

Preface to ‘Encounters with Historians’

I began to be seriously interested in history at the age of sixteen as I moved into my last two years at Sedbergh School. In the history sixth form (‘Clio’ – patron of history) I was taught by a very gifted ex-Oxford historian Andrew Morgan.¹ He excited my imagination and I began to see the fascination of trying to understand what caused the Renaissance, the English Civil War, or the rise of modern liberty. He helped me to obtain entry to read history at Oxford, where I started to study in 1960.

As an undergraduate I was taught by a succession of gifted historians, in particular on Anglo-Saxon and medieval history by James Campbell, on Tudor and Stuart history (which became my favourite period) by Lady Rosalind Clay, G.D.Ramsey, and through lectures by Christopher Hill, Hugh Trevor-Roper, Lawrence Stone and others. The eighteenth and nineteenth century were excellently taught by Harry Pitt and throughout my undergraduate years I learnt an enormous amount from Brian Harrison, who lent me all his notes and taught me his ‘one fact one card’ system.

As a postgraduate I undertook my D.Phil. on the history of witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart Essex as the first supervisee of **Keith Thomas**.² His brilliant and energetic mind shaped my problems and approach, my style and my scholarship, and has influenced me more than any other single teacher. His two great works on *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1970) and *Man and the Natural World* (1983) as well as many seminal essays, in particular his essay on ‘History and Anthropology’ in 1963, introduced me to a new way of looking at the past.

I naturally had to learn the craft skills of an historian as I began my D.Phil. - where appropriate materials could be found and how to read and interpret them, Since it was a period when a re-organization of archives in Britain was opening up a new wealth of local documents, I was particularly fortunate to be able to attend seminars and become friends with W.G. Hoskins, Joan Thirsk and Hilda Grieve of the Essex Record Office, and other first-rate local and regional historians.

On the philosophy of history I was most influenced by the work of the Annales School, in particular **Marc Bloch**. I have included two pieces which pay a small tribute to a great historian, although again these pieces were written at later points in my life. I was also influenced by the work of R.G.Collingwood, Pieter Geyl and a number of great thinkers on the historian’s task.

Towards the middle of my D.Phil., I became aware of the work of the members of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure. Their work, in particular that of Peter Laslett,³ E.A. Wrigley, Roger Schofield and Richard Smith remained a source of inspiration for the rest of my life and I became particularly close to them in Cambridge from 1971 onwards. Many of my historical books bear witness in

¹ For a personal account of his influence, see my www.alanmacfarlane.com under ‘Life’

² For a personal account of his influence, see as above.

³ For a personal account of his influence, please see as above.

footnotes and acknowledgements to their influence, but I have only included one example of a prolonged piece of writing on one of their members. This is an assessment of the work of **E.A. Wrigley**, written much later when I was wrestling with questions of the origins of industrial civilization. This has only been published before on my website.

One other debt I owe to this group is their pioneering work on the use of computers in history, where I learnt a great deal in particular from Roger Schofield and from other historians such as Michael Anderson and Roderick Floud. Much of my subsequent historical work revolved around computer record linkage of historical records and I worked intensively with a number of computer scientists over the years. This will be described in a companion work on methods, but alongside the simultaneous emergence of the newly available local records (and record at the Public Record Office) and the new social science framework linked to the Annales school, so well surveyed by another influence on my work, Peter Burke, this made the period particularly exciting.

As an undergraduate, I had been deeply impressed by the work of R.H. Tawney and a great fan of the constellation of Marxist and associated historians like Edward Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, Rodney Hilton and Lawrence Stone who constituted the board of the journal *Past and Present*. But after becoming trained as an anthropologist and particularly after the detailed investigation of two English villages and their history over many hundreds of years, I came question this paradigm. I put forward my arguments for suggesting English continuity in 1977 in *The Origins of English Individualism* and in most of my subsequent books and articles. Usually my assessments were measured, but on one occasion I wrote rather more forcefully in relation to one of those whose work I had once admired, **Lawrence Stone**. I have included this long review because it does set out some of the methodological problems of writing history.

What I had rediscovered in the mid-1970s was the alternative view of English history which had been dominant in the period up to the 1930's, before the work of Trevelyan and Tawney, and then the new socialist historians, began to apply a 'watershed' theory. I had imbibed part of this continuity theory from my earlier teachers, in particular Andrew Morgan and James Campbell, but I was to rediscover it through my extended encounter with my favourite historian, **F.W. Maitland**. I have dealt with Maitland in a full-length separate book in this series, but he seems to me to provide a superior framework of evolution-with-change than that suggested by Tawney and his successors. Maitland was not, of course, alone, and at the same time I read Stubbs, Acton, Freeman and other late Victorian and Edwardian historians and came to appreciate how much had been so quickly buried.

As I proceeded to search for alternative models to those I had accepted as an undergraduate, I became interested in the antecedents of Maitland and his contemporaries. This took me back into the earlier nineteenth century and I rediscovered Alexis de Tocqueville, about whom I have also written a full, book-length, treatment. Tocqueville in turn took me back to the French and Scottish Enlightenment and I discovered the thoughtful work of many of the great figures. In particular I engaged with the work of **Montesquieu** and **Adam Smith**, about whom I have also written full-length

book treatments and who helped me develop new answers to the riddle of modern development. I have only included one small example of this very powerful Enlightenment influence here in the form of a short published essay on **David Hume**.

My undergraduate and postgraduate historical experience had been confined to European, and particularly English, history. I ventured outside first in a study of a tribal society in the Himalayas in 1968-1970 as a second doctorate. But this was just a start. It was when Sarah Harrison and I started to make annual visits to Nepal, to explore India a little, and then, in particular, to work on the history and culture of Japan from 1990, and of China from 1996, like many others caught up in the effects of 'globalization', I became interested in world history.

I was extremely fortunate to have been a long-time colleague of Jack Goody,⁴ my first Professor at Cambridge, who had for long thought in world historical terms and I was much influenced by his historical-anthropological works, comparing Africa, Europe and Asia. I also read more widely in the work of other comparative thinkers, in particular E.L.Jones, David Landes, and W.H.McNeill.

The first to interest me in the world sweep of events was **Fernand Braudel** whose majestic *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World of Philip II* had completely captivated me in the 1970's and whose three-volume *Civilization and Capitalism 15th-18th Century* intrigued me as a serious attempt to understand how the modern world emerged. I gave a talk on Braudel in a series on global history organized by another historian who has influenced me greatly through his writing and organizing of intellectual events, Patrick O'Brien. Although this is a rough and previously unpublished, I include it to indicate the search for global frameworks which informs much of my more recent work.

As my interests expanded to the anthropology and history of Asia, I encountered a number of leading historians and social theorists of those regions who have influenced me greatly, including (on China) Mark Elvin and Christopher Cullen and (on Japan) Osamu Saito, Akira Hayami and others. Again their influences can be seen throughout my more recent work.

As I sit in my library looking up at some of the hundreds of historical books I have read and which have influenced me, I feel a sense of betrayal. I see the accusing fingers of so many other authors and colleagues who have shaped my work in so many ways, part of that vast network within which each single author's creative work is caught. Where are Le Roy Ladurie, Karl Jaspers, Lewis Mumford, H.J. Habbakuk, John Hajnal, Claudio Veliz, M.M. Postan and so many more? Their shadows are in my books and articles and I shall not trouble them here, except to acknowledge a crowd of others who at moments in my intellectual journey provided a new idea or connection.

⁴ For an account of the influence of Jack Goody, see www.alanmacfarlane.com under 'Life'

Then again, in my attempt to move along the ever-changing boundary lands between history and the social sciences, there are many other major figures who have influenced me in the fields of anthropology, sociology, philosophy and the social sciences. I shall deal with them in a separate volume, though the two fields interpenetrate in reality and to separate them is highly artificial. Indeed, the people I admire most, like Keith Thomas, F.W.Maitland, Marc Bloch, Tony Wrigley and others really knew no boundaries. They followed the problem wherever it led.

What I do hope to show by publishing this series of 'Encounters' is the way in which on the journey to understand ourselves in time and space it is the conversations with other minds who have journeyed before us, or are journeying alongside, that we gain most so much. And, as always, the person who is journeying beside me, Sarah Harrison, as well as my late lamented friend Gerry Martin, who have given me more ideas and support than even the long list of illustrious figures mentioned above. To all the voyagers, as well as new ones in America and elsewhere who are joining me now at this later point in my life, I give my thanks for companionship.