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Learning the Scholar's Craft: A Journey with Enid Jones, John Hope Franklin, Sir Denis Brogan, Sidney Fine, and Oscar Handlin

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World War II had just ended when my family moved to Harlech, in North Wales. Truckloads of U.S. soldiers were still a common sight in Harlech, and we kids used to run after them. We shouted, “Got any gum chum?” It was one of my first English-language phrases, Welsh being my mother tongue. Exposure to American influences had become a worldwide phenomenon.

Immersion in U.S. history as a discipline was quite another matter. In understanding my own choice, I gained some retrospective understanding as a result of conducting a twenty-year study of student opinion. At the beginning of each academic year, in the very first class meeting of our survey course on American history at the University of Edinburgh, I would ask the enrollees, virgins to the field, why they chose the subject. Among the positive reasons were a liking for American culture, especially music. But one respondent summed up an alternative reason in two sentences: “I always hated America. Your course gives me the opportunity to find out why.”¹

In one of my more recent books, I argued that the United States has a leftist tradition.² However, it took me years to arrive at that conclusion. I originally approached American history after following a left wing trajectory that billed the United States as arch-conservative, arch-capitalist, and hostile to democratic socialism and world peace. My ambition as a very young man was to put things right by going into politics, with the goal of becoming Foreign Secretary in the British government and righting the wrongs of the world. I grew up in an environment of heated political debate. My father had been a founding member of and economic adviser to Plaid Cymru, the political party that agitates for Welsh independence. Then he became a socialist, and, in Plaid's view, a traitor. Aneurin Thomas, the history master in my comprehensive school (high school in U.S. terminology), was a fervent nationalist who berated me for travelling in England and France before getting to know every corner of my native Wales.

There were, however, more cosmopolitan influences. One was Lily Pincus of future psychoanalytical fame, a native of Prague who fled Hitler's persecution and was welcomed in Wales by my mother.³ Lily was always one of my wisest

¹ For a brief summary of the questionnaire outcomes for 1967-1980, see Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, “The Teaching of United States History in British Institutions of Higher Learning,” in Lewis Hanke, ed., *Guide to the Study of United States History Outside the U.S. 1945-1980*, 4 vols. (White Plains: Kraus-Thomson for the American Historical Association, 1985), II, 305-62 at 330-1.

² Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *The American Left: Its Impact on Politics and Society since 1900* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

³ See, inter alia, Lily Pincus and Christopher Dare, *Secrets in the Family* (London: Faber, 1978).

counselors. Another was Father Trevor Huddleston, whom I met at a church conference. He was one of Nelson Mandela's comrades, and inspired me, as a schoolboy, to give a BBC radio talk in Welsh in Mandela's support. That earned me a spate of invective from my teachers, who saw Mandela as a Communist. Yet one of those teachers, the celebrated and bilingual Enid Jones,⁴ put an effort into improving my English language writing skills, and literacy is, of course, an essential ingredient in the historian's toolkit. The acquisition of the scholar's craft is a process of incremental accumulation.

At the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, I continued to be more interested in rebel politics than in academia. The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis convinced me that the United States was a danger to mankind, and I gave an impassioned speech at the Friday night student debating society condemning President John F. Kennedy. Anti-Americanism played at least a part in my decision to take the survey course in American history, followed by the senior honors course on Reconstruction.

The course teacher, Alan Conway, was an unreconstructed Dunning-school Reconstructionist who steered us toward course material that painted a sympathetic picture of the sufferings of the white South. However, he did draw my attention to *Black Reconstruction*, and the W.E.B. DuBois book had a profound influence on my thinking. It began to make me sympathetic to at least one segment in American society.⁵ Conway also agreed to host a talk by John Hope Franklin, then the visiting Pitt Professor of American History at the University of Cambridge. It was on the understanding that, instead of inflaming us with opinions about black history, he would address the issue of historical methodology.

Though I did not realize it at the time, Franklin made a deep impression on me. When you read the following paraphrase of his advice, remember that in those days many of us kept our research notes on 5-by-3 inch index cards: "Amass your cards. Decide on your hypothesis. Now make an outline for your dissertation. Sort your cards into boxes and subcategories according to that outline, taking care to put all your rejects into a separate box. Now gather up your rejects, and sort them in such a way that you can mount an attack on your original hypothesis. Next, write your thesis keeping in mind what faults your critics might find in it." Wise words from the author of *The Militant South*.⁶

Passing the time while I waited for the opportunity to stand for Parliament, I moved to Cambridge University to study for a Ph.D. in American history. Not long after my arrival there, I was struck by Harold Laski's observation that the American labor movement was "naturally marked . . . by violence."⁷ Here was an opportunity for me to write a dissertation showing that backward-looking America embraced violence as a displacement activity to exclude socialism. My dissertation would be on industrial violence in the years 1900-1909, with 1890-1899 as a statistical control period.

In the mid-1960s, Cambridge had no provision for the training of history Ph.D. students. But there were compensatory factors. One was help from my Philadelphian friend and fellow Ph.D. candidate Dustin Mirick, who had obtained an MA at Columbia University, and was versed in the latest U.S. historical methodology skills. They included the punch-card approach to data organization. I had reservations about that because by definition it rested in pre-existing assumptions. By chance, his Cambridge Ph.D. "supervisor" (as advisors are called in the UK) was G. Kitson Clark, a don who had given unusually thorough thought to graduate instruction. As soon as it was published, I purchased Clark's little handbook on

⁴ The novelist Philip Pullman, two years my junior in my comprehensive school, Ysgol Ardudwy, paid several tributes to Enid Jones who was a seminal influence on him. See, for example, the 4 November 2017 BBC Radio 4 Extra broadcast devoted to his relationship with her: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00775zz>.

⁵ W.E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Russel & Russel, 1935).

⁶ John Hope Franklin, *The Militant South, 1800-1861* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1956).

⁷ Harold J. Laski, *The American Democracy: A Commentary and an Interpretation* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1949), 200.

postgraduate research. I found it useful as a student, and later, as a supervisor. Here is one of his little pearls of wisdom: “Resist the temptation to indulge in needless attacks on previously accepted authorities.”⁸

Of further assistance was my own supervisor, Sir Denis Brogan. Reflecting his Irish Catholic background in sectarian Glasgow, Brogan insisted I should look for ethnic explanations of industrial violence. He was thinking of the Molly Maguires, and, in my period, the “National Dynamite Conspiracy” that pitted the Irish Catholic leaders of the Bridgemen’s Union against construction industry businessmen, some of whom had Scottish Protestant ancestry. My rejection of this hypothesis and parting row with Brogan lay behind an ironic congratulations card he sent me on the conferment of my Ph.D. degree: it was a photo of Karl Marx’s tomb in Highgate, London. There was a kind of reverse Celtic chemistry between Sir Denis and me, a personality clash. But he was the author of a classic work on U.S. politics,⁹ and I heeded a good piece of advice he gave me: if you are writing a major work, do not be distracted, and concentrate on that. Furthermore, because of his international renown and extensive travels in the United States, Brogan was able to pick up the phone, and secure for me two excellent American advisors.

The first of these was Sidney Fine, under whom I studied for a year at the University of Michigan.¹⁰ The Cambridge University American history Ph.D. was a sandwich arrangement: a year’s subject-definition and reading in Cambridge, followed by a period of research in the United States, then a year back in England writing up. It was in the course of my year in Ann Arbor that I first encountered the American character, the determination to judge you for what you are, not for the social status of your parents or of your Public (i.e. private) School. I fell in love with that democratic outlook. Without such empathy, no amount of methodology can help a non-American appreciate and understand America.

Sidney would tease me slightly: “Hello, Rhodri, how are you?” “I’m fine” “No, I’m Fine.” He was inspirational. His knowledge of archival sources on U.S. social history was phenomenal, and he dispatched me on rewarding visits to Madison, WI, and Washington, D.C. With good intuition, he introduced me to his colleague Kenneth Boulding, the Liverpoolian economist turned conflict analyst, with whom I had stimulating talks. Whether or not with mischief in mind, he made me attend classes on U.S. industrial relations where the main text was Selig Perlman’s ultra conservative book, *A Theory of the Labor Movement*.¹¹ The outcome of all this was, as Sidney intended, an appreciation of the “Wisconsin school” approach to social history, leading to an interest in historiography, an interest that later carried over into my work on the CIA and FBI.¹²

Sidney’s own 11 a.m. lectures, which I attended religiously, more than made up for the Perlman nonsense. He clung on to those sophomore lectures like a dog with a bone. Every year, he insisted on delivering them, in a large and always full auditorium. Every year, he won the faculty prize for best lecturer. Sidney’s discourses brought to life the main events of American history and their historiography. They gave me broad context not just for my Ph.D. topic, but also for future research projects, and they furnished me with a model for my own teaching.

⁸ G. Kitson Clark, *Guide for Research Students Working on Historical Subjects* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1965), 17.

⁹ Denis W. Brogan, *The American Political System* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1933).

¹⁰ Sidney Fine authored works on U.S. labor history. In the year I first met him, he was about to publish his critique of the nineteenth-century business ethos, *Laissez Faire and the General-Welfare State: A Study of Conflict in American Thought, 1865-1901* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964).

¹¹ Selig Perlman, *A Theory of the Labor Movement* (New York: Macmillan, 1928).

¹² See, for example, Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, “The Historiography of the CIA,” *The Historical Journal*, 23 (June, 1980): 489-96, and “The Historiography of the FBI,” in Loch Johnson, ed., *A Handbook of Intelligence* (New York: Routledge, 2006): 39-51.

After Michigan, it was a summer researching in Washington. Then I had the good fortune of an opportunity to spend a further year in the United States, further filling in my sandwich. This was at Harvard University, where Oscar Handlin directed my studies. Oscar and I were poles apart politically, and potential difficulties loomed when I had a head-on confrontation with the authorities because they refused to let Herbert Aptheker speak on campus. But the chemistry between us in this case worked. Though a Pulitzer Prize winner¹³ and a member of the often stuffy Harvard establishment, he had a humble background, and sympathy with the underdogs about whom I was writing. In spite of being an authority on immigration, he made no objection to my rejection of ethnicity-based interpretation.

I was having analytical difficulties. The facts just wouldn't fit my hypotheses. Oscar encouraged me to overcome the problem by writing papers that would not be part of my dissertation text, but which helped me to grapple with issues. There was one, for example, on the social structure of Rocky Mountain metalliferous mining camps, where serious disorder had taken place. To help clarify my thought on another issue, Oscar sent me down to New Haven to talk to Howard Lamar's Western History seminar on "frontier conditions east of the Mississippi in the 1890s." He kept pushing until I reached my John Hope Franklin-style eureka moment: my working hypothesis was wrong, and the idea, nay myth that industrial violence reached critical proportions by 1910 needed to be (a) re-examined, and (b) explained in political terms.

Oscar Handlin and I never agreed politically. By the age of 25, I had a tenured position at the University of Edinburgh, and soon after that drove him around the city to see the sights. We did the castle, the palace, and other tourist bits. To balance that, I showed him a slum, and then drove him to see some new social housing. "That's what socialism has achieved," I said proudly. "Yes," he replied, "that's socialism for you." He was referring to the drab architecture.

But Handlin continued to support me. Getting your Ph.D. is not the end of your learning curve. When I had been lecturing for three years, he encouraged me to apply for a postdoctoral fellowship at Harvard's Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History, which he directed. It was the opportunity that sidelined my political ambitions, and enabled me to change field – an important step in one's career. With the help of my excellent research assistant Brian Ibsen, I researched for a book on the "social bases of American diplomacy." Simultaneously I started work on the history of American espionage—a natural progression from my Ph.D., which had two chapters on labor spies. Also in that industrious year, I prepared my Ph.D. dissertation for publication.

Now for the final qualities needed by a fully-fledged scholar: patience and persistence. In my time at the Charles Warren Center, Handlin's colleague Bernard Bailyn took an interest in my work. He was on the lookout for contributions to a Harvard journal he was editing that catered for pieces that were too long to be articles, but too short to be books. A revised version of my dissertation went into his journal.¹⁴ This flying start was, however, too good to be true. Trying to find a book publisher for my book on industrial violence, I did eventually succeed—but on the 33rd attempt!¹⁵ As for my book on the social bases of American diplomacy, it never did find a publisher, and it languished ever more dustily on my shelves from its inception to the present day. Readers' reports on the manuscript were not only negative, but also gave opposed and

¹³ The 1952 Pulitzer Prize for History went to Oscar Handlin for *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1951).

¹⁴ Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, "Violence in American History: Plug Uglies in the Progressive Era," *Perspectives in American History* 8 (1974): 465-583.

¹⁵ Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *Violence and Reform in American History* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1978).

confusing advice for revision. It took me years to Balkanize it, and write it again as two separate books.¹⁶ Learning the craft of the historian is one thing, finding publishers quite another. Flexibility and patience are required.

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¹⁶ Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *Changing Differences: Women and the Shaping of American Foreign Policy, 1917-1994* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995) and *Peace Now! American Society and the Ending of the Vietnam War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).