

H-Diplo ESSAY 190

Essay Series on **Learning the Scholar's Craft: Reflections of Historians and International Relations Scholars**
12 February 2020

How I Got from There to Here

<https://hdiplo.org/to/E190>

Series Editor: Diane Labrosse | Production Editor: George Fujii

ESSAY BY A. G. HOPKINS, UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE, EMERITUS

Comments and cautions about a life committed to writing abound and have probably been with us since script was invented. Five hundred years ago, Erasmus assailed the scholarly life in a satire that sharpened the edge of truth to cutting point: “people who use their erudition to write for a learned minority... do not seem to me favoured by fortune but rather to be pitied for their continuous self-torture. They add, change, remove, lay aside, take up, rephrase, show to their friends, keep for nine years and are never satisfied.” And that is the good news. As matters progress: “their health deteriorates, their looks are destroyed, they suffer partial or total blindness, poverty, ill-will, denial of pleasure, premature old age and early death.”¹ Read on, if your courage permits.

This seemingly perverse yet freely-chosen occupation is only partly motivated by what George Orwell called “sheer egoism.”² Subtler motives, including ‘the historical impulse’, combined with particularities of circumstance, provide a starting point for understanding why we volunteer for this unusual form of hardship. My own case is necessarily an individual one but is also, so I believe, broadly representative of many others who choose to write for a ‘learned minority.’

My parents grew up in the East End of London long before gentrification had touched the area. My father was born into a family of lightermen, who worked the boats on the Thames; my mother was born into— well I am not exactly sure (and nor was she) because she was illegitimate and began (and ended) her life as a cleaner. My father was brought up by Uncle Joe, the most ‘famous’ member of the family, which measured fame in gradations that rose to the height of becoming sparring partners with some of the famous boxers of the day. But Uncle Joe was different. He had a few books and a phonograph, and he was an active member of the Labour Party, then in its early days. Uncle Joe was the formative influence on my father, who was only seven years old when his own father died. It was from Uncle Joe that my father acquired a love of music, a detailed knowledge of Shakespeare, and a commitment to progressive politics. My father wanted to be a teacher but the educational opportunities of the time ensured that his ambition, which was well above his station, was frustrated. Instead, he and my mother ensured that their son, a prospective B picture hero, had the educational opportunities they had been denied. In this regard, they were following an established trail, though whether they were aware of their own place in the long line of parents who realised their dreams through their children, I am unable to say.

My education made it evident that I could do one thing reasonably well and many others indifferently. My only strength lay in reading. I had read from an early age and in my early teens I extended my net to catch the novels of the time, from H. G. Wells to George Orwell via A. J. Cronin, and was lured into deeper waters by the promise of the Thinker’s Library with its impressive image of Rodin’s sculpture on the spine. I never lost my interest in literature, but history captured and detained

¹ Desiderius Erasmus, *In Praise of Folly* (London, written 1509, published 1511; London: Penguin, 1971), 148.

² George Orwell, ‘Why I Write’, *Gangrel*, Summer 1946; reprinted in *Such, Such Were the Joys* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1953), ch. 1.

me because it seemed to offer a route towards understanding many of the dilemmas of the time. My family's political leanings may also have turned me in this direction; if so, however, the influence was a sub-conscious one.

All British school-children are aware of the vagaries of the history syllabus. In my day, you might study Rome and World War I but almost nothing in between, or something in between but nothing at either end. My particular focus was something in between, the Tudors and Stuarts, and I carried this interest, rather unadventurously it now seems to me, into university. I had the good fortune at London University to work with or, more appropriately under, two great historians, S. T. Bindoff and Joel Hurstfield, whose interests lay mainly in economic and social history. Coincidentally, it was at this time (the late 1950s) that the first books on development economics were being published. Following a lead from my seniors, I began to think of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries less as the 'unrewarding story of the gyrations of barbarous' kings and princes (to adapt Trevor-Roper's dismissive remarks about African history), and more as a case study in the history of underdevelopment.³

On graduating, my tentative plan was to undertake research into the merchants of Stuart London. The idea underlying this proposal was to contribute to one of the great historical debates of the time, the development of capitalism, which was then conceived as a transformation emerging from feudalism. Two considerations caused me to pause. The subject had already added lustre to great names and made reputations among those who followed them. It was not evident, at least to me, that I could contribute anything significant to research that had already been completed. A more positive reflection came from my reading of the early literature on development economics. Might it be possible to take the rise of capitalism and explore its history, or lack of it, elsewhere? The risks, in terms of source materials and job prospects were greater than staying in an established field, but the potential, which I saw with all the optimism and innocence of youth, was irresistible. Instead of putting another brick in the wall, there might be a chance to design some of the architecture.

Motive combined with circumstance. There was little institutional guidance because Area Studies in Britain had yet to be established. Instead, I conducted a rapid tour of the world from the comfort of the university library and imposed on the time of some of the notable scholars of the day. These forays eventually led me to John Fage, who had just returned from Ghana to join the School of Oriental & African Studies. With John's encouragement, I decided to carry my interest in the development of capitalism and 'the rise of an African merchant class' to West Africa. In the event, my Ph.D. took a different tack. Senior scholars in African Studies advised that I would be unlikely to find sufficient material on this subject. Instead, my dissertation was a fail-safe exercise outlining the economic history of Lagos during the second half of the nineteenth century. My first, and considerable, contribution to scholarship was to refrain from publishing it. Instead, I produced a number of articles based on my research, including some on the merchant community. As is often the case, once I was on the ground and asking appropriate questions, I found that information was forthcoming. By that time, however, it was too late for me to return to the dissertation I had hoped to write.

Circumstance again came to my rescue. Centres of Area Studies were being created in Britain just as I was finishing my Ph.D., and I had the good fortune to be appointed to a junior position in the new Centre of West African Studies at the University of Birmingham, which was founded in 1963. My mandate was to devise a course on the economic history of West Africa. Youthful enthusiasm assisted by an unacknowledged measure of ignorance encouraged the wide (and probably wild) generalisations that carried the course through various transmutations and led to my first book, *An Economic History of West Africa*, which was published in 1973.⁴

This simple and straightforward title would not be approved today, when eye-catching and often misleading claims are advertised to promote 'name recognition.' The content, however, reflected the qualities I have ascribed to my teaching at the

³ Hugh Trevor Roper, *The Rise of Christian Europe* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1965), 9. The original phrase depicted the history of Africa as being "the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe."

⁴ A. G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa*, 2nd ed. (Harlow: Routledge, 2019 [1973]).

time. The book had a broad, unifying theme, based on the concept of the market, which served as a vantage point for examining the resource endowment, factor proportions, and the resulting pattern of economic activities throughout the region. The aim was to describe the particular configuration of underdevelopment that characterised West Africa and to show how an association of internal and external influences altered the composition and size of market activity—from the pre-colonial period to the end of colonial rule. The book generated some discussion at the time and rather more as the subject expanded. The second edition, which appeared in 2019, provides a guide to the important contributions that have been made during the nearly 50 years since the book was published—somewhat later than the author intended.

This exceptionally long delay occurred because I had become involved in another venture, a reinterpretation of British imperialism. My interest in West Africa remained but my time for research became divided between two fields. In addition, by the 1980s, a new generation of well-trained graduates had entered African history and were driving the frontiers of the subject forward in ways that exceeded my own capabilities. My *Economic History of West Africa* had consumed the best of my big ideas and I was not attracted by the option of defending my interpretation against all-comers. I had made my statement; it was for others to adapt, refute, and improve as they saw fit. Some Africanists regarded my move into imperial history as a backward step. It is certainly the case that imperial history had become almost instantly unfashionable following the rise of Area Studies. Yet, the imperial component remained an important part of the history of Africa and other parts of the world that had felt the effects of Western influence and control. The dependency thesis had recognised its relevance in assigning the West a prominent part in the underdevelopment of Africa, but this was one line of enquiry that left aside many other possibilities.

My *Economic History* attempted to establish the framework for a subject that was scarcely known. The two volumes, entitled *British Imperialism, 1688-1990* (1993), written with my friend and colleague, Peter Cain, attempted to change the framework of a subject that was already very well known.⁵ The principal interpretations had long been dug into trenches that separated Marxists from their enemies. The desultory exchange of fire continued without either side waving a white flag. Our interpretation attempted to cut across conventional battle lines by revising the assumptions about modernity that Marxists and their opponents both shared. We drew on recent research to give prominence to financial and commercial services, a sector that had long been underestimated and sometimes even ignored in standard accounts of economic history. It was this sector, led by a group we termed ‘gentlemanly capitalists,’ that stood in the vanguard of the particular form of capitalist modernity that characterised Britain and was a key explanation of economic policy at home and expansion overseas. This argument, crudely summarised here, has also generated a substantial discussion. Fortunately, the second and third editions (2002 and 2016) appeared with uncharacteristic speed.

The connection between the two books is closer than might appear from their titles. Both are joined by the link with empire, the former as part of what used to be called the ‘periphery,’ the latter by its focus on impulses stemming from the metropolis. Both are concerned with the origins and development of capitalism, albeit under very different circumstances. Both have in common the perception (derived largely from my work on Africa) that ‘traditional’ societies are far more flexible and forward-looking than stereotypes allow. Many gentlemanly capitalists were traditional landowners or closely connected to them. High finance harnessed established social and political networks and offered opportunities for gain without loss of status. Industry, by contrast, was regarded as a demeaning occupation that no gentleman would willingly associate himself with. On this occasion, the bourgeoisie did not play a revolutionary part.

The debate over gentlemanly capitalism ran uncomfortably alongside the burgeoning influence of postmodernism. While we were giving publicity to the long-run evolution of capitalism and its global ramifications, postmodernists were denouncing the ‘totalising project’ and ‘structuralism’, and questioning the legitimacy of concepts such as material reality. This trend was not so much alarming as depressing. Among the most considerable of its consequences was the elimination of poverty as a subject of historical research. Critics of postmodernism had enough firepower to hole the ship below the

⁵ Hopkins, *British Imperialism, 1688-1990*, 3rd ed. (Harlow: Longman, 2016).

waterline but it sailed on for some years before sinking quietly in the early years of the present century. As Thomas Kuhn almost said: a model is not defeated by contrary facts; only by another model.⁶

I was among those trying to find a way forward. Stimulated by postmodernism, I turned to the new literature on globalisation, which in the 1990s was the province of social scientists other than historians. My exploration led to a book of prospective essays, *Globalization in World History*, written with Cambridge colleagues and published in 2002.⁷ The aim was to set out an agenda for what might become a new subject. Accordingly, we discussed the concept, identified opportunities and dangers, and sketched phases of globalisation to provide a sense of historical movement. We made it clear, too, that globalisation had different centres of diffusion and was not just another example of 'the Rise of the West and the Fall of the Rest.' I think it is correct to say that this was the first book by historians on the subject. But if we thought that Clio had touched us on the shoulder, we were disappointed. The book was eventually recognised and has now been widely cited. At the time of publication, however, the profession had still to appreciate the potential of the subject, so fame passed us quietly by without a glance.

The destruction of the Twin Towers in 2001 was an event that made it impossible to believe that material forces were merely symbolic. I arrived in Boston on the evening of 9/11, and the smoke and dust were still in the air when I reached New York shortly afterwards. I had taken early retirement and was on my way (via a semester at Harvard) to take up a post at the University of Texas at Austin. Once installed, I disinterred the drafts of the second edition of my *Economic History of West Africa* and had made progress with a chapter on the period since 1960 when President George Bush authorised the invasion of Iraq in March 2003. I was so appalled by what seemed to me, as to many others, to be a huge catastrophe in the making that I felt compelled to learn more about the roots of U.S. foreign policy, not least because numerous commentators were treating the episode as evidence of the rise of a new empire. One question, urgently asked, was whether the United States was the new Rome. Another, rarely put, was whether it was an old Spain failing to observe that the sun was setting.

This new preoccupation, perhaps even obsession, caused me to abandon my drafts on West Africa and begin to study the history of the United States. At my age and stage this was a foolish undertaking. Historians of empire took ship with the British troops in 1783 and did not return until the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, and then only tentatively. Few of us had any knowledge of what went on in the United States between these dates; we had our hands full conquering the rest of the world.

The result of my efforts, *American Empire: A Global History*, was published in 2018.⁸ The only contribution I could think of making to an immense and daunting historiography was to view standard themes from the perspective of imperial history. The analysis set the United States in the context of the development of the Western world and gave prominence to economic influences that joined the two but had lost visibility. Thus, the Revolution was linked to the fiscal crisis that overtook Europe in the late eighteenth century. The first half of the nineteenth century showed how a newly-decolonised state struggled to secure effective independence while still under the influence of the former colonial power. The period after the Civil War saw the rise of the industrial nation-state, an extended economic crisis, and the acquisition of a territorial empire, just as it did in Europe. The second half of the book focused on the insular empire in the Pacific and Caribbean between 1898, when the flag was run up, and 1959, when it was taken down. Extraordinary though it may seem, the last

⁶ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962). It is only when sufficient anomalies accumulate that pressure is generated to develop an alternative paradigm.

⁷ Hopkins, ed., *Globalization in World History* (London: Pimlico, 2002).

⁸ Hopkins, *American Empire: A Global History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

book to provide a comprehensive survey of U.S. colonial rule was published in 1962.⁹ There was a ‘gap to be filled’ and an analysis of the colonial record to be made.

Taken as a whole, the trajectory of U.S. development and colonial expansion from the eighteenth century to the end of empire had much more in common with trends in Western Europe than historians have recognised. To this extent, the United States was entirely unexceptional, even though ‘exceptionalism’ remains ingrained in the psyche of the average American citizen.

The book certainly challenged the author and it is likely to challenge readers too. It pulled together many of the interests I had developed during the decades since I first fastened upon the Tudors and Stuarts. My abiding interest in capitalism runs throughout the book. Phases of globalisation are used to determine key chronological divisions. Imperial ambitions jostle the United States into an awkward association with Old Europe. My knowledge of African history helped me to see imperialism from the perspective of the recipients and not just the promoters. My long-standing literary interests are evident in the sections on cultural activities. These themes, large in themselves, stretch the reader over three centuries. In the face of these demands, reviewers have so far shown considerable tolerance.¹⁰

What value might these reflections have for those still at the outset of a life that Erasmus called ‘continuous self-torture’? We need only nod towards my own motivation, which seems to be a familiar case of a son seeking satisfaction, and perhaps justification, by trying to realise the opportunities made possible by parental self-denial. One other consequence has affected me profoundly but cannot be inferred from what I have said so far. I have always treated ‘the book,’ which was a rarity in my early years, with the reverence due to a symbol of the highest standards of scholarship. This perception has made me a careful writer but also a slow one, though I can no longer say how far the characteristic stems from anxiety about disappointing my parents’ expectations or concern about my own. Despite these worries, I have avoided the most baleful of Erasmus’s predictions, poverty and an early death, and I also hope that my journey has not generated too much ill-will. At the same time, my youthful looks, such as they were, have undoubtedly been run over by time’s steamroller. Additionally, I shall have to plead guilty to the charge of denying myself pleasure and hope that extenuating circumstances will lead to a light sentence.

On balance, there is much to raise the spirits of both apprentices and craftsmen. It is a huge privilege to enter a career that brings both self-education and the prospect of adding to the knowledge of others. Moreover, writing becomes easier, though never easy, with experience, which increases confidence and encourages the imagination to roam. Nowadays, too, there are mundane aids, almost compulsions, to academic writing. The demands of tenure and the elevation of quantity as a metric for advancement reduce both the time and the need to polish a phrase or hone an analogy. Style may still be, as Peter Gay put it, “the art of the historian’s science,” but few of us now set aside the time needed to become artists.¹¹ Fortunately, authors rarely allow themselves to experience serious disappointment. For them, effort is itself achievement, and the prospect of making the next book better by aiming higher is an incentive that rarely fails to work its magic. As Robert Browning said of the painter, Andrea del Sarto, “a man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s a heaven for?”¹² As for myself, I still think that tomorrow is the day I am going to be found out.

⁹ Whitney T. Perkins, *Denial of Empire: The United States and its Dependencies* (Leiden: A.W. Sijthoff, 1962).

¹⁰ H-Diplo Roundtable XX-33 (23 April 2019) on the book provides a valuable assessment, <http://www.tiny.cc/Roundtable-XX-33>

¹¹ Peter Gay, *Style in History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1974), 218.

¹² Robert Browning, “Andrea del Sarto,” in *Men and Women* (London: Ticknor & Fields, 1855), 187. Del Sarto could paint to perfection but was criticised (and criticised himself) for not being able to reach far enough to capture the soul in his subject.

Tony Hopkins is Emeritus Smuts Professor of Commonwealth History at Cambridge and Emeritus Walter Prescott Webb Chair in History at the University of Texas in Austin. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of London, honorary doctorates from the Universities of Stirling and Birmingham, and is a Fellow of the British Academy. He has written extensively on African history, imperial history, and globalization. His publications include: *An Economic History of West Africa* (Longman, 1973), *British Imperialism*, written with P. J. Cain (Longman, 1993; 3rd ed. 2016); *Globalization in World History* (W.W. Norton, 2001), *Global History: Interactions between the Universal and the Local* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); *American Empire: A Global History* (Princeton University Press, 2018); and numerous scholarly articles.