

PREFACE TO THE 'AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A BOOK'

Here are three contemporary accounts of what I think I am doing.

Version one: late August 1995

The following rough thoughts, written in late August 1995 before the final re-write of 'The Savage Wars of Peace', are an attempt to reflect on a few things which I believe lie in the background to that work. A number of them may appear, and perhaps are, too trivial or too personal to warrant mentioning. But it seemed a good idea to try to get down on paper some of the things which it seemed to me to be in the background when I came to write my book.

Of course, one can only capture a tiny part of the process. But I hope that by noting down very rapidly a few of the deeper pressures, this will make it possible over the next few years to add to this unashamedly autobiographical dossier, a dossier which may only be of interest and which, when written, should perhaps be buried...

In the following pages I try to explain the situation as I approached the Michaelmas term 1993, which is when I began to gather my thoughts together for a piece of work, short in its inception, but large in its execution, on 'The Savage Wars of Peace'.

After a longish apparent digression, we are back in the Michaelmas vacation 1993. I have a five-page essay which outlines the sketch of an idea of an essay comparing the population patterns of England and Japan. How, given the deeper reservoirs, the surface conditions, is this gradually transformed into a book? Where are the barriers, how are they solved? What **happens**? An honest account of this written **simultaneously** after the fact, in the sense of **The Ancient Mariner's Account** or 'Watson' narratives, but also written **before the fact**, i.e. tracing from my diaries, notebooks and the plans and drafts themselves. What **seems** to have happened may turn out to be **tedious** in the extreme. On the other hand, this is the only time to write it, if it is to be written, and along the reconstructed path I may pick up trails which I should **not** have abandoned and will help me in a voyage which is not quite over here. Even if not in this, my 2nd Voyage (Cook), perhaps in my 3rd, whenever that may be.

(N.B. All passages in italics are from contemporary accounts in my notes, diaries etc.)

14.8.95 Autobiographical thoughts from Diary/Letters etc.

*In the preface to **Individualism and Culture of Capitalism** I have given some thoughts to factors which influenced my writing. It would be fun to expand those somewhat and would be useful for my lectures on heuristic methods etc. Among the threads I might follow could be the following:-*

- 1) Finding the **problem** - the mystery
- 2) Working out the **answer** - the solution
- 3) Testing/refining the answer - the proof.

Among the areas for consideration/discussion might be:-

*The use of **books** - and particularly the **serendipity** of second-hand bookshops (CUL.*

*The finding of the unexpected and unusual (see **Culture**, pp.vii - viii)*

The retrieval of information and linking of the previously held apart - one fact one card method.

The role of chance - King's, Jn. Dunn Res. Centre, M. Porter, Gerry etc. - Japan/K.Thomas/Haimendorf/Jack and Gerry

*A **memory barn and garden** - ways it is laid out to stimulate and fresh thought.*

Filing systems in general.

Foreign travel, anthropology and the shock of the other

Friendship, critique, stimulus of collegiality etc.

Relaxing - walking/music/poetry etc.

Teaching/communicating/lecturing/students etc.

On methods of writing - from Smith - Corona onwards.

Feeding the unconscious - reservoir of reading etc.

Variations in activities.

Arrangement of time/space and activities.

Sarah and partnership and love.

Keeping many projects on boil: the bottom drawer and composting ideas.

This set of ideas is a preliminary set of reflections leading into the present work, and takes us almost up to the present.

*Probably a day or two later I continued these thoughts in the **Thoughts** book as follows.*

*'What one wants to reconstruct and think about is the intellectual **process** of creativity, both how one thinks and lives. For this to be possible, it is essential to keep fairly detailed records of the process, as well of one's wider life - whom one meets, whom one teaches, lecture courses etc. Above all one needs to have material to construct the thought process **forwards**. Almost all analysis, e.g. Jack Goody's account of his work in **The Expansive Moment** which I have just read and I suspect in Geertz's **Work and Lives** which I have just read and written **after** the event. All the uncertainties, contradictions, untrodden paths, pressures are lost. The account is therefore both unrealistic and **bland**. Presumably there are diaries/letters **something** to give concreteness. And having noted how in later life much of the pressure comes from academic politics/admin, why does he leave all of this out? The **friction** which creates ideas, the productive tension, all of that is missing.*

*By keeping **all** of my papers as an archive since about the age of 15, it is possible that I will be able to do better and to write the account **forwards**, instead of backwards. That is **real** history, rather than archaeological excavation at a superficial level.*

*By beginning to think about this, particularly in relation to creativity, by **reflecting** on research and writing etc. this may make me a better practitioner and better able to help my students.*

*At the age of 53, with about ten books under my belt, it is a good time to think about this. The next twenty years **should** be my most productive (as they have been Jack's). Many things are in place - a stable home, finances, job, barn, books, research area, computing system etc. It is now full summer and time to bring in the intellectual harvest - the July/August of my life. To make the ground 'fertile' (Gerry Martin) for really exciting thought and then to wait - that is all one can do. **But** there are a number of practical things one **can** do to make it more fertile and by working on creativity/originality one may throw some light on this.*

So here we are. We can now go back to the beginning for how these preliminary thoughts developed into some more detailed ideas about how I came to work...The circle is closed, in the way that Carlo Levi ends the life of his carbon atom in the full stop at the end of his chapter on the carbon atom - where it gives its final energy and dies.

Version two: late November/early December 1995

(typed from Nepal 1995 Blue notebook - red sidelining near end)

A book is a finished product, it is polished and presented as a logical argument. Yet it is the product of random and largely unanalysed and unanalysable forces. It is obviously fashionable to provide readers with a short autobiographical account of the construction of the text, but before this had become fashionable, I had already provided brief accounts of how I came to write two previous books - **Individualism** and **Capitalism** in an attempt to show a little of the background, the scaffolding, which lay behind the finished product.

This is something that is particularly important in this case. De Tocqueville once wrote XXX (re France), recognizing that the largely invisible and unspoken models and assumptions are often essential for an audience to understand our work. This is very much the case in writing **Savage Wars**. It is in many ways a curious book, attempting to solve a wide set of problems by using an unusual comparative strategy. Readers who are interested in such things may find it helpful to have a brief account of how it emerged out of thoughts and experiences lasting over thirty years, from 1962 to 1993, during which the academic world changed greatly.

It attempting such an autobiographical account one is faced with several serious difficulties. One is to both use and yet not abuse the benefits of hindsight. It is usually impossible, at the time, to realize what is most important in the influences on one's thoughts, or to see any continuing pattern in such thoughts over time. Looking back it is much easier to see how, often in unanticipated and unexpected ways, particular books, people or experiences altered ones perspective greatly - perhaps indirectly and after an interval of years. On the other hand, memory has a dangerous tidying up quality. Selective amnesia operates and a logic, coherence and pattern is imposed so that the doubts, pauses, wrong tracks, mistakes are ironed out and everything looks too necessary a development. Some middle point between these extremes needs to be established so that a thread is discerned, but the accidental and random and chance workings of the imagination are retained.

This problem relates to another. Humans are not disengaged thinking machines. The whole way in which they think is related to a complex of experiences many of which act at a very deep level, so deep that we are scarcely aware of their power. The intellectual tasks I attempt to undertake are rather ambitious, partaking something of the nature of those paradigm shifts which Kuhn describes (ref xxx). It is in the nature of such shifts that the process by which they occur is mysterious. There may be new facts, but something more is required whereby the familiar becomes unfamiliar, the premises are challenged, the world become strange and rare. Sometimes it occurs in a few minutes, flashing in the mind as with Darwin, Wallace or Einstein. Sometimes it takes days or weeks or even months. But always there is a shock of seeing the world anew as if one had put on new mental spectacles, or gazed through a microscope or telescope.

Now a feature of such shifts is that they cannot be **forced** directly. All one can do is to assemble sufficient data, allow the imagination free rein, construct one's life experiences in such a way that they create maximum surprise and stimulus - and wait. Again this is what Darwin and Wallace did (or Kipling). The creative process itself is a law unto itself: 'the wind bloweth where it listeth, it infuses the human or not, quite unpredictably.

Given this fact, a good deal of my life has been concerned with trying to manipulate the external world so that there is a maximum chance of creative imagination working in relation to a particular problem. Many things come to bear here which, in a longer treatment, it would be essential to explain - family relations and education, early teacher's influence, marriage, friendships, influence of career moves, chance meetings

etc. But that intellectual autobiography would not be appropriate at this time and place (though I have started to write it elsewhere).

Here I can only pick out a few of the more obvious, academic, influences which have led up to S.W.P(Savage Wars of Peace). What I am trying to describe is what, in late 1995, seem to me to be some of the reasons for writing it at all, and why it takes its present shape. We all operate with blinkers, selecting a tiny part of reality to focus on. I would like to show how these blinkers have, hopefully, gradually become widened over time, perhaps closing in on other aspects. The course I have taken, eschewing the straight academic career of historian or anthropologist (or anything else) has its dangers. But it hopefully has the merit of giving me an unusual angle on things, particularly bringing into focus the most obvious and apparently trivial of facts.

Of course, if one goes too far away from the mainstream, one's work becomes incomprehensible to others - and one becomes an uninfluential eccentric - dismissed as full of wild half-truths. By remaining solidly in the teaching and research establishment I hope to have avoided this. Yet the routines imposed by a discipline or an institution have a blinding effect, and one of the many virtues of repeated fieldwork in another culture is that it, hopefully, shakes the growing complacency and dogmatism of an aging academic. One should be constantly seeking and striving.

Wright Mills nicely described a book as a (dump of one's files) **give quote**:- It is in fact more than that, because in the process of **dumping** one creatively transform the files. The writing process itself reveals connections and ideas which were not present in the original files.

Nevertheless, using this metaphor, what I hope to do in this introduction is to give readers a glimpse of what those files, so to speak, roughly contained at the **start** of writing this book. These are the ingredients. The book itself, which came as a great surprise to me, taking me in unexpected and hitherto unexplained directions, is the final meal made from the ingredients - a chemically new entity created by intellectual working. It is more than the sum of the parts. Yet something of its nature can be understood by describing how it came to be assembled.

In fact the metaphor of assembling has also its limitations. Over the thirty years during which the thoughts in the book began to form, there was a mixture of raw data collection and previous bursts of creative activity in which I tried to make sense of what I was finding. Thus what was present in 1993 when I started to write it was a very large set of materials, from isolated facts, to quite well worked out sections or sets of ideas. The creative process consisted or taking what I already knew, partially knew, and knew that I **should** know, starting to explore the problem, finding further gaps, returning to data collection, taking further steps, finding further gaps, following hunches. The research and the writing proceeded side by side and consequently, when my recent books have usually only had a couple of drafts, this book went through at least **seven**, each substantially different.

This book is like a symphony, played by an orchestra of whom I am merely the conductor. It has many authors, of whom I am only the principle. Most of the research and many of the ideas have come from others. Parts of many of these have found a temporary course through my mind and onto the pages of this book. It would thus seem only honest and necessary to explain in some detail the various streams that have joined and influenced my life, whether it be Malthus or Japanese demographers, Edward Morse or John Hajnal. In one sense there is nothing original in what I have written. All the 'facts' and many of the ideas were lying about, admittedly, in fairly obscure places. My contribution has been to draw them together, give them a new shape and weave them into an argument.

Version three: April 2002

One long-standing interest has been the process of creativity. As one reads books, watches films or plays, listens to music, hears of amazing scientific discoveries, one wonders how Tocqueville, Kurosawa, Milton, Handel, Newton or others worked. How does one arrive at the new connection, discover new things? What is originality and how is it achieved? Both in trying in a humble way to discover new things oneself, and in trying to teach and guide one's students, particularly the Ph.D. writers who are exhorted to make 'an original contribution to knowledge', an academic is constantly thinking about intellectual and artistic creativity.

Yet when we turn to in depth accounts of how people work, the evidence is thin. Poets keep scraps of early poems, or incorporate discussion of creativity into the work as in the case of Wordsworth, Keats, Coleridge, Yeats. Likewise, some painters and novelists, for example Leonardo, van Gogh, Orwell, Thomas Mann, Proust and others give hints on the process. But where are the detailed accounts of the creative process by scientists and social scientists (including historians).

What I am thinking of is not **after the event reconstruction** of an intellectual career or adventure (as in anthropology with Geertz, Goody, Haimendorf Levi-Strauss), or in science, Crick & Watson, Otto Frisch 'What Little I Remember' (aptly titled) etc, which always, of necessity, become teleological and tidied up, but something which catches the randomness of discovery **as it happens**. Not the narrative of the voyage written afterwards, as Cook's accounts of his voyages, but the letters from the voyage, or log books. Where are the logs of the intellectual voyages as they happened? I cannot think of a single satisfactory one in history (see the feeble 'Commonplace Book' by Tawney, Trevelyan, E.H.Carr, Collingwood's 'Autobiography' etc.) or in sociology or anthropology.

Yet something like this is needed, if only to alert those who are embarking on sustained intellectual voyages to the fact that the hooks they read are, in a sense, fictions. That is to say, they were not written in the way they appear to the reader. The book is **after the fact**, rather like Sherlock Holmes' final revealing of the chain that led to the murder, or like the finished jigsaw puzzle. It does not in any way replicate or even hint at the experience of creativity.

It was with all this half in mind that I conducted an experiment. As I wrote the book which finally ended up as **The Savage Wars of Peace** in 1997 over the period from December 1993 to March 1996, I kept unusually full and detailed notes and comments on the process. These consisted of the plans and drafts of the book itself as it shifted and changed, extracts from personal diaries, periodic detailed analyses of how the research and writing was going in a 'Thoughts' book.

When the book was three-quarters finished I knitted all of these together. The idea was that, if the book was a success as I hoped it would be, it would be relatively easy to find a publisher interested in publishing what I termed 'The Autobiography of Book'. For various reasons, including the price (equivalent now to about £65 or more), the book sold only to a few individuals and libraries, so I put 'Autobiography' on one side.

Since then several things have happened. The book has attracted a great deal of interest in Japan, and been translated into Japanese. It is going to be published in paperback by Palgrave and this should mean a wider readership. It has turned out that the book is the first volume, the first voyage as it were, of four that I have made exploring a diversity of traps and tendencies, so it is particularly important as the start of a new phase of creative writing (see 'Riddle', 'Making', 'Glass'). Students and others whom I have told about the book thought it might be valuable and helpful to know how a book is actually written, from the inside so to speak. Finally, with the Web, with its niche distribution possibilities, and its breaking down of the previous barrier between private and public, a publication of some kind seems warranted.

A web version will make it easier, finally, to compare this account with the final published version. It also fits in well with other materials I am assembling on my web site which cross the barrier between personal and public, for example autobiographical material on people and places which have played an important role in my life. So it now seems the time to do something, and perhaps to tie it up to wider writings on creativity which I had projected under another book called 'The Milk of Paradise', based on my study of great thinkers in 'Riddle' and 'Making'.