CONFESSIONS OF A HISTORY ADDICT

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As a professional historian, I find it intriguing to look back over my own personal history to see how I got to where I am. I recall that as a secondary school student more than thirty years ago, I daydreamed in study hall about someday being a university history professor. Currently, I teach world history, Pacific Islands history, and when I get the chance, African history, at the University of Hawai‘i, and I research and write in all those subject areas. It might appear, then, that my life followed a rather logical course to the present, but in fact there were twists and turns along the road that could have led to quite different outcomes. Still, my fascination with history recurs as a *leitmotiv* throughout, and probably directed my experiences in ways that I was unaware of at the time.

I was born and grew up in the eastern United States, specifically central New York State (or upstate as we say, to distinguish ourselves from the better-known city). After coming into this world in Lockport, a former stop on the old Erie Canal that once linked the Hudson River with Lake Erie, I was taken by my parents to a suburb north of Syracuse—many towns in that region have classical names (Rome, Troy, Utica, Ithaca, Minoa, Attica) in a strange transposition of Europe to the frontier of British North America. Yet there were also Native American names all around me, especially lakes, rivers and falls recalling the tribes of the Iroquois confederacy that once dominated the region (Oneida, Cayuga, Seneca, Mohawk and Onondaga). In fact, Syracuse was near the central council fire of the Iroquois, whose people remain fiercely independent of American control, refusing even US

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government money and accepting poverty as the price for their pride. In my teenaged years I played the sport of lacrosse, the ancient Iroquois substitute for war, and I remember our teams' being beaten by Onondaga teams by scores like 23–2. I admired how skilled even small children on the reservation were at catching and throwing the ball in those webbed sticks. When the Onondaga and Seneca played each other, they body-checked ruthlessly to prevent scoring.

As a boy I was fascinated by wars, like most male kids. The so-called 'French and Indian wars' of the mid-1700s were part of local lore, and my father read me James Fenimore Cooper stories. My parents were each the first in their families to get a university education, and both went on to obtain MAs He was descended from hired hands on dairy farms and took me through the woods and hills where he had grown up; he also instilled in me a love of frontier heroes, including great Indian chiefs like Tecumseh, and as a family we visited historical sites such as the restored French fort on nearby Lake Onondaga or Jamestown in Virginia. She was from a small town in Arkansas, in the American south, and was related to hillbillies; she became an English teacher and urged me to read, buying for me biographies of people I wanted to know about, such as Hannibal, Genghis Khan, etc. I played at war with my friends but also did research on my own, developing military board games based on ancient Greece or Rommel's campaigns in North Africa. I was thrilled to see the centennial re-enactment of the civil war battle of Gettysburg in Pennsylvania; I ran alongside the role-playing Confederates replicating Pickett's doomed charge, naively oblivious of the wasteful death and destruction of war.

In school, history always fascinated me, even when we had to spend an entire year in the ninth grade studying New York State history! I credit my world history teacher, Richard May, with bringing the subject to life for me; he even sang us the *Marseillaise*, which I now sing for my own unsuspecting students to wake them up near the end of my French Revolution lecture. Because we had to prepare for a standardised exam, May spent time at the end of every class drilling us with facts, especially dates. He would shout out 490BC or AD1453 and see which of us could say what happened. I still remember those dates today and think of him every time I use them. Since I was already motivated, I did well in history classes, and when applying to university I took an achievement test in European history instead of in

American history (which most classmates preferred), because I was already being drawn to more distant frontiers than the familiar ones around me. History to me was about adventure, exotic places, and people not all that different from today despite differences in culture and technology. I would later develop an obsession with travelling, to see the places I had read so much about.

Even the contemporary civil rights movement and the beginnings of the Vietnam war did not sway me from my bookish romance with the past. In 1964, I began to attend Hamilton College, named after the man who had been the chief proponent of a federal constitution for the United States in the late 1700s. It was a respected, private, liberal arts college of 800 male students and 100 professors near Utica. I mostly enjoyed my studies at Hamilton, but not the all-male isolation and the over-emphasis on the fraternity system, which tended to segregate people into clubs that stereotyped each other. Channing Richardson's course on international politics gave me a new direction. He included in his readings and lectures material on Africa, a part of the world that was becoming independent in the 1960s and was stimulating a whole new field of academic history. I then decided to transfer back to the 'real world' and wound up where my parents had met, at Syracuse University, which had an East African Studies program. Syracuse was so big, urban and amorphous that I would later attend the graduation of my old classmates at Hamilton instead of my own, because I knew more of them.

I took African studies courses, history and social sciences at the Maxwell School of Citizenship, and creative writing. Robert Gregory was creating a two-semester survey course in African history, and he also allowed me to sit in on his graduate seminar. I was avid to learn more about this hitherto-neglected part of the world, which I had only known previously through colonial history. I read about ancient empires like Ghana and Mali and current political leaders like Kwame Nkrumah. I decided to find a way to get to Africa to learn more about it first hand, since my only experience 'abroad' so far had been driving across the border to attend summer Shakespeare festivals in Canada. I managed to win a competition to be my hometown's 'community ambassador', a programme run by charity organisations via the Experiment in International Living, which arranged homestays overseas for students. In the summer of 1967, then, I left North

America for the first time and travelled to West Africa with a student group led by Henry Drewal, a former US Peace Corps volunteer in Nigeria who was specialising in Yoruba art and religion at Columbia University.

Because of the Biafran civil war, our group had to be diverted from Nigeria to Ghana, but our disappointment was quickly erased by the warm reception we received. I stayed with the family of J. W. L. Mills, chief education officer, in the capital, Accra, and was made to feel right at home. He and his wife (who were African, despite the English surname) would later reciprocate by visiting my parents. Our group also travelled north as far as Ouagadougou in Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso), where we met Elliot Skinner, an African-American anthropologist who was serving as US Ambassador. I remember he told us that he had just written a book for American high school students about African heroes, so that Black kids would have their ‘cats’ to brag about just as other kids did. I was looking for more information on such historical achievements and also for signs of ‘modernity’ in Africa, in order to counter the prejudices in the minds of most Americans—such as the mostly white community I would be lecturing. In a sense, I was re-discovering American race problems through Africanised eyes.

I found that Ghana, in the post-Nkrumah era, was switching its foreign aid contacts from the Soviet bloc to the West, but there were still many who regretted Nkrumah’s overthrow in a military coup in 1966. He had promoted Ghanaian and African unity and stood up to neocolonialism, but he had also become increasingly dictatorial as a drop in cocoa export prices had undercut many development projects he had begun. Half our student group was African-American, and we had many discussions about the problems and future of Africa and what Americans could do to help. I remember seeing Peace Corps teachers in Ghana and admiring their courage in committing two years of their lives to work on another continent. When I returned for my final year at Syracuse, I gave more than thirty slide lectures to the community organisations that had sponsored my travels. I tried to present an upbeat image of Africa as full of promise, but some of my audiences could not overcome the news images of bloody civil wars in Biafra and the Congo.

Protests against the Vietnam war were increasing too, and when Martin Luther King Jr and Robert Kennedy were assassinated in 1968, I became more alienated from the US scene. Partly to avoid being drafted to fight in a war I opposed (even historian Arnold Toynbee said it was going against the grain of modern Asian nationalism), and partly to continue pursuing my interest in Africa, I joined the Peace Corps. I recall how the woman at my local draft board looked at me and said calmly, ‘All right, you can do your thing for two years and then come back and do our thing’. I remember thinking that was easy for her to say, but several of my best friends were dead because of her thing and so were a lot of Vietnamese. As Richard Nixon was about to be elected, my motto became ‘emigrate in ’68’. His America was not one I wanted either to kill or to die for. I was chosen to be an English teacher in the Ivory Coast, next door to Ghana. Ironically, we did our French-language training in a small village in Quebec, Canada—a country that provided sanctuary for so many US draft-resisters.

On my second visit to Africa, I was more interested in ‘traditional’ African culture than modernisation, because I had lost faith in the direction my own country was headed. For two years, I befriended my government middle-school students in the small town of Toumodi, learning some of their Baule language and visiting their families in remote villages. I saw secret religious ceremonies, drank palm wine under the stars, and even tried to explain the landing of American astronauts on the moon when it was announced on the radio. They asked me why anyone would go there, and for want of a better answer I said the US had gone to get that old man they described in their stories, who beat his drums and harmed idle children who stared too long at the moon. That earned me another round of palm wine. I also travelled around West Africa, as far as Timbuktu, and during my summer break I flew to East Africa, travelling from Ethiopia to Tanzania. I daydreamed about taking an Arab dhow across the Indian Ocean—two years later I would make that trip several times working in the bowels of an oil tanker.

My Ivorian students’ dedication to study was quite impressive, the reason in many cases being that they were the only child in the family chosen to attend school, become literate and help their relatives improve their lives by getting a good job. I had fifty students per class and six classes to teach, but they knew their stuff, often studying under streetlights at night and enduring harassment by local police who were jealous of their educational opportunities. They excelled at learning languages, because there were over sixty in the Ivory Coast (population four million), so each spoke several languages already. In my spare time, I devoured writings by African and African-American novelists, poets and historians (thanks to my parents’ sending me books). Increasingly, I began to question the very premise of the Peace Corps, which at that time took liberal arts graduates, put them through a crash training course and expected them to uplift the Third World through osmosis.

In 1970, as my Peace Corps term was expiring, I learned that the US had adopted a lottery system to determine who would be drafted to fight in Vietnam. Someone (I imagined that woman at my draft board, naturally) randomly drew numbers ranging from one to 365, in order to rank everyone's birthday. If mine were drawn early on, I would be more likely to be drafted. I spent two days in the capital, Abidjan, looking for a copy of the *International Herald Tribune,* which had the ranking. During those two days, many scenarios ran through my mind, but I was determined not to participate in what I regarded as an imperialist war. I finally decided that I would remain overseas, now that I had learned how to survive by teaching English, and perhaps travel like those hardy individual backpackers who had come through Toumodi and stayed with me. But when I got my hands on a *Tribune* at last, I saw that my birthday was ranked 310th, far down the list and safe. I would have stayed longer in Africa, but I wanted to return to studying history and perhaps to make an impact teaching that subject.

I went to California to earn an MA in African history at Stanford University, studying under G. Wesley Johnson and Kennell Jackson. Current trends in African studies appealed to me, because they challenged the conventional wisdom. Jan Vansina, for example, had done groundbreaking work with oral traditions in central Africa and attempted to set guidelines for the use of this important data source. Computers were helping linguists trace the Bantu migrations, archaeology was yielding more evidence about the spread of iron-working, and Arabic and classical sources were being consulted on early state–formation. Another theme was the impact of the trans-Atlantic slave trade: Philip Curtin had produced the best demographic census yet, and Walter Rodney was developing his thesis that European contact had actually 'underdeveloped' Africa by diverting productive energies and economic surplus away from a possible 'take-off'. The influence of Islam and Christianity were popular topics, resistance to colonial conquest was being refined by Terence Ranger and Robert Rotberg, and Immanuel Wallerstein was developing his world system theory to explain why the promise of independent African states was undermined by neocolonial economics.

The atmosphere of protest against the Vietnam war made Marxist analysis more popular, and it helped me to evaluate colonialism and resistance in Africa. The works of Claude Meillassoux, Catherine Coquery-Vidrovich and Jean Suret-Canale were useful, and I recalled conversations I had in East Africa with radical African students. I focused my research on the Ivory Coast, examining the way the political elite had switched from being allies of French leftists in the 1940s to being coopted into the colonial regime in the 1950s. Ivorian leaders continue to be among the most pro-French in West Africa, reminding me of Nkrumah's warnings about neocolonialism. The Hoover Institution of War, Revolution and Peace at Stanford was a great source of materials, even though its leadership was very conservative. As we marched against the US incursion into Laos, we called it the Hoover institute of counter-revolution. I completed my MA and was accepted into the PhD programme, but I was drawn elsewhere for two reasons. First, I was curious about Asia and wanted to travel there. Second, the world of academia, where people walked around carrying briefcases and competed over how many obscure articles they had read, was beginning to look like an 'ivory tower' in a politically-charged time when 'relevance' was the watchword.

I decided to use my Peace Corps Readjustment Allowance to leave the country. Having befriended a Chinese student, I booked on the same charter flight to Hong Kong that he took to go home for summer vacation. I found myself the only non-Chinese on the plane and thus made more friends crossing the Pacific. By the time we landed, I was fortunate to have two groups of acquaintances showing me around and taking me out to eat the best food I have ever had. I also tried to talk my way into a visa to the People's Republic, but 1971 was too early for that. Since I was staying in a hostel for young backpackers who were on their way around the world, I took that leap, hopping a flight from Hong Kong to Bangkok and spending the next two years travelling in Asia. I worked on ships, tended bar, taught history at the International School in Kuala Lumpur, did Zen meditation, hiked in the Himalayas, visited a dozen countries from India to Japan and returned to California in 1973 with a profit, because the cost of living was so cheap in Asia.

My work on ships took me across the Indian Ocean six times, and also across the Pacific, an experience that would affect my future research. First, however, I decided to try writing a novel, an autobiographical fiction (like all first novels?) about travelling in Asia that I immodestly imagined would transform the world because of all the spiritual and cultural insights that I had gathered. I sent it to several publishers, but now I am thankful it never got into print; someday I may cut it in half and re-present it as a comedy. Meanwhile, I had started a second novel, this time on a more historical theme: the French conquest of the Ivory Coast in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The topic was what I would have done my PhD dissertation on, but I thought a novel would reach more people. With a visitor’s card, I did research at the Hoover Institution, started a draft, and then hitchhiked from San Francisco to the Ivory Coast, by way of Canada (Air Icelandic across the Atlantic), Europe, North Africa and the Sahara desert.

I remember how hard it was to catch a lift at the end of the paved road in southern Algeria. A small community of travellers were stuck there, and they gathered like flies around every arriving vehicle, so I walked out into the Sahara to attract more attention. For two days I slept on shelves I dug in the leeward side of dunes and watched countless shooting stars criss-cross the cloudless night sky. Finally I gave up, realising that my ambitions were insignificant. After all, I had already had the draft of my novel stolen in the casbah of Algiers. I walked back to town, where to my surprise, I caught a lift south. On this third visit to West Africa, I was no longer looking for modernity, or even traditions. I simply saw Africa as it was, a syncretism that was moving in its own direction regardless of how academics tried to classify it. With help from a former colleague at Stanford, David Groff, who was working on his own dissertation in the Ivory Coast, I did local research and began my novel again. I almost got a job to sustain myself, but I came down with hepatitis and had to fly home. Besides West Africa, I took with me memories of the Sahara, a pure place for self-reflection that Honor de Balzac once called ‘God without men’. The real meaning of my Zen meditations had finally hit me, and I looked at the world more holistically.

Back in North Syracuse with my parents, I spent a summer recovering and writing. To earn some money, I taught secondary school history in Cooperstown. Then I drove across the US in a rusty old Ford Mustang I called my bicentennial car, since it was 1976 and the car cost only $200. For the next seven years in California, I did a variety of jobs while completing the book: pizza cook, bartender, bookstore clerk, waiter, substitute teacher, writer-in-residence at a hot springs. I never got that book published either, though one editor said he liked it. The problem, he said, was that the public wanted 'simple complexity'. He advised me to rewrite it, beginning not with Africans, as I had foolishly done, but with 'a macho Frenchman, washed ashore Shogun-style', who would hook Western readers and enable me to lead them through whatever insights I chose. I think of that advice today as critics attack the Eurocentrism in Western writing about the Third World: they are right, but maybe it also has something to do with marketing. I finally gave up and returned to teaching, perhaps to revise the novel again later. I considered returning to Stanford for the PhD, but Timothy Weiskel had done his dissertation on 'my' topic.

I sent out my resume to a variety of places, and one morning a telephone call came from Hawai'i asking me to go to Disneyland for an interview—I thought that one of my friends was pulling a prank, but it turned out to be true! I bought a suit and tie, flew down to the Disneyland Hotel (where a conference of private secondary schools was being held), interviewed for about twenty minutes and went around Disneyland in my suit . . . When I got back to San Francisco that same evening, it seemed like a dream. But I got the job and moved to Maui, where I taught secondary school history for four years, starting in 1983. Sheer chance had thus brought me to Hawai'i, but I attended workshops for secondary school teachers at the University of Hawai'i on Pacific Islands studies. There I heard Brij Lal, David Hanlon, and Robert Kiste, and they opened up a new world of inquiry into a region that, like Africa two decades earlier, was essentially unknown to me. I also married in 1985, after inviting a friend from California days to come visit. With her support and encouragement, I decided to complete what I had set out to do at Stanford in the early 1970s, and get a PhD. I had always wondered how my life might have been different if I had not been so alienated from academia in a politically-charged era, and frankly I was getting tired of patrolling secondary school bathrooms for smokers. Surely there was another level of teaching, where students' private lives would be their own business and I could concentrate more on the subject matter?

Since I was in the Pacific—and had always been attracted to frontiers of history—I chose to specialise in the Pacific Islands, with secondary fields in modern Japan, modern China and world history (theory and methods). From 1987 to 1991, I studied under Lal and Hanlon. They made ideal mentors, with the former's emphasis on ethnic and class relations in Fiji and the latter's ethnographic (and now postmodern) approach to Pohnpei and other sites of 'culture contact'. I also saw parallels with African history, such as the use of oral traditions, linguistics, ethnobotany and archaeological data to balance Eurocentric written data, the focus on indigenous Islanders, not just what outsiders did in the region, and resistance studies that cross-fertilised with other historiographies. The labour trade and missionisation themes reminded me of African studies as well, as did the blending of anthropology and history and concerns about neocolonialism in newly independent states. I did a seminar paper comparing ethnic tensions in Fiji with those in New Caledonia and Malaysia, a project that led me into world history, a field of transregional themes and contexts that influences my perspective on the Pacific.

My dissertation research was on Pacific Islanders who had worked or travelled on Euro–American ships, from ennobled 'Omai' of Tahiti to the proletarian 'kanakas' on whaling vessels. Their collective experience, I felt, was a counter-exploration that presaged both the plantation labour trade and modern outmigration in Oceania. Perhaps my own seafaring days affected my choice as well. In 1992, Brij Lal proved himself the ultimate adviser by taking a position at Australian National University (ANU) and thus creating a job opening at Hawai‘i. The first person offered Lal's job, Vicente Diaz (now at the University of Guam), turned it down, and I was hired just before a 'freeze' caused by state budget shortfalls. So I was thrice lucky and now am a professor of history, just as I had imagined back in high school study hall. But what a winding path to get here! Actually, none of it was a waste of time, in my opinion, because all those life experiences and travels have made me a better historian and instructor. I can teach our Department's introductory 'World Civilizations' course and enjoy it, showing slides of the Great Pyramid and telling what it felt like to be inside 4,700 years of history.

As a Pacific historian I continue to travel to island countries, pursuing themes such as nationalism and modern diasporas. My childhood fascination with military history has been tempered by my awakening to the terrible price of war during the Vietnam conflict. Just as I studied Native American heroes as a boy, I continue to root for 'underdogs' in history, whether lower class rebels or racial minorities or indigenous peoples. As in African history, I see a trend where more Pacific Islanders are entering a field that was once almost entirely controlled by 'outsiders', and I like it. I see my role as gathering and transmitting information about an historiographically colonised region. Even the well-meaning 'islander-oriented' approach developed at ANU does not address all the concerns that nationalists have about lingering imperialism. I try to get my students to think for themselves about controversies in the field, and to consider class as well as ethnic tensions. Like me, they will have to negotiate their own route to fulfilment, and that means exploring inside as well as outside. It may even require putting up with people carrying briefcases and talking about their latest books and articles.

It may seem strange, living in Oceania, for me to say that I still carry a Sahara around inside me, but I do. It is a meditative, humbling space that I revisit sometimes by surprise. In 1995, for example, a matai on Ta'u in American Samoa reminded me how modest our efforts are to understand and represent the past. After talking with him for a while and admiring his knowledge, I suggested that he write down what he knew of Samoan oral traditions so that others could study them. He explained that he had started to do exactly that once and wrote about thirty pages. Then Hurricane Tusi came through and blew it all away. He decided that Tagaloa, his namesake, was trying to tell him something. The Sahara in me smiled.

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