese history and Oscar Handlin and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in US history. During the academic year 1956-1957 the committee widely advertised its program in colleges and universities so that their students, in particular those in the process of applying to graduate school, would consider the new field.

At that time, I was a senior at Haverford College, majoring in history, with a focus on modern Britain. I was interested in continuing my studies in graduate school and applied to Harvard and several other universities. When the historians on Harvard’s new committee saw my application, they got in touch with me and invited me to come to Cambridge for an interview. So I spent the Thanksgiving recess in November 1956 visiting Harvard and meeting with Fairbank, Handlin, and others. It so happened that the professor who had headed Harvard’s British history program had just been appointed president of Radcliffe College, and thus it would be rather difficult for me to study with him as a graduate student. But Fairbank and other members of the committee encouraged me to apply to the new program. That would mean switching from the study of British history, on which I was focusing as an undergraduate under the guidance of Wallace MacCaffery, to US and Asian history. He was spending that year in Cambridge University as a Rhodes scholar, so I wrote to him for advice. He thought this would be an excellent opportunity to continue my study of history, especially as the new committee at Harvard was offering a substantial scholarship—\$5,000 per year, if I remember correctly—so that I would not have to worry about tuition and living expenses as a graduate student. It was a very fortunate development for me personally, and I have never regretted the switch.

So I went to Cambridge in September 1957. And there I met Dorothy Borg, who was visiting Harvard University as a guest of the Far Eastern Research Center, which was under the leadership of Fairbank. She had published in 1947 her first book, *American Policy and the Chinese Revolution, 1925-1928*, and was at that time one of a few scholars working on the history of US-East Asian relations.<sup>1</sup> The book’s strength lies in its thorough documentation, mostly on the basis of published material. (At that time State Department archives for the 1920s were not yet open to research.) It may have been at one of the Thursday afternoon teas that the Fairbanks held at their house to which they invited graduate students and other guests that I first met Dorothy. She was very kind and cordial to junior scholars and graduate students, and we spent many hours with her discussing her and our projects. It would be no exaggeration to say that the students who met her remained within her circle of young colleagues.

Re-reading her book today, I am as impressed as ever with her determination to make US-East Asian relations a major field of study. Thanks to her initiative, a number of scholarly conferences were organized, and she was always eager to attend and interact with the participants. I especially remember the international conference convened in Japan in 1973 to which she came. The conference was organized by James W. Morley (Columbia University), Hosoya Chihiro (Hitotsubashi University), and others. I was among the small number of junior participants, and I still recall the freshness and excitement that we all felt at this remarkable gathering. It would be no exaggeration to say that Dorothy was one of the founders of the scholarly field of the history of US-East Asian relations.

The field has continued to thrive, but today it seems to have developed in ways that Dorothy may not have entirely anticipated. First, more and more historians in the field seem capable of using original sources in Chinese, Japanese, and other Asian languages. This is in part due to the fact that such material has become available to research, whether

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<sup>1</sup> Dorothy Borg, *American Policy and the Chinese Revolution, 1925-1928*. (New York: American Institute of Pacific Relations and Macmillan, 1947).



archival or in print, and that an increasing number of scholars from these countries are publishing in English. Western scholars, too, are eager to learn one or more of these languages so that their work may become “multi-archival,” a requirement that would have been unthinkable for Dorothy’s generation of scholars. But even more importantly, the field today tends to be considered an aspect of international history – or global history, as it has become more and more common to refer to it. Global history presupposes that all national histories as well as the history of international relations must be comprehended within a world (global) framework. Toward the end of the twentieth century, in particular during the 1970s, historians began to recognize that national and regional histories make sense only within a global framework. There is nothing so unique about a country’s development that it can be understood without reference to what is happening elsewhere. National history is too narrow a framework, not only because the world’s nations and peoples are interdependent but also, more fundamentally, because nations have been around for a relatively brief period of time, compared to human beings endowed with such existential identities as gender, age, and race. All subjects, including US-East Asian relations, must be understood in the context of these identities.

Global history as an overarching framework for the study of history is likely to stay. Although few of us would feel confident in dealing with more than a handful of languages, we would still be well advised to put our subjects in that larger framework. There was a time, for instance during the 1950s when my generation of historians studied history in colleges and graduate schools, when the idea of national uniqueness was extremely influential. When I went to graduate school to study history, Americanist faculty often told us that there was something very unique about US history, including individual Americans. As one of our professors told us, you could always tell an American no matter where you were in the world. But the same thing was being said by scholars in other countries. The study of the past was a way to explore the uniqueness of each country. It was probably also during the 1970s that such intellectual parochialism began to give way to a broader, more global perspective. Globalization of scholarship is frequently challenged, but it not likely to go away. This is fundamentally because we are all global beings.

Such a perspective may not have appeared plausible to Dorothy’s generation, but she would have understood its implications. She was always open to foreign scholars and students, freely mingling with them at academic settings and conferences, in the United States and abroad. She was a globally oriented scholar long before the coming of the age of globalization.