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Nicholas B. Dirks. *Autobiography of an Archive: A Scholar's Passage to India.* Cultures of History Series. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. 400 pp. $30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-16967-7; $90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-16966-0; $29.99 (e-book), ISBN 978-0-231-53851-0.

Reviewed by Joan Gaughan (Independent scholar)

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Commissioned by Charles V. Reed (Elizabeth City State University)

Countless letters, journals, and diaries from the earliest days of the East India Company confirm that it is very hard for a Westerner to be blasÃ© about India. One either hates the place or falls in love with it. Especially if one is young, the latter is likely to be the case. Nicholas B. Dirks encountered India when he was twelve years old. His father, J. Edward Dirks, a Presbyterian minister then teaching at Yale University, had received a Fulbright grant in 1963 to teach at Madras Christian College. For the young Dirks, that year in India set in motion âa lifetime of passages to India, personal as well as professionalâ (p. 2). From his parents he had imbibed a fundamentalist version of Christianity, but his âfailureâ to have what he calls a road-to-Damascus conversion, exacerbated by his discontent with certain religious doctrines, had led to some self-doubt. What happened in India was not only an encounter with peacocks, cobras, and leopards but also a change in his relationship to his own religious belief. Far from losing his faith, that year introduced him to broader understanding of belief itself, and that understanding seems to have colored all his future encounters with India.

Dirksâs educational career, which began at Wesleyan University and culminated in a PhD from the University of Chicago, coincided with the intellectual turmoil of the Vietnam and civil rights era with all its painful scrutiny of the moral and political verities that had sustained our national innocence, the kind of scrutiny he had gone through as a child examining his own religious faith. That period also saw, in university history departments, a turn from an emphasis on high politics and intellectual history, the deeds of generals, kings, and philosophers, or what was sometimes criticized as the study of âdead white men,â to the spectacle of the ordinary, the multifaceted social and cultural currents that were often the subject not of history but of anthropology.

This book is a collection of the authorâs earlier essays and lectures, including excerpts from his *Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (1987) and *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (2001) arranged in five sections. The thread that unifies the whole is the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to handling any archive, an approach Dirks had derived under Bernard Cohn at Chicago. It was that approach that led him back to India to look at the nature of kingship in Tamil Nadu through a lens that united history with anthropology.

In discussing his initial approach to the Tamil archive, Dirks reminds us of the trepidation many of us experienced encountering our own archives. There is the initial excitement of having a field of oneâs own. Then the awful moment when, confronted with the actual thing, the questions arise. âWhere do I start, thereâs so much, a lot seems to be missing, how do I handle this or that particular element, and what do I do next?â And one has the slightly uncomfortable feeling of being led down paths one did not really expect to travel. And then comes the frustration, particularly in something like the archives Dirks encountered in Tamil Nadu, where he found few indices, guides, photocopy machines, or neat catalogues, plus the archive was scattered all over India and some of

it had ended up in the British Library. His greatest challenge, however, was that colonial rule, particularly after 1858, had itself distorted the archive. The old saying that history is written by the winners is, of course, true also in anthropology. What information is collected and how it is collected, interpreted, stored, and used depends on the agenda of those in charge whose interests may have little or even nothing to do with the actual human sources of that information.

And then that unexpected path…. It was in his study of Tamil kingship that Dirks was forced to the conclusion that the larger narrative of political and economic history could not be separated from caste. Caste is not a new thing, of course, but Western ideas about it are. Caste is neither an unchanged or unchanging system derived from ancient times nor is it specifically religious, nor is it necessarily unified. Rather, it is a very untidy thing (and colonial administrators were not comfortable with untidiness) that cuts across and around and transcends political hierarchies. What the British did was to construct caste as inherently religious, something that, as a matter of policy, they would not interfere with. Although Dirks does not address it, because of its presumed religious nature, caste did give the Evangelicals an argument for proselytizing in India, and, as he points out in part 4, colonial control could be legitimized because inequality and oppression seemed embedded in caste. At the same time, the British also set aside the political realities on the ground that did invite intervention, condensing the chaotic nomenclature of Indian princes into a tidy hierarchy of ârajas,â âmaharajas,â and such who all looked pretty much alike officially but who had exercised very uneven categories of prerequisites and influence before the advent of the Raj and, in fact, continued to do so during it. Moreover, if âall politics are localâ in the United States, they are even more so in India where major decisions can be made on the dirt floor of a threshing shed. Dirks does not address that issue either but it is a very minor omission.

If there is a criticism to be made at all about this work it is that Dirks gives scant sympathy to British administrators who were often trying very hard to bring efficiency and order to a world that valued neither. Given that the British entered an arena once described by Jawaharlal Nehru as a bundle of contradictions held together by a string of invisible threads, it is a wonder that the distortion of the colonial archive was not more egregious than Dirks found it. And for that, in part 1, he credits the work of the early Orientalists, particularly Colin Mackenzie whose Mysore Survey, taken between 1792 and 1799 with the help of Indian assistants, primarily C. V. Boriah, and then his two brothers, Lutchmia and Ramaswamy, contains a trove of information about the languages and dialects, tribes, families, history, and geography of southern India. More than mere information, however, it is Mackenzieâs approach to India, his intellectual humility linked with an insatiable curiosity, that Dirks appreciates enough to credit him as the precursor to his own scholarly work.

In part 2, instead of looking *at* his archive, Dirks enters *into* it. In a delightful chapter entitled âRitual and Resistance,â he scrutinizes social relations and structures of authority through the lens of the annual Aiyanar festival. Aiyanar is a critical deity since he is the protector of rural villages in the Pudukkottai district of Tamil Nadu. Although the ritual is obviously, at its root, religious, it is simultaneously an expression of the hierarchies within the community, involving claims about authority and, at the same time, about struggles against and within it. Participation in this or that piece of the preparation is a privilege âownedâ by this or that particular group, and thus can be contested. Confirming the essential fluidity of caste, Dirks points to the centrality of the village headman, the ostensible center of the festivities that begin and end at his house. The priests make the clay horses whose consecration is the center of the ritual, but it is as potters rather than as priests that they must obtain permission from the headman to begin making the horses.

Dirks had looked forward to attending the festival. He was told exactly when it would begin and agreed to arrive soon after dusk on the appointed day for the celebration, which, he understood, would begin at midnight. Although he had failed to receive a formal visit from the headman a week earlier, on the appointed day of the festival, Dirks drove his motorcycle the thirty-five potholed and dusty miles to the village only to find it dark with no visible signs of a festival or anything else happening. In fact, it had not taken place for seven years and nobody, except Dirks, expected it to take place that year. Like any colonial administrator, he had logically expected the preparations to result in what they had been about. Unlike many colonial administrators, however, he realized that the preparations as much as the ritual itself were an end in themselves, the stage for both conflict and continuity within the community, or as he says, âtheater livedâ rather than âtheater playedâ (p. 130).

In part 3, Dirks steps into another archive, or rather another section of the same archive, to discuss sovereignty not in India but in Britain as it related to In-

dia, using Edmund Burkeâs attack on the excesses of the Company to study the relationship between sovereignty and empire. From its origins, to protect their trade, the Companyâs servants had exercised the powers of a sovereign state. Answerable only to the Crown through its charter, the Company had built forts, engaged in military and naval clashes, and negotiated a variety of agreements with local powers. As early as 1668, the Bombay factory was granted the right to mint money and establish courts of judicature with jurisdiction over both British and Indian subjects, privileges that Madras also acquired about the same time. Thus, long before the trial of Warren Hastings, despite the fiction of âa group of merchants quietly plying their trade,â the Company-state had become such a prominent fact not only of Indian politics but also of British political life that its threatened bankruptcy in the middle of the eighteenth century called for government intervention.

Burke opposed that intervention, believing that any meddling in the Companyâs affairs presented a fundamental constitutional danger, and he continued to support the Company during the debates on the 1773 Regulating Act. He had not opposed the Companyâs expansion, nor did he oppose the idea of empire. Dirks argues that, for Burke, Shah Alam IIâs forced grant of the diwani (the right to collect revenue on behalf of the emperor) to Clive in 1765 changed not only the Companyâs relationship with the Moghul Empire but also its relationship with the British state. I donât think that is quite accurate. Believing that the Companyâs commercial interests were not in fundamental conflict with what was left of Indian sovereignty, that England could rule India in conformity with its own ancient constitution and Indiaâs, Burke actually had hailed the grant of the diwani as âthe great act of the constitutional entrance of the Company into the body politic of India.â[1] Rather, it was the moral squalor that came in the wake of the grant of the diwani that raised Burkeâs ire, and alarm. His almost obsessive pursuit of Hastings almost two decades after the grant of the diwani bespeaks a sense of outraged betrayal. What alarmed Burke was not the granting of the diwani itself but the fact that in addition to the despoiling of Bengal, nabobial riches were being used to buy lands, office, and seats in Parliament, thus upsetting the social and political order at home. The two were inextricably linked. The upending of tradition and order in India threatened legitimacy and order in England. Could, or would, the Companyâs servants subordinate their own commercial interests to the standards of Englandâs ancient constitution, let alone Indiaâs? Or, as Clive had wondered, was India too great a sovereignty for a merchant company to rule? The way out of the dilemma, of course, was to declare that Shah Alamâs grant of the diwani had effectively created a vacuum of sovereignty into which the Company had no choice but to enter. Shah Alam and his descendants thus became pensioners; the Company became the Raj; and while Richard Wellesley and his successors thought of themselves as proconsuls of empire, the fiction of a cadre of merchants merely exercising sovereignty continued. If ever a crown were hollow, until 1858, this one might have been the prototype.

What Dirks does in this section, and, in fact, throughout the *Autobiography of an Archive*, is to link the colonial to the postcolonial world. A central problem faced in the eighteenth century both in the parliamentary debates about governance in India and in the trial of Hastings, who, as Dirks rightly points out, was not the worst of the nabobial lot, was whether economic interests and military might can be translated into political right. That issue is not irrelevant in the postcolonial world. Although Dirks does not say so, several questions may come to mind here. One might be whether the need for a commodity such as oil and the right of a petroleum company to profit can be reconciled with the stated ideals and traditions of a free republic? Can the messy, totalitarian, brutal dictatorship in whose land that oil exists be tolerated by a republic whose professed ideals include a regard for human rights? Globalization has not left behind the problems brought about by the links between commerce and political sovereignty but has simply recast them in different vocabularies.

The latter two parts could almost be titled âAutobiography of the Archivistâ where Dirks reflects on the academy, particularly in its transition from unified single-disciplinary studies to interdisciplinary area studies to global studies, and, in so doing, brings his own intellectual autobiography to a culmination. During World War II and in the Cold War years thereafter, the governmentâs need for information about the non-European world prodded universities into instituting interdisciplinary area studies programs. The result was, in the words of the title of his last chapter, âthe opening of the American mind,â that the political, literary, and cultural horizons of American scholars were vastly widened. To the catalog of French, Spanish, German, occasionally Italian, and maybe Latin, language departments began adding Chinese and Japanese, Farsi, Hindi, Urdu, Korean, Filipino, and Arabic. The current fall schedule at the University of Michigan where Dirks was a leading founder of interdisciplinary studies includes courses in the Bagh-

vad Gita, Asian Cinema, and the Great Books of Japan and, if one is tired of courses in Western civilization and medieval French literature, there is Gender and Sex in China.

Government prodding, however, had a downside. In a passionate defense of Frank Boas, whose chair he held at Columbia University in 1997, Dirks uses Boasâs opposition to the use and/or misuse of academia by the government, the practice of turning âscholars into spies,â to argue for the continued independence of academia from political controls. Political influence, however, is not the only problem faced by interdisciplinary programs. In the last two decades of the twentieth century, the polarization of politics and the ensuing culture wars both within and outside academia spawned by the Vietnam War and civil rights movements, and the demise of the Soviet Union contributed to their decline. Yet he admits that neither area studies nor the disciplines they incorporated are able to fully deal with challenges of globalization, ranging from climate change to international law, global inequality, and the need to regulate global markets and financial institutions or, as he says to create the conceptual frameworks to grasp the transformation of the relationship of discrete places to a world without place.

I was initially a little puzzled by his inclusion, in the last chapter of the book, of a criticism of Alan Bloomâs *Closing of the American Mind* (1987). I had assumed that Bloomâs diatribe roughly thirty years ago had been given its last rites and been buried, unmourned. However, given the fact that there is no sign of a truce in the culture wars and, indeed, when academic research is often subject to the kind of attacks once reserved for rap music and marijuana smokers, there is a good reason for Dirks to take on the Bloom argument. Bloom had blamed liberal education in the university, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, for abandoning the core classical values of the Western tradition and for fostering a cultural relativism that he disdained. In attacking the Bloom position, Dirks argues that the culture wars are themselves evidence of the centrality of the liberal arts, which, as he postulates in his introduction, because of the emphasis on critical thinking, reading and writing are âthe single greatest contribution of America to higher educationâ (p. 23). Far from abandoning those core values, he says, it is precisely because of a broader understanding of cultural, religious, and social differences that âwe can celebrate the ... embedding of knowledge in the world while also insisting on the priority of moral questions in guiding our engagement with the worldâ (p. 320).

What is at least as alarming as the Bloom challenge, however, is the sense that liberal arts are often seen as irrelevant, wasteful, and unnecessary, that they are the province of an elite. While the economic downturn beginning in 2008 and Americaâs general anti-intellectualism may have something to do with that, the culture of the intelligentsia as well as its ambivalence about playing a larger cultural, social, and political role is also to blame. Citing Hanna Holborn Gray, Dirks points out that faculty increasingly live within their own departments and talk only to their own colleagues, and institutes and centers have become semi-autonomous. In addition, arguments over the dropping or retaining of distribution requirements, competition for government and corporate funding, and arguments over the universityâs relationship with both, infighting over identity politics as well as different kinds of histories and âselvesâ can be blamed on the culture wars, but there is also little agreement about how to chart new mechanisms for global engagement. Henry Kissinger once said that the arguments in academia are so vicious because the stakes are so small. And while he was right about the quarrels being vicious and the smallness of some of them, he was wrong about the overall stakes. They are not small, and Dirks begs the professoriate to argue on behalf of a liberal education rather than dissolving into internecine rancor over the smaller stakes.

His concern is especially relevant in view of a recent article, âThe Decline of International Studies,â by Charles King. While King bemoans the fact that education and research have become less about national priorities than political jockeying, he also blames the âcultishnessâ of the American academy, where, he charges, graduate students are often taught to âfill a hole in the literatureâ without asking whether or not the hole is worth filling and where only 30 percent of professional scholars in international relations have a working knowledge of a language other than English.[2] Moreover, since globalization is taking place on Americaâs own front-door step, it would seem that Dirks has much to do before he considers retiring.

There are a number of things to savor about this book. Not the least is the taut, clear language, which, at times, becomes almost lyrical. In a discussion of the late twentieth-century cultural landscape from a post-colonial perspective, using Michael Ondaatjeâs *The English Patient* (1992) as well as Matthew Arnoldâs work on the relationship between culture and anarchy to exemplify the significance of ruins, Dirks says, âWe stroll across the dilapidated ramparts, we climb the devastated

staircase, we sift through the sandy shards, we back up on a grassy knoll until we can see the grandeur and the beauty of the prospect. But ... we cannot just stand back, despite the fact, perhaps because of the fact, that we now know the ruin is littered with unexploded mines.... We plant flowers in the garden, never sure if the weeds we pull or the sharp blade of our trowel will trigger an explosionâ (p. 248).

At other times, he is passionate particularly in arguing that the continuing debates about the collision of cultural relativism and universal values should continue to be at the forefront of disciplinary debates. In a discussion of the controversies surrounding hookswinging,[3] for instance, he reminds us that while such practices as that and sati or clitoridectomy may horrify us, that very horror should not blind us to other forms of violence both closer to âhomeâ and in the postcolonial world. âHorrible events take place; hundreds of atrocities escape being reported, let alone receiving sustained international attention, each day, from dramatic cases of genocide to the everyday forms of violence against women, children, and other subaltern groupsâ (p. 165).

More than the language, however, it is Dirksâs intellectual humility that makes him a worthy heir to Mackenzie and a worthy successor to the twelve-year-old boy who was wise enough to allow India to captivate him. And it is that quality, that approach to his archive, as much as what he finds in it, that makes this a valuable addition to oneâs library.

Notes

[1]. Cited in John Keay, *The Honorable Company: A History of the English East India Company* (New York: Macmillan, 1991), 377.

[2]. Charles King, âThe Decline of International Studies,â *Foreign Affairs* (July-August 2015), 88, 93, 92.

[3]. In hookswinging, a rope attached to a pole is passed through iron hooks inserted into the back of the devotee just below the shoulder blades. He is then lifted and swung about the pole for several minutes before being lowered to the ground.