

## *My Intellectual Odyssey*

GEORGE ATHAN BILLIAS

**M**Y FELLOW citizens, citizens of the republic of letters—for I assume that most of us work under similar circumstances, share the same values, and are engaged in a common enterprise—I'd like to have you join me in reviewing my intellectual odyssey as a historian. I've chosen the word 'odyssey' quite deliberately. Odyssea, the man most of you call Ulysses, has always loomed large in my secret life. As a youngster, I read his adventures in modern Greek, identifying with his great feats—his wartime exploits, exotic travels, and triumphant trip home. Years later, I read Constantine Cavafy's poem, 'Ithaca,' and realized that the poet was telling us the journey back to Ithaca was of greater significance than the hero's arrival home. The process of life itself, in other words, was more important than its outcome. Later still, I picked up the classic poem of Nikos Kazantzakis, 'The Odyssey.' I thrilled to the lines describing how Odyssea called back his ideas, like lost children, during the last moments of his life. My intellectual odyssey, like that of my hero, is Greek in origin, cyclical in pattern, and involves the recalling of ideas.

My Greek heritage played an important role in my choosing the life of the mind. My father, a poor Greek immigrant, though not a learned man, had great respect for learning. During the Great Depression, it was not unusual for fathers to take their sons out of high school and put them to work. My father encouraged me instead to pursue my studies. He sensed, as did many immigrants, that the way out of poverty lay through education. After I graduated from high school in 1937, he made certain that we set aside

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enough money from my wages so I could attend evening college at Boston University. It is to my father, then, that I owe the impetus which propelled me into the world of ideas.

I remember distinctly the moment I first became aware of history as a separate discipline. While on military maneuvers in the Mojave desert as a private in the army in 1942, I read Allan Nevins and Henry Steele Commager, *The Pocket History of the United States* (New York, 1942). Lying in the shade of a halftrack to escape the blazing sun, I thought, 'So that's what history is, and that's how historians write.'

My grim wartime experiences strengthened my resolve to study in that field. After attending an officers' candidate school so I might be engaged in noncombatant duties, I was commissioned a Medical Administrative Officer. Assigned to the Ninth Armored Division, my mission was to follow columns of tanks into combat with a platoon of ambulances, picking up the dead, dying, and wounded. At the end of the war, our spearhead liberated a Nazi concentration camp. I was able to evacuate the wretched victims still alive—though many were barely so. The sight of man's inhumanity to man, the horrors of war, and the desire to understand the causes of the conflict drove me to take up the study of history.

Many years later, members of the Clark Department of History discussed what had caused each of us to become historians. Four of the eight confessed that war had been the main motivation; Mars had forced us into the arms of Clio. Two of us, Theo von Laue and myself, mentioned World War II; two others, Douglas Little and Francis Couvares, the Vietnam War. My sample is limited, as quantitative historians would quickly point out, but wars, it would appear, breed historians. (Remember Thucydides, Xenophon, and Herodotus.)

My wartime experiences not only provided the motivation to study history but also gave me the means: the G.I. Bill. Entering Bates College in 1946, I met three mentors and a classmate who contributed to my career as a first-generation academic. Amos Hovey trained me as an American historian. Robert Covell pointed

out that my ten-page book reports actually began on page eight, when I started analyzing rather than describing what I had read. Dean Harry Rowe persuaded me to think of teaching on the college rather than the high school level. And, most important of all, I met and married my classmate, Joyce Baldwin, who was willing to undertake with me the financial sacrifices entailed in a college teaching career.

Exactly forty years ago, I entered Columbia University's graduate school where I found an exciting faculty. From my mentor, Richard B. Morris, I learned American colonial, labor, and legal history. Other professors contributed to my intellectual growth: Henry Steele Commager showed me the complexities of constitutional law, Allan Nevins, the breadth of American historiography, Dumas Malone, the secrets of the Jeffersonian South, Joseph Dorfman, the economic mind of America, Jacques Barzun, the high culture of modern Europe, Garrett Mattingly, the importance of the Iberian peninsula, and Franz Neumann, the *realpolitik* of Nazi Germany.

But Columbia was still under the spell of Charles Beard, and the Beardian paradigm was dominant. Like many a graduate student, I wanted to challenge the prevailing canon. For my M.A. thesis, I wrote an anti-Beardian monograph, *The Massachusetts Land Bankers of 1740* (Orono, Me., 1959). My research in local records proved enlightening. The land bankers, I discovered, were not debtor farmers as Curtis Nettels and others had concluded; they consisted instead of well-to-do landholders, small businessmen, and professional people who wanted a cheap currency for purposes of expanding their entrepreneurial activities.

The evidence in primary sources that I uncovered in small country towns presented a different picture from that given by scholars using secondary sources located in Boston. Since then I have felt that too much American colonial history is city-filtered. We still need to do more research in primary sources in what were once rural areas.

When I passed my doctoral orals in 1951, a second depression—

the academic depression of the early 1950s—prevented me from getting a college teaching position. To support my family, I went to work as a civilian historian for the Air Force. Here I learned my craft as a writer. There is no better way to learn to write than by scribbling eight hours a day. If you can get someone to pay for your apprenticeship, so much the better!

We become what we teach, I believe. My teaching career at the University of Maine and Clark University followed a cyclical pattern that determined to a large degree what I taught, researched, and wrote. Having been trained as a generalist at Columbia, I taught general courses at Maine—the U.S. history survey, American colonial history, and American economic history. When I came to Clark in 1962, I was selected to head the new NDEA (National Defense Education Act) graduate history program. Following the trend toward specialization sweeping the field, I concentrated only on courses in three periods: American colonial history, the Revolutionary War, and the Early National Era. But during my last decade of teaching, I became a generalist again. I offered courses in *America and the World*, *Race and Ethnicity in American History*, and *War and Society*—a comparative history course on World War II.

Teaching to me is an art, the art of making love to an entire class. It is, as most love affairs are, a reciprocal relationship. I received as much as I gave. The brightest students I had at Maine and Clark—both graduates and undergraduates—are too numerous to name individually. But I cannot refrain from mentioning a few who have become good friends—Ron Petrin, Bob Kolesar, Barbara Lacey, Bill Baller, Barbara Rosenkrantz, John Hench, Sid Hart, Gordon Marshall, Gerry Gawalt, Jim Gibson, David Roth, Ronnie Banks, Debby Gray, Richard Higgins, Ann Butler, Mike Lefell, and Howard Trachtman. Although I make no claim to have been a great teacher, I had tremendous enthusiasm for history and hope I conveyed it.

As far as my writing and research were concerned, the four fields I focused on—biography, historiography, military history, and

legal and constitutional history—each held its own special appeal. Since my teaching and research were closely related, the cyclical pattern in my teaching was reflected in my writings.

Biography has always seemed to me to be a balancing act: how to give the subject his or her due and, at the same time, to maintain a proper historical perspective; how to be fair to the subject as well as to his or her opponents; how much to include of the life and how much of the times. Biography as a genre provides an opportunity to inquire into the ideas, attitudes, and institutions of a given era. But if one is inclined to self-scrutiny, it also enables the scholar to measure his or her life against that of the subject.

In the Glover biography (*General John Glover and His Marblehead Mariners* [New York, 1960]) I was fascinated to discover how easily the patriot cause in Marblehead could be splintered by another local issue. The smallpox epidemic of 1773 frightened the townspeople so much that they turned on enlightened Whig leaders like Glover who were advocating inoculation. Pox and politics failed to mix. Glover and other members of the committee of correspondence resigned in disgust when their inoculation hospital was burned to the ground by a Marblehead mob. Once Glover and his men marched off to the Continental army, my thesis changed. It became a variation of Clausewitz's dictum that war is a continuation of peacetime activities by other means. I tried to show how Marblehead mariners were able to turn their peacetime pursuits to wartime use. These seafaring soldiers conducted brilliant amphibious operations in two critical situations—the Long Island evacuation and Washington's Delaware Crossing at Trenton in 1776.

The Gerry biography (*Elbridge Gerry: Founding Father and Republican Statesman* [New York, 1976]) represented my revision of the picture of republicanism presented by Bernard Bailyn and Gordon Wood—the theme discussed in this symposium. Their portrait was based on a composite of many sources. I wanted not a generalized description, but a specific example based on the beliefs of a living, breathing republican. Gerry, I concluded, per-

sonified a certain strain of republicanism. His thoughts and actions reflected an individual commitment to certain republican precepts: the subordination of private interest to public good; the fear of centralized power, whether civil or military; and a passionate concern for personal liberties. What surprised me most was Gerry's existential view of life. There existed a symbiotic relationship between his personal and public worlds: he constantly carried on an internal dialogue about whether the pursuit of happiness was better found in the private or public sphere.

The reasons for my involvement in various historiographical projects were mixed: they combined personal, pedagogical, intellectual, and economic motives. The editions of four such works first appeared in the late 1960s and early 1970s. During this time I moved to Clark, had Gerald N. Grob as a colleague, and recognized that readings books were highly popular. I undertook the editing of the Revolutionary War readings book (*The American Revolution: How Revolutionary Was It?*, 1st ed. [New York, 1965]) because I felt a volume with that particular intellectual approach was needed. The work on *Interpretations of American History* (1st ed. [New York, 1967]) represented both a personal and an economic opportunity: a chance to collaborate with Gerry Grob, whose work I admired, and—since salaries were low—to supplement my income. Little did we imagine that the work would survive for more than a quarter of a century, providing an analytic summary of historical scholarship through its successive editions. Two other books, *American History: Retrospect and Prospect* (New York, 1971) and *The Federalists: Realists or Ideologues?* (Lexington, Mass., 1970) summarized existing scholarship on those subjects.

My work in military history reflected my life experiences in an ironic way. In my youth I had been deeply influenced by the pacifism of the post-World War I era. But during World War II, I came to realize that there were causes worth fighting for. Too many scholars, I believe, reject military history for the wrong reasons. They feel that differences between nations can be settled by rational discourse and without the resort to force. Military

history, as a result, has been a neglected field; it has relatively few practitioners. I edited *George Washington's Generals* (New York, 1964) to continue my interest in military history that had begun with my doctoral dissertation on Glover. The companion volume, *George Washington's Opponents* (New York, 1969) was undertaken to fill a gap in the existing historical literature.

The three books I edited in legal and constitutional history were the result of my work with Professor Morris. *Law and Authority in Colonial America* (Barre, Mass., 1965) was an outgrowth of the training I received at his hands. The Morris *festschrift*, coedited with my long-time friend, Alden Vaughan, was a tribute by eleven former Morris students (Alden T. Vaughan and George A. Billias, eds., *Perspectives on Early American History: Essays in Honor of Richard B. Morris* [New York, 1973]). And the book of collected essays on American constitutionalism (*American Constitutionalism Abroad: Selected Essays in Comparative Constitutional History* [Westport, Conn., 1990]) was inspired, in part, by Professor Morris's writings on the same subject.

My current research on the influence of American constitutionalism throughout the world, however, was affected more by other considerations. Everything came together for me in the decade of the 1980s. In my teaching I began offering a course with Douglas Little called 'America and the World.' Its aim was to show the interconnectedness of developments in America with those in other parts of the world from the age of colonization to the Cold War era. We become what we teach, as I have said. This course motivated me, among other things, to take a trip around the world in 1982. At the same time I started research on my current project regarding the influence of American constitutionalism abroad from 1776 to 1989.

My teaching and research along global lines has convinced me that American history should be taught in a different way—more from an international perspective and somewhat less from a national point of view. The economy is already global in scope, and—despite ethnic and national loyalties—political and social

trends may move more in that direction in the next century. The United States entered upon the international phase of its history some time ago; teaching American history solely from a national angle of vision makes less sense to me. A global approach, for one thing, will disabuse students of the notion of American exceptionalism. They will discover that problems in American history—racism, ethnocentrism, imperialism, and slavery—were not unique to the United States. The globalization of American history may well be the future agenda of our profession, and I support it enthusiastically.

In my intellectual odyssey, I have not roamed alone. I've been fortunate to have close friends as traveling companions. Gerry Grob not only became a second brother, but patiently bore with me the birth pangs of every project I contemplated. Milton Klein should be listed as co-author in all my writings, since he edited everything I've ever published. Herb Bass kindly invited me to join in a project in which he needed no help simply to provide work therapy for me at a trying time. Paul Lucas generously shared his ideas, knowing I could never repay him in kind. Dan Borg asked me searching questions when I strayed too far. And Ron Formisano caused me to venture farther afield than I might otherwise have gone.

Many of you in this audience were also fellow travelers. I've read your books, corresponded with you, or spoken with you about historical matters. In the privacy of my home, I play a little game while searching for volumes in my library, which is always in disarray. I run my fingers along the shelves saying, 'Where are you, Oscar?' 'Where are you, Bernard?' 'Where are you, Gordon?' For you see, your books have become your embodiment to me.

To this point I have referred to persons in the republic of letters who very obviously belong—former teachers, colleagues, and close professional friends. But the common definition of the republic is far too restrictive, I believe; it should include many others who contribute directly or indirectly to academic pursuits.

First, I would include a scholar's wife or husband. One need only

glance at the acknowledgements in almost any book for confirmation. You will forgive me if I refer to my personal history in this regard. Without the support of my late wife, Joyce, I could not have accomplished much. Her fatal illness proved a devastating blow, and I stopped writing my Gerry biography for over two years. I completed the book only because she urged me to do so under circumstances that are too painful to relate. After a decade of desolation in which I wrote little, it was my great good fortune to meet Margaret. As a wife, she has loved, comforted, and encouraged me. As a fellow scholar, she has counseled me, edited my work, and engaged me in an ongoing intellectual dialogue. She is the inspiration of every single line I've written since we met.

Second, I would include the children of scholars. I don't know about others, but I'm so constituted that I must write for someone as a personal audience. To this day I think of myself as writing for my children: son Stephen and his Bela living across the continent in California; son Athan and Laura residing in faraway Japan; daughter Nancy nearby in western Massachusetts; and now that our grandchildren are born, for Scott Athan and Alisha Nancy.

Third, I would include members of a scholar's extended family. In my case I would not have survived my wife's death without the love, solace, and comfort offered by the Billias family clan—my brother Ted and his wife Penny, my sister Emily and her husband Rip, my sister Marie, and my many nieces and nephews.

Fourth, I would include those who assist us in our scholarly work—librarians, archivists, and secretaries. Once again, I call your attention to any acknowledgements page. Without the able staffs of the Goddard Library, the American Antiquarian Society, and the Harvard libraries, I could hardly function as a scholar.

Many academics like myself would include a fifth category—patrons of the republic of letters. I have been fortunate to count among my friends three of Clark University's finest trustees—Jack Hiatt, Alice Higgins, and Chester Bland. Each has not only been a benefactor to Clark but has had a direct impact on my academic career. Jack Hiatt established the Jacob and Frances Hiatt chair in

history, and during my last six years at Clark, the department honored me with that title. Alice Higgins set up the Higgins Humanities Fund which, in part, made this symposium possible. The late Chester Bland and his wife Shirley established the Bland-Lee Lecture Series which enabled me to bring to the campus distinguished scholars and to make some of their lectures available in published form.

But it is time to bring my intellectual odyssey to a close and to return to home port. Let me conclude by leaving you with this thought—a variation of a familiar saying. Old scholars never die, nor do they fade away. When you mount the library steps, enter the stacks, and look up at the shelves, there they are—like old friends—awaiting you.

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