

Gerry Martin (1930-)

I suppose it must be a very widespread dream of all creative workers that one day they will meet the perfect patron. That is to say someone who combines wealth, discrimination, enthusiasm for one's work, constructive ideas and tact. The chance of meeting such a person, however, is very slim and most nowadays have to rely on the patronage of bureaucratic organizations such as Research Councils. It was such Research organizations which generously funded and supported much of my research from 1970-1990 and I owe an enormous debt to them, including the Economic and Social Research Council, the London-Cornell Foundation, various scholarship funds, King' College Cambridge and the University of Cambridge for their generosity and support.

There are, however, some disadvantages of this form of patronage. It is by its nature competitive, short-term, requires detailed proposals and research reports, and there only an official or a busy committee to receive one's reports. So we wait in hope that the Renaissance-style patron will turn up, but for the first 50 years of my life, apart from a nibble from a wealthy American, nothing emerged.

It was in the summer of 1990 that I first heard about Gerry Martin. We were celebrating at a dinner at the Pavilion in Cambridge the successful conclusion to the Naga Project. Among those present was the historian of science, Simon Schaffer, married to one of the Naga team, Anita Herle. Simon mentioned that he would like to introduce me to a recently retired industrialist called Gerry Martin. Gerry, I learnt, had set up something called 'The Achievement Project', which financed conferences and students to study the roots and conditions of periods of sudden flourishing or achievements such as the Renaissance. Simon said we would get on. I was a bit suspicious as I felt that there must be a hidden agenda and I suspect I may have suffered from some kind of snobbery which made me wonder what an industrialist could contribute to serious academic discussion.

Anyway, I agreed to demonstrate the Naga videodisc to Gerry in September 1990, just before we went off for fieldwork to Nepal during a sabbatical term, and just after we had returned from our first trip to Japan. Gerry turned up, confirming my worst suspicions, in a dark suit and tie, and grasping a large brief-case. We talked for a while and I was struck by his soft and thoughtful speech and amazed when he asked whether I needed any financial help to finish the Naga Project. I did, in fact, need such help rather desperately, so when he offered £7,000 towards this I was both relieved and amazed. Especially as there seemed to be no strings attached. I applied to the Renaissance Trust through Simon with a short description of my aims and the money arrived.

From this beginning, there built up a friendship and collaboration which has profoundly affected my life and work and which can only be briefly sketched in here. One part was the financial and material support. In a series of different kinds of grant towards my work, Gerry proceeded to give very generous financial support over the years.

Always given in the humblest manner, and completely openly – just to support whatever I wanted to do. This gave me enormous flexibility. I did not have to make expenditures fit under headings. I did not have to work out trendy applications. I did not have to write reports which tried to inflate my successes. I was trusted to get on with the job and to devote all my attention to it.

This was all absolutely fundamental and helped enormously in later projects and in travel. And there was other material support; for instance Gerry gave me a good xerox machine, brought me very expensive books, movie cameras and a superb telescope. He has even willed me his fine library. And all this done as if I was doing him a favour in accepting this support, rather than the other way round.

So I was freed over the last 15 or so years of my career in Cambridge from all financial worries in relation to research, and could help younger scholars and colleagues, start new projects, buy current equipment, travel, hold workshops and conferences as I liked. A wonderful privilege.

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As important was the intellectual stimulus. Like a true Renaissance patron of the best type, Gerry was enormously encouraging and discriminating. He took an immense interest in my ideas and made me feel that they were important. He read all my books, from *Savage Wars of Peace* onwards, often again and again, and we discussed them chapter by chapter. Often this was the much longer version which was later drastically trimmed.

In parallel we discussed all sorts of themes in global history, meeting every few weeks in day-long or week-end seminars and long walks. I would try to explain the basics of history and anthropology to him, and he would reciprocate by explaining the basics of technology, science and industrial production.

This was very fruitful. I have had absolutely no education and no experience outside a narrow arts and social sciences background and the experience of practical living in third world societies. Gerry as an engineer and industrialist gently helped me to understand another world which I needed to comprehend. Our friendship, a difference of age (c.10 years), meant that we could have a sort of older-younger brother relationship. It was easy and constantly a delight as he is a relaxed, deeply insightful, serious yet amusing person.

In particular, the theme of much of Gerry's vision was the importance of what he called the triangular relationship between increasing reliable knowledge, innovation and mass production of goods. This was precisely the area where his experience as one of the founders and managing directors of the large international company 'Eurotherm' had lain. And our discussion, his charts and maps, the meetings of the 'Epistemology' group with the physicist John Ziman and others, all helped to increase my interest in the relations between technology and society, which I was also starting to lecture on.

Our interests also became based on shared cross-comparative experience. We took Gerry and his wife Hilda up to Thak in 1991, which was an indelible experience for

us all. Then in 1996 we went to China together and in 1997 they visited us in Japan for a couple of weeks and in 1999 we went to Venice together. In between we often visited them in Sussex and they us in Cambridge. Our conversations were protracted and generously tolerated by Sarah and Hilda and many pages of notes came out of them. Conferences and seminars run by Patrick O'Brien in London and elsewhere, as well as a series of four, two-day, seminars at King's College, explored many of the issues of global history together. At these conferences my favourite times were the walks with Gerry when we discussed what was good or less helpful about the various presentations.

Many of our discussions developed ideas which we hope to gradually make available, perhaps with the help of Gerry's friend Howard Dawes. But for a long time we had a plan to write some kind of general history of technology and society which would express our many ideas. We discussed this on many occasions and I have a large box of rough drafts on many technologies. But the task seemed dauntingly large. When Sarah suggested we concentrate on just one part to start with – glass – this seemed a solution. So in about 1999 on a visit to Gerry's flat in Paris we started to work seriously together on this subject.

Over the next two years I wrote and re-wrote chapters in many forms and, as ever, Gerry read them through, made helpful suggestions, corrected the scientific and other facts, added further references, explained things to me, often accompanied by a visit to a Museum. He wrote some case studies and contributed a number of the fundamental ideas. *The Glass Bathyscaphe: How Glass Changed the World* came out in 2002 and much of its success stemmed from his ideas.

We then worked on the draft of a parallel book on the history of tea, which I wrote with my mother, Iris Macfarlane. Again Gerry adds wise suggestions and corrections and, above all, shows enthusiasm or scepticism. After that we worked together on a book of 'Letters to Lily' for which Gerry was largely the inspiration.

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As Gerry has constantly pointed out, to solve complex questions requires long-term collaboration. To collaborate on writing with fellow academics has always seemed problematic. Gerry is at just the right distance. He is outside the academic cliques or competitive hierarchies. Yet he is very interested and well informed and with an original, lateral thinking, mind. As is also true of Sarah, my work is a collaboration with him and would have been very different (and I am sure greatly impoverished) without his generous involvement.

Gerry's life and work as an industrialist, philanthropist and academic, including the texts of his major writings will be found on this web-site under: projects, working with Gerry Martin.