H-Diplo Essay 437

Essay Series on **Learning the Scholar's Craft: Reflections of Historians and International Relations Scholars**
13 May 2022

Learning the Scholar's Craft

https://hdiplo.org/to/E437
Series Editor: Diane Labrosse | Production Editor: George Fujii

Essay by Roger Dingman, University of Southern California, Emeritus

How did I become the American international and naval historian that I am?

I suppose it all began with stories. Bible stories on Friday afternoons at the Catholic elementary school I attended. Stories from the Book of Mormon that my grandmother told me. Stories depicted in the Works Progress Administration (WPA) artists' murals at the Santa Monica Public Library where my parents parked me and my sister while they went grocery shopping. Stories discussed in my high school American history classes taught by women who held doctoral degrees in history and education. And stories that unfolded in a much more sophisticated way in lectures by my Stanford history professors in the late 1950s.

One of them – old Tom Bailey, the preacher's son turned American diplomatic history textbook author par excellence,[1] planted the seed of what became my intended specialization by the time I entered graduate school at Harvard in 1962. But there was another very important influence in the meantime. The Navy. My father persuaded me to enroll in the Naval Reserve Officers Training Corps (NROTC) while at Stanford to escape the draft. A necessity in the depths of the Cold War. The Navy sent me to Japan for two years.

There I discovered another culture, another language, stories different from those I knew from American history. The intertwining of Japanese and American naval history confronted me every time I looked out the window of my room on the Yokosuka Naval Base. There was the shore that Commodore Perry's men had surveyed in 1853. There was the ruined battleship *Mikasa*, Admiral Togo's flagship that destroyed the Russian fleet in the Battle of Tsushima. And there was the beach where victorious US Marines had stormed ashore in August 1945. That time away from academia cemented my determination to become a historian who inserted the Other into his work.

It took time for me learn how to do so. Ernest May directed my graduate work at Harvard. His use of German language sources for his account of the road to war in 1917 provided a superb example of how multi-lingual, multi-archival history should be done.[2] William L. Langer, the pre-eminent European diplomatic historian of the day, force-fed the notion that an international historian needed multiple language competencies. I loved the beer and salami that he fed his us hungry students in what was the last graduate seminar he taught. I also learned through writing a tortuous seminar paper about the Nazi newspaper *Volkische Beobachter* that German was not my language. It had to be Japanese, which meant intensive

[1] Thomas A. Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1980) went through ten editions.

[2] *The World War and American Isolation, 1914-1917* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950).

© 2022 The Authors | CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 US

language work in Cambridge and then a marvelous year at the Inter-University Center for Japanese Language Studies in Tokyo, at first in the heart of the city, then, on the edge of suburbia on the campus of International Christian University.

I returned to Harvard clueless about a dissertation topic until Akira Iriye, then a beginning assistant professor, suggested what I should do. I had to use my experience and Japanese language capability to tell the other side, the Japanese side, of the story of the origins of the Washington Naval Disarmament Conference of 1921-22. That took longer than I could have imagined. My *Power in the Pacific,*[3] based on British as well as Japanese and American archival sources, did not appear and win the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations' (SHAFR) Bernath prize for an author's first book until 1976.

That book defined my place in the stable of up-and-coming "younger" American diplomatic historians in the theoretical debate that beset SHAFR for years to come. Could one write good American international history based on American sources alone, or was the use of non-American, and especially non-English language sources, necessary to do so? Those questions never found a universally accepted answers. Arguments within SHAFR about them persisted for decades until more recent debates about the importance of the so-called "cultural turn" overtook them. I stood intellectually then, and still do, on the side of always including the Other side.

There was one more major intellectual influence that shaped my career as a historian: re-exposure to the military as a visiting professor at the US Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island in 1977-78. That was a time when the American military was floundering in the wake of the Vietnam war, deprived of the draft, and struggling to become something other than an all-male institution. The times were tough, but the desire to learn from the past and grow into a different future was strong. I arrived just after an intellectual revolution there, fueled by a past president, then Rear Admiral Stansfield Turner, and an old CIA hand, Phillip Crowl. They added history, in the guise of a department of Strategy and Policy, to the curriculum. The thing to do, in the wake of what most still refused to acknowledge was failure in Vietnam, was to get the Navy's future leaders to think in terms of grand strategy by having them look for wisdom in the classics of military and naval history. I had not done so, for no such history was offered at Stanford or Harvard in my student days. I had to immerse myself in both – so that I could teach others.

I came away from that experience intellectually changed in two ways. I sensed that diplomatic or international historians, whatever one chose to call them, had focused too narrowly on the politics and politicians of policy-making and needed to pay more attention to the role of the military in that task. One also had to think in terms of strategy as well as the particulars of the process. I also saw that there was another dimension of war – conflicting and troubling memories of experiencing it – what we would now call post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) – at both individual and national levels. That was something international historians had paid very little attention to. The year at the Naval War College, in ways I did not fully understand at the time, set the agenda for the rest of my research and writing over the years.

Two very different books about the experience of war followed. *Ghost of War* became a study of error in war and how and why different national memories of conflict developed.[4] It focused on an American submarine's sinking of the *Awa maru,* a ship repatriating two thousand Japanese civilians from Southeast Asia, for which the United States had promised safe passage. Two conflicting national memories of the Pacific War crystalized from the incident. Americans all but forgot about it, burying it in the larger memory of World War II as "the good war" fought and won by "the greatest generation." Japanese remembered it as an un-righted wrong, a tragedy, in a war in which they had been victims rather than aggressors.

---

[3] *Power in the Pacific: The Origins of Naval Arms Limitation, 1914-1922* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976)

[4] *Ghost of War: The Sinking of the Awa maru and Japanese- American Relations, 1945-1995* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1997)

© 2022 The Authors | CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 US

Deciphering the Rising Sun told a very different tale, a story of transformation not tragedy.[5] Its protagonists were the Navy and Marine Corps men and women not of Japanese ancestry who became Japanese interpreters and code-breakers during the war against Japan. They discovered the Japanese Other, first in language, then in combat, and then in person during the seven-year occupation that followed the war. They went on to become diplomats, journalists, and pioneering teachers of Japanese history, language, and culture in American and British universities. In so doing, they helped heal the wounds of war, changing Japan from enemy to friend in the eyes of those who had fought the war and of succeeding generations.

Looking back, I can see that my development as an international and naval historian came about more from experience than from than exposure to a commanding set of ideas. I was born and raised in Los Angeles and taught there for nearly forty years at the University of Southern California. The city was changing, looking less to the east and Europe and more to the west and Asia. Its peoples – Japanese, Chinese, Koreans, and later Vietnamese, Thai, and Filipinos – came to it and transformed it into a far more racially and culturally diverse place than it had been when I was growing up.

Living through that larger change helped keep me focused on what had become my specialization as an international historian: America's relations with Japan and East Asia.

I experienced history first and foremost as story. My teachers presented it as an attempt to recapture and understand the experience of those who had gone before us. My navy sojourn in Japan and enduring connections with the country gave direction and focus to my career as a historian and what I wrote. One of the marines I interviewed for my last book reminded me of what the purpose of my work was. By telling others stories of the American connection to Japan and East Asia, I became a part of that link and helped insure its strength in the future.

Enough.

Roger Dingman is Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Southern California.

[5] *Deciphering the Rising Sun: Navy and Marine Corps Codebreakers, Translators, and Interpreters in the Pacific War* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2009)

© 2022 The Authors | CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 US