

Sympathetic 'Farangi': Interview with Michael N. Pearson

Michael N. Pearson, Professor Emeritus at the University of New South Wales, Australia, and Adjunct Professor of Humanities at the University of Technology, Sydney, is a renowned scholar of maritime history. His books on Indian history have been pioneering ones, though not without criticism. His range of scholarship has been wide. He began his academic journey with a book on Gujarat, moved on to pilgrims to Mecca and then to East Africa, and finally covered the entire Indian Ocean. On this trajectory, he contributed enormously on the rulers, merchants, pious passengers and many other categories of the people who inhabited a large part of the Indian Ocean littoral. Recently, he was very much engaged in talks about his latest book, The Indian Ocean, which is an ambitious work indeed. On the way to England for a conference, he stopped at Leiden to share his views on history with the TANAP students. This provided a good opportunity for Ghulam Nadri to interview him.

Tell us something about your early life and education.

I was born in 1941 and grew up on a quite remote farm in the North Island of New Zealand, and people claim they can still hear tinges of New Zealand vowels in my speech. This farm was about ten miles from the nearest town, and that was a town of only 2,000 people. The farm was not particularly prosperous, and we lived an almost self-sufficient existence, growing most of our own food, buying very little from town. We lived on lamb; when we had eaten one sheep, my father would kill another and we would eat that, and so on. So, it is probably an unusual background for someone going for higher studies and ultimately becoming a professor of History. Indeed, of all the people I went to primary school with, only one other went on to university. After primary school, I boarded at a high school in Napier, and there did quite well in history. So when I went to university in Auckland I did more history, and did a BA and honours MA there. What was being taught at Auckland University was very traditional history indeed. There was some New Zealand history, a little Australian, and a lot on the history of the 'Mother Country,' Britain. There was a whole

course on the Congress of Vienna that is very old-fashioned diplomatic history. There was a little bit of American history too, but almost no history of Asia or the Third World at all. Actually ironically there was a course on British expansion and there was an Indian component as part of that, and this was traditional Indian history as taught by English people, which talked about the Battle of Plassey, the methods of British administration, the British bringing civilisation to India, and so on. Looking back, it was really shocking. I didn't enjoy the Indian part of the course at all, and I did my MA thesis on an early business firm in Auckland. It was pretty boring really.

My political background was I suppose leftist. I became quite active politically in one of the biggest issues in New Zealand at that time, the early 1960s, that is tours by South African sporting teams, which were selected only from the white South African population. At this time, New Zealand bowed to South African pressure and didn't include any Maoris in their teams going to South Africa, even though about half the rugby union team, ironically called the All Blacks, would usually be Maori. Vietnam was central in my political thinking. I still remember going to a lecture in 1963 where the speaker told us there was a place called Vietnam, and the Americans were getting increasingly involved in the civil war there, and this was going to be a major problem, as indeed it did become. My time in the United States, which I'll get to in a minute, began in 1965, as the Americans began their build-up of troops, and ended in 1975 just after they had all been evacuated and Vietnam was reunited. In terms of political consciousness, Vietnam was absolutely central.

At this same time, I began to have a rather callow and unfocussed interest in India. I had some sort of undergraduate interest in Buddhism, especially Zen, and I suppose my increasing interest in the Vietnamese resistance to colonialism led me to look at earlier examples, and especially India. So I read autobiographies of Gandhi, Nehru, etc. This was while I was finishing my MA, and once I finished that my choice was to become a high school teacher in New Zealand or see if I could manage to go overseas and do a Ph.D. somewhere. At that time, there was still a pronounced 'cultural cringe' in New Zealand. The only place worth going to was an English university, and preferably Oxford or Cambridge. Most of my peer group in the early 1960s went to England, and indeed there was quite a prejudice against American higher education. Nevertheless, I thought the US would be more interesting for me, and I wrote to four or five different American universities who offered Indian history for the Ph.D.. These letters were hand written, which shows how long ago this

was, or maybe how behind the times New Zealand was. One of my letters was to the University of Michigan, and it was read by a person called John Broomfield, who sent back a very positive reply. He turned out to be a fellow New Zealander who was beginning his own career as, at that time, a junior academic. Of course, I hadn't done any of the US qualifying tests such as GRE, so they really had no idea whether or not I would be capable of handling Ph.D. work at a prestigious place like the University of Michigan. So I went on a wing and prayer. They paid my fees, and gave me about \$500 worth of research work, and that was it for the first year. Luckily, I did well enough in the first year to get very generous financial support after that; that is from 1966. I was lucky in another way too. Broomfield was a specialist on modern Bengal, but before I left New Zealand, he told me that the area of modern Indian history was already rather over-populated. He suggested I think of looking at the early modern period, and more specifically think of using the Portuguese archives in Goa. He had been there the year before, that is 1964, just three years after Liberation, and he was sure these archives were a great untapped resource. So he encouraged me to learn Portuguese, and also Persian, so that I could handle whatever material there might be from the Indian side.

My then wife and I left New Zealand in August of 1965, and this was my first maritime experience. We travelled for three weeks from Auckland to Florida on quite a small ship with, I think, about 200 passengers and a lot of cargo. This was in fact just at the end of the time when one travelled by sea rather than air; I've never again done a long voyage by sea. The voyage was interesting in another way too, in that we stopped in Tahiti and Panama on the way. Tahiti was the first time I had been in a non-English-speaking country, and Panama was the first time I had seen real poverty—both places left a profound effect on me.

Once we got to Ann Arbor and the university, I started studying. My Portuguese language was now up to the level of efficient reading at least; Persian was a continuing battle, an enormously difficult language to learn, at least for me. At the time that I did my Ph.D. research I could struggle through a Persian chronicle with very great difficulty and constant reference to a dictionary; I was never able to read contemporary Persian documents. I can't claim any mastery or any competence in Persian. And what modest ability I had acquired in the late 1960s I could not keep up, so that today I would make no attempt to read anything in Persian. It's a language, like all others, where if you don't use it constantly you lose it.

Did you find Michigan in any way different from your own university at Auckland? Who were the people who looked after your finances and logistics? My supervisor was John Broomfield, but in fact when I arrived in Ann Arbor he was away in India, and my first teacher of Indian history was Peter Reeves, who filled in for Broomfield for two semesters. I was really lucky to have him as a teacher, and he remains a dear friend to this day, nearly forty years later. This was the American degree system, rather different from the British one that we had at Auckland. I had three years of course work and language training. Most of the course work was history, and I had four fields here: ancient India, modern India, British Empire and Southeast Asia, and at the end of that we had one or two written exams and then a two- or three-hour oral exam. This was an intimidating experience indeed: five professors grilling me orally for about three hours! But I passed, and then had two years overseas doing Ph.D. research and writing a first draft of the thesis. I had support from the University of Michigan and also from the Gulbenkian Foundation in Portugal, which was a very generous foundation indeed. I had a whole year in India, mostly in Goa but also in Baroda where I met Satish C. Misra. He was a wonderful friend and very, very helpful, and he made it possible for me to attend the Indian History Congress in 1968 at Bhagalpur. I did research in Baroda and a little bit in Delhi and I am more or less sure that there I met Om Prakash in 1969.

What were your personal experiences in the archives in Goa and Lisbon?

I was very lucky to be working in Goa in 1968–69. At that time, most Indian archives were much bureaucratised and very slow. This wasn't the case in Goa, where for nearly all the time I was the only person doing research. The Director at that time was V.T. Gune, who was a Maharastrian historian and therefore not very well liked by the local pro-Portuguese people. However, he left me alone, and even gave me a cup of tea each week. I was also privileged several times to meet P.S.S. Pissurlencar, who had been archivist under the Portuguese for thirty or forty years. He knew the archives intimately. He had long ago retired, but he gave me some excellent advice. He was dying of cancer at the time, and I had the melancholy privilege of attending his funeral also.

The archives at this time were in a Portuguese bungalow, single storeyed, with a veranda, which was where my desk was, and a garden outside where I used to wander around smoking from time to time. It was still very informal. I more or less had open access to all the bound documents. Then I had time in Baroda and Delhi, and late in 1969 I started eight months in

Lisbon, where I used most of the major Portuguese archives. Portugal at that time was a dictatorship, that is during 1969–70, and that was another new experience for me.

What were you researching at that time in these archives?

I was working on my Ph.D., which later became my *Merchants and Rulers in Gujarat* book, which was about Portuguese policies on the west coast of India, trade control and so on, and particularly the reaction of Indian rulers and merchants to Portuguese policies. I wrote a first draft of the thesis in Lisbon, and then had a little time in London. Around the middle of 1970, thanks entirely to my supervisor, John Broomfield, I landed a job at the University of Pennsylvania. My thesis was accepted in 1971, and after revision finally published in 1976. What I was trying to do in this book, and indeed in most of my later work, was to use European, especially Portuguese, documentation to write about the history of India, or indeed other Asian and even African areas in the early modern period. It was the sort of thing Ashin Das Gupta did so well for Surat. I never really considered myself to be a Portuguese colonial historian; rather I wanted to use Portuguese documents to write Indian history.

The central argument in *Merchants and Rulers* was that the Muslim rulers of Gujarat, firstly independent Sultans and then the Mughals, were almost entirely land-oriented and not really concerned about what happened on the sea. The fact that the Portuguese built forts on the coast of Gujarat at Diu, Daman and Bassein and taxed trade coming out of Cambay and Surat was not seen as a threat to the authority of the rulers of Gujarat, because their ethos and their attitudes were almost entirely based on land and what happened at sea was of no interest or concern. And I would certainly today modify this piece of juvenilia. As Om Prakash and also Van Santen have shown, it seems clear that the Mughals derived much more revenue from sea trade and customs duties and also took more interest in what was happening at sea than I allowed for in my first book. Indeed, on my first visit to Leiden, I think in the late 1970s, both Van Santen and Heesterman criticised me along these lines, saying that the disjunction I found between land and sea was drawn far too strictly.

Did you find the academic atmosphere conducive at Pennsylvania, since Holden Furber was still there, someone who was very much involved in Companies' trade and maritime history, etc?

Between 1970 and 1975, I taught at the University of Pennsylvania and I was in both the History Department and the South Asian Studies

Department there. The history department at that time was rebuilding and a young competitive department. There were about twelve of us who were assistant professors. This meant we were on fixed three-year contracts. Towards the end of the second contract you were evaluated for tenure by all the tenured professors, and only about one in four made it: a very ruthless system indeed! The South Asian department at that time had a large number of very senior scholars in most of the disciplines. One of them was Norman Brown, the very eminent Sanskritist, but the person with whom I had much more to do with was Holden Furber, and that was a unique privilege for me because I was at the beginning of my career and Holden was nearly at the end of his. He retired I think in 1973, and soon after that he finished his great book *Rival Empires of Trade in the Orient*. He was a very supportive colleague. He read my thesis and provided very useful comments. We taught together sometimes, and it was a real privilege to have such a senior scholar as a colleague, and indeed as a friend too.

Didn't you seriously consider continuing at Pennsylvania?

After a few years at Pennsylvania, my then wife and I began to think seriously about where we wanted our two young boys to grow up. Should it be Philadelphia, or would somewhere closer to home be better? We thought that New Zealand might be a bit 'slow' for us after all our travels, so I tried for jobs in Australia and finally got one at the University of South Wales, which I joined in 1975. I retired from there as professor of History in the middle of 2001.

What were your main academic achievements at the University of South Wales?

I did a few articles and book chapters which were offshoots from the large amount of research I had done for the thesis. They dealt with topics like piracy, corruption, Hindu seafarers and Indian participation in the Goan economy. Subsequently I revised some of these to make my second book, *Coastal Western India*, and Teotonio de Souza, an old and dear friend, was instrumental in that happening. I then got involved with Ashin Das Gupta in Indian Ocean matters. I first met Ashin when I was in America and he was passing through, as indeed did many others, including Om Prakash, for a great advantage of being at the University of Pennsylvania was that all the best Indian historians visited at one time or another. This was in the early 1970s, and we could see that there was a certain similarity in what we were trying to do, even though he used Dutch sources and

I was using Portuguese. He was beginning to establish Indian Ocean Studies at Vishvabharati University at Shantiniketan, and in the late 1970s he had a few people there to do a seminar on the Indian Ocean. Subsequently we worked together to produce the book called *India and the Indian Ocean from 1500 to 1800*. This was not so much based on new research as an attempt to say, 'Here is what we know about private English trade,' 'Here is what we know about the seventeenth century,' and so on. We hoped to sum up the field and perhaps show what else could be done. We had chronological chapters on the overall sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; we had one on Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean; Southeast Asia; East Africa; East Asia; we had one on the companies; two on private trade; and a charming one by A. Jan Qaisar on life on the sea. It was not purely a maritime history book because it was very much focused on India, and I don't think the book had any sense of the sea in it. It was mostly a book about trade and a large part of the maritime experience was not mentioned at all. In a way, I have subsequently tried to rectify these omissions.

Before that, however, I was asked to contribute to the very large project of the New Cambridge History of India. My brief was of course to write a book called *The Portuguese in India*. This was meant to be a very short book, and in a way, it's an essay, and certainly is not meant to be a complete coverage. I'll say a bit more about my attitudes towards colonialism later.

At about this same time I was asked to present the Heras Lectures at St Xavier's College in what was then Bombay. This invitation came from Fr. John Correia-Afonso, who was one of those courtly, worldly Jesuit scholars. I mentioned that my politics were mildly leftist. I'd read a bit of Marx, just as everyone did, and in particular had become interested in the world-system theories of Immanuel Wallerstein. I liked the way he tried to present a complete account of the recent history of the world from a neo-Marxist standpoint. In the 1970s and 1980s his work was very much on the scholarly agenda, though I suppose more recently the fad is cultural studies rather than Marx. So for the Heras lectures I presented a summary of his theory, and then critiqued it, and discussed how it could apply to the Indian Ocean area. So again I was moving a little closer to the sea! The lectures were published as *Before Colonialism*, a teleological title that I really shouldn't have used.

My next effort was to write a book about people travelling over the ocean for religious reasons, that is the hajj to Mecca. In a way this was a critique of Wallerstein, for I felt he doesn't give enough attention to the way people are not motivated only by economic factors. In one

fundamental way this was not a satisfactory book, as it used almost no Persian, Turkish or Arabic sources, except in translation. It was mostly based on various European sources. My understanding is that in fact there are very few indigenous sources for the early modern hajj, but even so there is a central problem with a book that discusses a matter which is so important and so central for Muslims and yet uses few Muslim sources. My main indigenous source was an unpublished work called *Anis-ul-Hujjaj*, which is a seventeenth-century account by an Indian Muslim pilgrim. Jan Qaisar at Aligarh Muslim University very kindly gave me a transcript and a rough translation of this. The author talks about the journey to Mecca, and what happened on the ship, so this was a very useful source for me. And despite the limitations, one of the reviewers said it was a very nice account from a sympathetic *farangi*, which I consider to be high praise.

This book had a rather strange history. It was called *Pious Passengers* and was published by Sterling in Delhi, but they sold it at the Frankfurt Book Fair to both an English and an American publisher. The English edition was the same as the Indian one, but the American edition was a major disappointment. It was called *Pilgrimage to Mecca: The Indian Experience*. The publisher was Markus Weiner in Princeton, and he insisted that the book be heavily edited. In itself, that was no problem, but there was no acknowledgement in the book that it was substantially the same as the previously published Indian version. The editor also took it upon himself to translate several short passages that I had left in French. He got most of these wrong and distorted the meaning badly. Finally, on the title page 'Indian' is spelt 'Indan.'

Your area of interest is well diversified, from Portuguese to pilgrims and then to medical practices and so on. What inspired you to write on the exchange of medical practices between Europe and India?

I entered the medical area quite by chance. In the mid-1980s, I had become friendly with a very eminent paediatric neuro-surgeon in Australia, and he encouraged me to investigate contacts between Indian and Portuguese medicine in Goa. In fact, I have twice spoken at major medical conferences on such topics. In 1989 I was a visiting Professor of early modern history at the University of Minnesota, and one of the things I did there was to give a public lecture that was organised by the John Ford Bell Library, a wonderful library on Europeans in early modern Asia. This lecture was later published, and I've maintained, to an extent, my interest in this area. This is partly because my wife is a very experienced nurse and midwife; she is a big help in correcting at least some of my errors in the area of

medicine. I've published four articles or book chapters on aspects of medicine in early modern India, and all of these will be in a collection of my shorter work published in the Variorum series, to be called *The World of the Indian Ocean*. The next thing I worked on was East Africa and the Swahili coast. I must admit that this was partly because I wanted a chance to travel somewhere other than India: not that I will ever get tired of visiting India! Working there was also a chance to enlarge my knowledge of the shores of the Indian Ocean. I had a couple of research trips to the area, met various people there, and accumulated quite a lot of interesting material. Then someone I had known for some time, John Russell-Wood, out of the blue invited me to deliver the Schouler lectures at the Johns Hopkins University. This was really quite an honour, as my predecessors included Le Roy Ladurie, Charles Boxer and lots of other very eminent people. I took the opportunity to write up my African material, and the lectures later were revised and published as *Port Cities and Intruders*—which incidentally was not my choice of a title. The reviews were mixed, some good, others not. I did have a sense that some of the critical ones from established East Africanists were really complaining about my having the temerity to encroach on 'their' turf. In any case, people must have bought it, because to my surprise it had a paperback edition also.

Your writings are often taken as Indo-centric and written from a very anti-colonial perspective. Why is this so?

I mentioned in the beginning various things that I suppose in a way politicised me to some extent; white South African sporting tours and in particular the Vietnam war. I suppose this gave me a broad sympathy with anti-colonial struggles, and an opposition to western imperialism. This did flow into a sometimes-critical look at the activities of the Portuguese, though I am never as rough on them as they were themselves in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There are a host of complaints written at that time about corruption and other things. Unfortunately, my writings have sometimes not found favour in Portugal among some of the more traditional scholars, who grew up in the dictatorship period (which ended only in 1974) when the notion of a civilising Portuguese mission was very much part of the prevailing ideology. Even today there still is an attitude among some Portuguese scholars that 'After all, we weren't as bad as the others,' meaning other colonial powers. But I certainly don't include all my Portuguese friends in this category of tacit apologists for their country's history. And if I were to write on any other colonial power I imagine my attitude would be the same!

Why are you so much interested in the sea and maritime history? Have you often been to sea and been observing the coastlines, that fascinated you so much?

I've shown as I've been talking how my interest gradually became more and more focused on the sea. A group in Western Australia, especially Peter Reeves and Ken McPherson, and also a Dutch scholar called Frank Broeze, helped this. They organised various conferences, large international ones, and McPherson set up an Indian Ocean Centre, which went through various manifestations and now has been closed down by an unsympathetic university administration. So this kept my interest in maritime history alive. On the other hand, I have very seldom travelled by sea, and I'm certainly no sailor. As I mentioned earlier, my first trip out of New Zealand was by sea to the US. In 1969, I travelled by sea from England to Portugal. I've done the ferry from Mumbai to Panaji several times, and short offshore trips in dhows in East Africa and small boats on the coast of Goa. But this is hardly a nautical experience. The only other first-hand sea experience I have is that I now live north of Sydney in a house right on the beachfront! In short, while I had written on aspects of the Indian Ocean, it was not my central concern. Then yet another invitation appeared.

*Your last book, *The Indian Ocean*, is an ambitious work and has been received largely with applause, but also with criticism. I think it deserves a rather detailed introduction here.*

There is a series from Routledge called *Seas in History*. Its general editor is Geoffrey Scammell, a retired early modern historian at Cambridge whom I've met at various Portuguese-oriented seminars and conferences. Before mine two volumes in this series had been published, one on the Atlantic, and one on the Baltic and North Seas. Geoffrey asked Ashin Das Gupta to undertake the Indian Ocean book, but soon after that Ashin was struck by a very debilitating disease, which he died of, and that was the tragic end of a good friend and a wonderful historian. Scammell then asked me to consider taking it up. I did not have anything really important on my desk at that time, and I also realised that a lot of my publications had a strong maritime element anyway, as I've already mentioned. The requirement was to do a very broad overview with a text limit of about 150,000 words. I felt that I had a good background in the early modern period, particularly on the Arabian Sea side. For the earlier period, and the period after 1800, I read very widely in secondary work. I also read masses of first-hand travel accounts. I was lucky here, as in the Fall of 2000 I was Vasco da Gama

professor at Brown University. I had almost no teaching, so I could use excellent libraries at Brown, and also at Yale University and New York. I quoted these travellers extensively in the book, partly to make it more readable, but more because that way I hoped to get a bit of ozone into my work, to give some sense of what it was like to travel by sea at different times. The other guiding principle was to try and write an amphibious history, one that moved easily between land and sea.

I felt that most of the more recent books on the Indian Ocean were far too much concerned with trade, to the exclusion of other matters, and especially religion. And I felt they gave no impression of an actual nautical experience. Certainly, I would include the book Ashin Das Gupta and I edited in this category, as well as the very fine work by another dear friend, Sinnappah Arasaratnam. As to earlier histories of the ocean, the French scholar Toussaint's book seemed to me rather jumbled, and with far too much attention to land matters which had nothing to do with the ocean. Ken McPherson's book on the Indian Ocean was a fine synthesis, showing an impressive command of the secondary literature. But it was a bit pedestrian, with no hint of the actual maritime experience, as people have lived it over history.

The Indian Ocean is a vast and old body of water and, obviously, I could not hope to be comprehensive. My original text was about 240,000 words, but the publishers quite correctly insisted it be cut down to the specified word limit. This does mean there are gaps, especially on the Bay of Bengal side, and for the earliest period. Some of the reviews have pointed to important matters which I either ignored or covered cursorily; sometimes I have to plead my word limit, but at other times I have to admit ignorance.

I started the book with a discussion of maritime history in general, and deep structural elements in the Indian Ocean. My debt to Braudel, and to another, recent, book on the Mediterranean by Horden and Purcell, is clear. One of the themes, which is scattered through the book, is a discussion of whether in fact there is such a thing as an Indian Ocean, something that can be treated as some sort of unit, which is capable of being analysed historically, just like, say, the history of a town or a modern state. I tried to show how people on the coasts related to the ocean, and the extent to which affairs in the hinterland affected sea matters. And I spent probably more time on people travelling over the ocean for religious reasons than I did on traders. Naval battles got very minimal coverage indeed.

One of my themes is that for about 1,000 years, from say 750 to 1750, one of the strongest connections across the ocean was Islam. Most of the people on the coasts, who were my main interest, were converted. Conversion itself is a major theme in the book, for I see it as a process rather than an event. It takes time, maybe generations, for a person to reach close to normative Islam. And travelling Muslim scholars were important here, both in making the initial change, and then reinforcing it and trying to get rid of pre-Islamic practice. Ibn Battuta, whose wonderful travel account I used extensively, is a good example of this. He had done the hajj, he had met great *ulema* in Mecca and Medina and elsewhere, and this meant he felt capable of commenting on Muslim practice around the shores of the ocean.

The book is also really an attempt at writing World History, that is a history which is not bounded by states and political borders. In fact, this sort of history now has more appeal to me than does World-System theory, even though I still very much admire Wallerstein's totalising ambitions. The book has had a few reviews already. There is a Roundtable discussion in the *International Journal of Maritime History*, with a reply by me. It is disappointing that most of the reviews have not really addressed my discussions of maritime history as a field, but rather have commented on gaps related to their own specialties. However, I may sometime later attempt to write more specifically about the problems of writing a history of an ocean, and if I do this I will also address some of the criticisms of my book.

Apart from research, in which you made enormous contributions to the academia of the Indian Ocean world, what other engagements did you have? I retired from the University of New South Wales in the middle of 2001, and I really had thought that once I finished the Indian Ocean book I would find completely non-academic ways to spend my time. However, instead I became part of a research project called 'Culture and Commerce in the Indian Ocean' with two colleagues from the University of Technology in Sydney. This means I am working more or less half time on scholarly matters, and spend the rest of my time in various community activities in the little coastal village where I live. The research grant means I can travel a little, to conferences and for research. It's an ideal life really, as I don't have to do the parts of an academic job that I had got tired of: committee meetings, marking vast quantities of undergraduate essays etc.

What is your message to the young scholars who are working not exactly on maritime history but on trade history?

The VOC archives I don't know at all but I am sure they have not been exhausted. The Australian scholar Bob Elson said he was the first person to use many of the documents he found in The Hague, when he was researching his excellent book on the Cultivation System. My impression is that a large amount of work is still to be done in the archives here (in The Hague) and most of the Portuguese archives. There is a mass of material in different libraries and archives in Portugal. The big gap probably is the eighteenth century that has not been that much worked on, and I know there is massive Portuguese documentation both in Lisbon and in Goa.

I would certainly expect people to be asking the right kinds of questions of the documents and not just summarising what these have to say about the past. It's best to go in with a problem, and use the documents to solve it. The Indian Ocean Project, which I am part of, is concerned to use a Cultural Studies approach to the history of the Indian Ocean. Here is the official description: the project examines trade cultures in a region which was the hub of the major world economic system in the pre-colonial period, and is now restrengthening. It thus links the earliest global system with current globalisation studies, giving those analyses historical depth. It is the first cultural studies project in Indian Ocean studies, and it aims to match new theory to the empirical diversity of the region, analysing the way cultural forces add value to commodities, while creating diverse forms of transnational culture and identity. The project will make major contributions to cultural/historical and post-colonial thought, with the potential to create a new field of study. The project has room for new researchers, and is in partnership with the Asia Research Institute in Singapore for the planning of an international conference in 2006.

So far my own work has not been in this sort of area at all, but I am sure that this approach could provide new, exciting and very different work on colonial history as well as maritime history.

Which aspects of history do you think can be unearthed from these documents?

It seems to me that there is still a lot to be done on the social history of the Europeans in Batavia, in Goa and in many other places also. Urban history has also been largely ignored, and researchers here could work with historical archaeologists to establish site plans and so on. I think conversion is constantly interesting, that is especially to see it as a process rather than an event, as I mentioned above. Comparison would be interesting here too: both between, say, the Portuguese and the Dutch,

and then looking at different successes in different areas. There is a huge ongoing series called 'Asia in the Making of Europe' and I imagine that it would be very interesting to do a variant of this and write on the influence the returned VOC people had on life in the Netherlands: what was the life style of the people who returned to their mother country after a few years' service in Asia, what role did they play in politics, society, the economy, and things like that.

I think it would also be very useful, especially for doing social history, to have some background in social anthropology and in the theoretical work that talks about clashes of culture, and culture contact generally. There is a very good collection from a conference at the University of Minnesota called *Clashes of Culture*, edited by Stuart Schwartz, and this gives some idea of what can be done. There is material in the Goa archives in an early version of Konkani, and in theory at least I think it would be possible to take an area of land in Goa, just a few hectares, and trace its history and possibly even its use, over even five centuries. This would be an incredible thing to do. As for diplomatic history, I am not really interested in this, but that is not to say that people could not do some interesting work on this. I think the interaction between Dutch, English and Portuguese in, say, the Gulf of Aden or Mocha or Jedda or with the Ottomans could be very interesting.

We still don't know much about Portuguese activities in Southeast Asia, in Thailand, Vietnam, Burma, etc. Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Luis Filipe Thomaz put forward the idea that the Portuguese had grandiose ideas of conquering large parts of Southeast Asia, which I find very improbable, but that is something that probably could be investigated more. There were some thousands of Portuguese adventurers or mercenaries operating in the Bay of Bengal. Most of them were peaceful traders, but some of them for a while became successful pirates and even were able to establish quite large areas of influence. We need to know much more about these people. However, Sanjay Subrahmanyam and George Winius to the contrary, their presence did not in any sense constitute an 'empire.'

I envy younger people starting off to do research on the early period of interaction between Europeans and Asians. We have some benchmarks now, or what could be called 'foundational studies,' but there are endless possibilities to do new and innovative work. It's challenging no doubt, both in terms of the language skills needed (which of course should include European and Asian languages where appropriate) and the need to use 'theory' of one sort or another to avoid writing history which is antiquarian, or which does not address general historical processes which

are of interest to our discipline generally. We need to be able to talk to scholars working in related, but different, areas. I read lots of histories of oceans and seas as I prepared to write my Indian Ocean book; similarly, we must avoid being parochial, and rather try to look at related work from other areas. Just one example of this would be the series by Jonathan Hart on imperialism. I would like to close by wishing all those embarking on research in either the colonial or maritime field: 'Bon Voyage.'

