

H-Diplo ESSAY 316

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

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On Becoming an Historian

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We should be wary when we look back at our own lives and try to discern a pattern. Historians know that one of the common fallacies in looking at the past is to assume that things were bound to turn out as they did, to see a chain of causality in what may be random events or simple coincidences. And we should also remind ourselves that success or failure is not due to the individual alone but to circumstances, timing and luck.

If Napoléon Bonaparte had come of age in the *Ancien Régime* and not revolutionary France, his relatively humble origins meant that he would have had little hope of becoming a general and none at all of being the Emperor. And if France had not been the richest country in Europe with a people newly motivated by liberty, equality, and fraternity, Napoléon could not have become master of Europe. Of course it helped that he was a military genius, a great political leader, and a man of boundless ambition and ruthlessness, but in any other age he would have had only a small provincial stage to play on.

I try and tell students—are they more anxious today about the future than we were?—that they cannot and should not plan their careers in every detail. To begin with they are almost certainly going to be disappointed. More importantly, if they keep their eyes fixed on the distant goal they miss what is happening under their noses. They may fail to take an interesting course which will open up new fields of investigation or they may restrict their reading to what they wrongly consider useful books. As I tell them you can never tell what might be useful.

The most important piece of advice I can give those who want to become scholars and make a living at it is to be prepared to take opportunities even if they may not be quite what you want and always be open to following new lines of research. I hope it reassures them when I tell them that I did not plan my career very well. I did not publish my thesis; I did very few articles for learned journals; and I changed my field of research several times. Yet somehow things worked out and I find myself being asked to contribute an essay to H-Diplo on Learning the Scholar's Craft.

I will start with the part played by luck and timing. I was born in Canada in 1943 and so grew up in a peaceful part of the world in a thriving and stable country with good schools and universities. Being a Canadian, as I was to discover, is also an asset in studying international relations. Belonging to a relatively new country which is not and has never been a great power, Canadians have fewer axes to grind and fewer things to be proud—or ashamed of.

I was lucky too in my parents, who believed strongly in education and, as important, in allowing their children to follow their own interests. Our house was full of books and we were encouraged to read whatever we wanted. And our parents told us stories, many of them about when they or their parents were young. History was always there, in the old uniforms that had belonged to grandfathers that we used for dressing up and in the stories my parents told. My father's were about a much smaller and different Toronto or being a doctor in the Canadian navy during the war. My mother remembered a childhood in India and then growing up in London, coming to Canada in 1939 and being unable to get home again.

I also tell my students—they must get so tired of advice—that as I went through high school I was sorting out the subjects I really liked from the ones I didn't much. History made the cut and so for quite a time did English literature and Latin but by the time I was ready for university it was history. I had some good teachers along the way and I owe them a lot but I also remember with gratitude the ones who actively discouraged me. We often underestimate, I think, how showing someone to be wrong is a powerful motivation. I went to a girl's school in England for two years and one of the history teachers, a compelling and forceful woman, disliked me intensely, not I think for what I did so much as for what I was. She loathed Americans and lumped Canadians in with them. "My dear old bird" she would say with contempt, 'we don't do *that* in this country." She told anyone who would listen, including the school's head and my parents, that I would never be able to study history at university. So, yes, I took a certain pleasure in taking my degree in history and doing well at it. I had similar reactions when men were encouraged to go on to graduate school and women were not (this was a long time ago) or when I was told that women did not, perhaps even could not, study military history (not so long ago). Another piece of good fortune was that I went to the University of Toronto in 1962. The History Department was outstanding and, although I was at first too uninformed to realize it, staffed with historians of national and international reputation. And in those days even senior faculty took undergraduates in tutorials and lectured in survey courses. We were taught very well, encouraged to read widely, and shown how to assess and follow the evidence, jettisoning if necessary neat theories. We also wrote lots and our professors rated style and clarity highly.

By another fortunate coincidence my cohort of history students was a particularly strong one. Because the curriculum was highly structured, we took the same compulsory courses in the same order which meant that we got to know each other. Today, with history curricula more like a smorgasbord, students can do four years of an undergraduate degree without ever getting acquainted with anyone else in the same field. We competed of course but, as my old friend Bob Bothwell has written in this series, we also became friends and we learned from each other. We went out to pubs and ate cheap sandwiches and drank beer which, if I remember, was 15 cents a glass. Some of us developed a passion for the Japanese Godzilla movies or spaghetti Westerns.

Yet all the time we kept up a conversation about history. I first heard about Barbara Tuchman—a huge influence—from another student.¹ We argued about politics, for this was the time of challenges from Quebec nationalism to Canadian confederation and turmoil in the United States with the civil rights movement and Vietnam. Some of us, including me, demonstrated outside the American consulate, which was conveniently close to the campus and organized teach-ins and others in our cohort told us we were being naïve. For the most part our friendships held as they have done ever since. When we graduated, in those days together, many of us went on to be professional historians and others went into law or business or government service.

I cannot say that my own intellectual interests were well-established by this point although I do remember thinking that I would never again to do Victorian history so I got rid of all those books. Later on I made the same decision about the First World War. (I have spent a lot of time in second hand bookshops and on line looking for books I once owned.) I applied to Oxford and was accepted, without any clear idea of what I might study. Luckily Oxford could be equally vague and the tutor responsible for the small number of graduate students at my first college suggested I might want to try a two-year B.Phil in Politics. It was an interesting experience; I learned a lot of political theory and about political processes and institutions; and following my interest in military history I wrote a thesis on the Indian army since independence. What I also learned is that I am not a natural political scientist. I don't ask those sorts of questions and I am not drawn by grand explanatory schemes. Rather than wondering if, say, a breakdown in the balance of power or alliance systems lead to war, I want to know who made the decisions, what they were thinking and the steps that got them there.

When I finished my B.Phil I was able to get a grant from the Canadian government to do a doctorate. My application must have conveyed a dedication to scholarship, but my motives, as often, were mixed. I was having a very good time in Oxford and wanted to stay on. I also decided to switch colleges because I had got to know people at the St Antony's which was, and

¹ Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Zimmermann Telegram* (New York: Viking Press, 1958); Tuchman, *The Proud Tower* (New York: MacMillan, 1966).

this was an innovation for Oxford, only for graduate students, and which focussed mainly on international and regional studies. I probably went for the social life—which was wonderful—but the move was one of the best things I ever did. In that much overused phrase, it was life-changing. The College fellows included leading experts in international relations as well as Russia, Eastern Europe, Asia, Latin America or the Middle East and my fellow students came from around the world as they still do today. Paul Kennedy and Modris Ecksteins were slightly ahead of me and Richard J. Evans, Rashid Khalidi and Jonathan Israel were contemporaries.

The College was small enough that we all knew each other. Fellows and students chatted over meals and in seminars. We went to parties together. At one point we gambled together when I and the Steward ran a consortium for buying tickets for the football pools. The then Warden, Raymond Carr, the distinguished historian of modern Spain, always took two shares, one for the College, which was always short of funds, and one for himself. Without fully realizing it, I was filling in huge gaps in my knowledge, whether about the Middle East or Latin America. I was also meeting people in different fields, anthropology or sociology for example. Scholarship in history, I have come to think, should always be prepared to draw on the insights and methods of other disciplines.

My original thesis topic was the defence policy of the Indian government since 1947 but after a certain amount of research I came to the conclusion that India might not have yet worked out a coherent strategy to deal with the threats from Pakistan and China and that if it had it wasn't going to be telling foreign researchers what it was. I mentioned this to Theodore Zeldin, then the Senior Tutor and, although I didn't know it, working on what was to be his extraordinary history of love, politics and ambition in the Third Republic.² He suggested staying with India but changing topics completely to look at the structure and nature of the ruling British community during the Raj. I took to the idea with relief and considerable enthusiasm.

Oxford fortunately had excellent resources on British India and was one of the few places in the United Kingdom at the time with expertise in the region. I went to seminars run by Jack Gallagher and Frederick Madden and later on by Ronald Robinson, where I met both the next generations of experts and older ones who had actually worked for the Raj and could tell us what they had experienced. I read government reports, memoirs with titles like *Life and Sport in Assam* (or Madras or the Punjab) and dozens of not very good novels. Unlike graduate students of today, who can make quick trips to archives and libraries and photograph thousands of documents, we had to sit reading and transcribing for weeks and months.

So I went to India for a year to look at the National Archives and National Library as well key state archives. I lived for a time in Delhi, then went to Calcutta and Bombay and on to Pakistan, to Lahore where the Punjab archives were in a Mughal tomb and the labels in the Museum had been written by Rudyard Kipling's father when he was curator. The advantages of such a long research trip, I have since realized, are great. First, because I was copying by hand I was having to select the key points in documents. We tended to use file cards and so I was also beginning to sort my observations into categories. Without my knowing it my thesis was starting to take shape. Second I learned for myself what it meant to live in a different culture, often to feel lonely and out of place, and to see my own world from outside. I remember the slight shock when an Indian newspaper talked about the Near West to realize that it was what I knew as the Middle East.

My thesis eventually done and passed I had to think about finding a job.³ I wanted to go back to Canada but by this point the university expansion of the 1960s was over and there were very few jobs and almost none in South Asian or imperial history. I wasn't (or so I thought) that much interested in teaching anyway and planned on going to law school. As I was

² Theodore Zeldin, *A History of French Passions, 1848-1945*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973-1977).

³ Margaret MacMillan, "Social and Political Attitudes of British Expatriates in India, 1880-1920." Ph.D. Dissertation, 1974, Bodleian Library.

waiting to do the application a friend suggested I apply for a part-time job in the History Department at Ryerson Polytechnic. I taught a standard Western civilization course and found I enjoyed it and the students.

That same year a colleague who taught Chinese history decided to move back to England. I applied for and got his job (sketchy would be too kind a description of my grasp of China's history) and stayed at Ryerson for the next 25 years. I learned a lot of Chinese history and that, as well as my interest in imperial history, led me towards international history. As long as I taught the big survey courses the department let me develop my own courses in war and society and international relations. My politics background came in handy and I started to read and often benefit from international relations theory. I owe a lot as well to the hundreds of students I taught at Ryerson. They were doing professional degrees in subjects such as business or engineering and often only took history because they needed a humanity. If they were bored they showed it. I learned to make my lectures clear and how to keep their interest through narrative and compelling details.

Because Ryerson was then primarily a teaching institution we were not expected to publish and so I rarely did. I thought from time to time about my thesis but never did anything about finding a publisher. In the 1970s when women's history was a new and growing field I decided to do something instead on British women in India. Thanks to a friend I found a publisher in London and the book enjoyed a modest success.⁴ I didn't then publish anything apart from a couple of book chapters and some journalism for over a decade. (Of course I urge a very different trajectory on my students.) I think I might have written more if anyone had asked me.

I had nevertheless developed something of an obsession with the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. In my varied teaching I kept coming across decisions that were taken or not taken there that had long term effects or issues which had never quite gone away. And anything peopled by characters as varied as Woodrow Wilson, Ho Chi Minh, Lawrence of Arabia, Georges Clemenceau, or David Lloyd George had to be a good story. I assumed that some notable historian must have written a history of the whole conference and its implications for the world but all I could find were monographs and handful of more general histories which focussed mainly on Europe. I kept reading and during university vacations I started going to archives, in the UK, the U.S., and Canada. I started to see the outline of the book.

Surely I thought the 75th anniversary in 1994 would bring a raft of interesting new books but the year came and went with the peace conference largely unremarked. This was encouraging. Or perhaps it was. I knew that to find a publisher I would need more than an outline. I wrote several chapters and sent off packages to university and trade publishers. Somewhere I have a file of rejections. No one, I was told, wanted to read about a bunch of dead white men sitting around a table talking about peace treaties. My favourite is from a press at a very rich university, which said it could not afford to publish a book few would read. Then chance again played a part. My brother-in-law, who is a British journalist, found himself chatting to a British publisher and asked him if there was a book on a major history topic he wished he had done. Yes, said the publisher, the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. My brother-in-law, forgetting all about time differences, woke me in Canada with a phone call at 4 am to say "send all your material immediately." I did and a few meetings and letters later I had a contract.

My book first came out in 2001, but not in the United States until 2002.⁵ Timing played a huge part in its success. The euphoria that marked the end of the Cold War had gone as the 1990s and early 2000s brought the disintegration of states such as Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union, the re-emergence of old rivalries frozen by the Cold War, renewed conflict in the Middle East, and terrorist attacks by Islamists on Western targets. People were asking why and the Paris Peace Conference helped to provide context and greater understanding. And so, very late in my career, I felt I could call myself an international historian.

⁴ MacMillan, *Women of the Raj* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1988).

⁵ MacMillan, *Peacemakers: Six Months that Changed the World* (London: John Murray, 2001); *Paris 1919: Six Months that Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2002).

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