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# The St Andrews Historian

A magazine for History graduates of the University of St Andrews

Issue 6 – 2018



# Letter from the Editor

Dear All,

It is always a great pleasure to be back in touch with another edition of our History alumni magazine.

This year has been especially challenging for teachers and taught alike given the extended periods of dispute and negotiations over pensions. Fortunately, it would appear that we are making good progress in resolving outstanding issues. In this edition, we divide our attention equally between our staff and alumni. We feature recollections from three of our alumni who are enjoying exciting careers in the field of media and communications. The interviewee in

our 'In Conversation With' piece is Professor Ali Ansari, Professor of Iranian history here at St Andrews.

And, finally, as always, we share research insights from colleagues working in the medieval, early modern and modern history departments. Enjoy!

Best wishes, Chandrika



## Reflections from the Head of School, Professor Colin Kidd

Welcome back – in mind if not in body – to the School of History at St Andrews. In previous years I have tried to give you a flavour of what academic staff in the School were up to with regards to their personal research and also their outreach activities to the wider world, which I am told exists out there somewhere beyond Leuchars railway station. In this issue I would like to do something rather different. This year I would like

to focus on the achievements of some of our most distinguished students, not least because some of our students have recently won major prizes on the national stage.

Jonathan Triffitt has recently been awarded the Robertson Medal awarded to 'the most outstanding candidate of this year's competition for a PhD scholarship' funded by the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland. Jonathan read German and Modern History at St Andrews, spending his third year at the University of Bonn in Germany, and then completed an MSc in History at the University of Edinburgh. The working title of Jonathan's doctoral thesis, which is co-supervised by Professors Frank Müller and Riccardo Bavaj, is 'The Age of Divine Right has simply passed by': The fall of monarchy in Hesse, Bavaria, and Württemberg, 1918-1934'. It is sometimes forgotten – even by historians rigorously trained in the St Andrews tradition – that Imperial Germany consisted of twenty-five states, twenty-two of which were hereditary monarchies. Jonathan aims to compare the fall of the monarchy in three of these, namely the kingdoms of Bavaria and Württemberg and the Grand Duchy of Hesse. This will involve extensive archival research in the cities of Munich, Darmstadt and Stuttgart, as well as in other German archives.

Ashley Atkins, an MLitt student in Scottish Historical Studies, won the Royal Historical Society's Rees Davies Prize for 2017, for his MLitt dissertation entitled, 'The Authorship, Function and Ideological Origins of the claim of Right of 1989'. This dissertation, supervised by Professor Roger Mason, reminded some rather red-faced modern Scottish historians, not excluding your own correspondent, that

the Claims of Right of 1988 and 1989 were very different documents, and that the latter was based on a rich and indigenous tradition of Kirkmanship dating back to the seventeenth century. This was cutting-edge analysis from an MLitt student which immediately raised the standard of discussion in this field, especially with its exploration of the unexpected and underexamined theological origins of a modern Scottish political discourse. The judges wrote that Ashley's argument is 'thoroughly convincing, superbly demonstrated on the basis of a range of primary and secondary sources, and written with remarkable lucidity, elegance and panache.' Ashley has been invited to submit a version of his dissertation to be considered for publication in the prestigious *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*.

Several other former St Andrews students picked up awards at the Royal Historical Society in 2017. Dr Claire Eldridge won the Gladstone Prize, for which Dr Andrew Smith was shortlisted; and Dr Richard Sowerby was shortlisted for the Whitfield Prize. Nor should we forget Dr Malcolm Petrie, once a St Andrews PhD student, now a member of staff, who won the David Berry Prize for his examination of the forgotten role of libertarian and individualist ideas in the culture of post-1945 Scottish nationalism.

We congratulate all these award winners, and apologise to History departments in other universities for St Andrews' stunning monopoly of the glittering prizes.

# In Conversation with Professor Ali Ansari

The editor Chandrika Kaul met with Professor Ali Ansari, Professor of Iranian History at St Andrews, for a wide-ranging discussion about the discipline of history, historicism in post-Brexit Britain, and much else besides.

**C:** Hi Ali. May I begin by asking you to tell us about your own historical background, specialisations and areas of research please?

**A:** Thank you. I actually started as a British and European historian funnily enough. My training at UCL was in British and European History, a very standard Modern History degree. In those days the University of London was a proper federal university, and if you wanted to go to different colleges to do different papers it could be done very easily. So I saw these papers at SOAS (The School of Oriental and African Studies) that dealt with Persian History or Middle East History, and my tutor just rang up from UCL and said that we are sending you a student. We had eight papers for an Honours History degree, and I had four of my papers in SOAS. I did the survey course in Middle East History; then I did an optional paper, I suppose we would call it an Honours Option, in Fatimid (Medieval Egyptian) history. Then I did a special paper on 'Persia under the Mongols'. In those days you could get away with being the only student in the class. In fact, my tutor, David Morgan, had not had a student for four years in that class and he was able to keep the course going, and one of the reasons he didn't recruit too well was that you needed Persian. In those days to do a special paper you needed languages, so I had the language, but I also got extra training in Classical Persian. So from British and European History, I went on to do Middle Eastern History and then did a postgraduate degree in War Studies, because I thought I would try and make myself more relevant.

I took a year out to see what the world of work was like and didn't like it and decided I would come back and do a PhD, which I did at SOAS in the Politics Department with Charles Tripp. But because of my historical background what I worked on was Political Myth, uses and abuses of history in twentieth century Iran. So my background really starts in a very orthodox, a very standard way and then moves further and further into Middle Eastern and gradually into Iranian History, in some ways dictated by my own background obviously as a first generation British Iranian, but also because I felt that I needed to do something that would basically play to my strengths, which is that I had Persian. I was never very good at Latin. At the end of the day if there weren't any academic jobs at least I might have some usefulness as a research analyst. I wanted to make myself marketable!

**C:** Thanks. I am just wondering how you would, given this interesting background, look at the role of history and public intellectuals in post-Brexit, contemporary Britain?



**A:** When you are studying the history of Iran, one of the first things you realise is that history is political. I have always been struck by how history and the teaching of history in the United Kingdom was always quite settled. We sort of accepted what the basic narratives were, but with Iran I always worked on the premise that actually because Iranian history in the twentieth century has been so turbulent and so revolutionary, we have various competing narratives. What the new regime does is it completely re-writes the past to justify its position and it emphasises this in different school text books, university courses and so on. So the Shah obviously prior to the revolution put a lot of emphasis on ancient Iran, pre-Islamic Iran – he was very big

on this, it was very strong nationalist narrative stuff. After the Islamic revolution of course it was post-Islamic Iran that became much more prominent, but even within particular aspects of that narrative, they didn't want to look at the history of medieval Iran that didn't show just how wonderful Islam was, for instance, or didn't do it through a prism of religious history. So I always had this notion that history was political, and of course my PhD being in the Political Studies Department was very emphatically of this view that historical narratives are very contested, historical interpretation is always really from the present, and these interpretations are important, these ideologies are important.

What I have been struck about in the last few years, and certainly after the last two referendums that we've had here, the Scottish Independence and then Brexit, is just how much of the narratives that I thought were settled were actually up for grabs. History, yet again, has become a little bit more contested, a little bit more political than many of us thought, and I think it has probably taken us by surprise. Even European historians appear to have worked within established traditions. If you talk to German historians, for instance, there is this whole debate about how German history has been interpreted leading up to the Third Reich, what happened with German unification and so on. You could talk similarly to Italian historians, Spanish historians and even the French have a few blind spots when it comes to the Second World War. However, by and large, you found the 'Anglo-Saxon' model has been a little more stable. But, I think over the last five years certainly, what surprised me coming back from abroad is to see that many of the ideas that I would have applied to Iran and the writing of history in Iran have a relevance for us here now. It is in many ways a reflection of ourselves. I have always approached the study of the history of Iran, and I always thought the teaching of Iran to be a case study for various themes and approaches

to history that we might use in a much more general sense. So my approach to history as a discipline in a way has been that we all look at different case studies, but actually what we are looking at are processes, methodological, ideological and historiographical issues that are relevant to everyone. In some ways it is easier for us to study Iran or India because the tensions are much clearer, the boundaries are much more acutely drawn. However, in the last five years what's happened in Great Britain is that what was latent has become kinetic in a way.

I think that's quite interesting, and so I wrote this little essay – *These Islands* – and one of the things I have applied in that is the concept of decadence. Is the teaching of history or our attitudes to politics and history decadent? Of course it's the sort of word you would use in the East, the Orient. People would get a little bit offended perhaps at the use of that word, but it's a very deliberate thing for me to say – look we have been talking about the East as decadent, as corrupted in a sense, but what do we mean by decadence? We don't just mean wealth. We are often talking of moral or ideological decadence, a complacency, taking things for granted. If I look at Iran, one of the great dangers there is fatalism. I don't know if it is the same in India, but certainly in Iran they would say whatever will be will be, everything will work out well in the end, whatever God wills that's it – that sort of thing.

**C:** In Hindi, we have the same word for yesterday and tomorrow!

**A:** So we have this sort of fatalism, and when I look at Iranian political thinkers they constantly try to energize the people to remind them that it is not just all a master plan, you have to do something. Which actually in a curious sort of way is a very Zoroastrian way of looking at it. Zoroastrianism has always dictated that we are in this moral fight between good and evil, but mankind, humankind, has a role to play in that.

Under some of the more mystical aspects of Islam certainly there's this element that the Almighty is omnipotent and you just sit and do his work. In a political sense that can make you kind of fatalistic. If you look at Iran in the nineteenth century there is this criticism of why don't people do anything, they are stuck in this stupor. So that could be typified as a form of decadence, and I thought it would be quite interesting to take these ideas and apply them back here and question if the West has become decadent? Has Britain become decadent? I'm not saying the answer is yes, but I'm just saying that it might be interesting to ask the question. According to Kant, Enlightenment happens not when you have the answers, but when you ask the correct questions. Kant says that we have emerged from darkness into Enlightenment when we have learned to ask the right questions, and I think what I'm trying to do in some ways is to ask the right question. What is it about us that in 2014 this country came very close to dissolving itself, almost by accident. In 2016, I think Peter Hennessey made a wonderful point when he quoted Seeley....

**C:** That England gained an Empire in a state of absent-mindedness.

**A:** Yes, and Peter Hennessey said that it seems we have lost Europe in a fit of an absence of mind. Were we sleepwalking, did we not know what was going on?

**C:** I wrote to a bemused colleague in Australia that David Cameron fluttered his butterfly wings and set off a storm! Could I just ask, since you mention your recent book, which is more like an extended essay, could you expand on some of the main arguments.

**A:** It's a think piece and naturally a little bit on the provocative side. Basically, I was trying to bring some of the themes and ideas that I have had about Iranian History or non-European History back home. What I was very interested in was this idea in Britain, and I draw very much on Orwell's *Lion and the Unicorn*, where he says England is probably the only great nation where its intellectuals are embarrassed about their nationality. What is the moral, spiritual and ideological core of what constitutes British identity? What is it that shapes it – how can we define it? I want to argue very strongly in a sense that like other countries, Britain is really shaped by a set of collective ideas. I'm not saying necessarily values, those are different. I am just saying: what are the ideas that fed a sense of the self? I wanted to go from looking at the consensus that was built up in what we would now call the Whig interpretation of history. Looking at Thomas Babington Macaulay, who I have a great admiration for, he is rightly criticised for the narrative inevitability he encourages, and the complacency this can lead to – decadence if you will – but on the other hand, he is a fascinating individual. Obviously a man of his time. But I think it is important we distinguish the Whig interpretation from the radical Whig ideas that informed it. Then I consider its deconstruction, what happened after the Second World War that led to this Whig narrative basically being assaulted both from left and right. One of the more interesting assaults on this narrative came from the United States. The United States was both an imperial or hegemonic power and also an anti-imperial power whose own foundation myths were defined against Great Britain as an Empire. On the one hand it inherited the mantle of empire from Great Britain, but at the same time it wanted to say we are separate, we are liberators. What I said in the text is that for me what was quite interesting is that the Americans had Whig history on steroids.

Then if we turn to Orwell who talks about the main sources of criticism, the left wing intelligentsia and the imperialist 'Blimps' and the post-1945 world, suddenly the British Empire has shrunk dramatically and they are squeezed between the left and the right. One of the things that I find quite interesting is the way the whole narrative on the British Empire in particular came under increasing scrutiny as you get to decolonisation. I became more aware of some of the consequences of this. Many people were terribly embarrassed about it and really wanted to put the past behind them. They moved into this sort of post-modern, post-colonial narrative that in which the Left in particular viewed Britain and America through a Marxist lens, that defined them as the epitomes of capitalism. Britain in this narrative construction really serves the purpose of being part of this process of the developing communist utopia, and as Marx would have it, ideally Britain or America as the highest stage of capitalist development should ultimately

in their own term fold, through internal contradictions, into a communist utopia. So, you get this sort of deconstruction of the narrative and its replacement with a new one. Interestingly 'decolonisation' comes home, the British Empire becomes the English Empire and the English Empire really is about Ireland, Wales and Scotland as being sort of tied to an imperial England. Basically it is this bringing of the post-colonial, the anti-imperial discourse back home, taking it to its next stage. The Irish can certainly make a case for it, the Welsh can certainly make a case for it but I always thought the Scottish had the least convincing case for it. One of the things I argue is that actually the Scots were very heavily implicated in the British, not English, empire. What we are now in danger of is throwing out the British baby with the imperial bathwater.

The final section of the essay seeks to deconstruct the deconstruction, if I can put it that way, and try and restore some balance to that argument. In addition, what we need is a much more sensible, sober and less ideological reading of British history and, by extension, the history of the British empire. These are historical phenomena that need to be seen on their own merits.

**C:** In much contemporary debate, this is either non-existent or polarised.

**A:** Yes, that's what I mean, it's too ideological. One of the things that really puzzles me is this idea that I can study the Persian Empire or the Ottoman Empire, and just look at it dispassionately, but it is very difficult in the current framework to do the same with the British Empire. I think you would agree that anyone who says anything about the British Empire and anything other than that it was a complete and utter disaster, is under fire! Whenever I look at the sources and at the way Iranians talk about Britain – yes, they are very critical of British policy, but they are actually quite admiring of British politics. What they always say is this: "why do the British always fall short of the ideals they set themselves?"

Orwell does talk about how the British are hypocritical. I think a better way of understanding that is to say that they had these moral visions, quite grandiose in some ways, but very frequently fell short of them. My view is that if you have power, is it not better to have some aspirations than to have nothing at all? I'm just throwing that out as a question – I'm not giving an answer to it, but is it not better, if we are all in the gutter as Oscar Wilde might say, for some of us to look up at the stars, and maybe occasionally hit that target?

**C:** Yes, I agree entirely.

**A:** What I find interesting talking to you, Chandrika, is that you look at India and I look at Iran, and if you read some of the Indian and the Persian sources, yes, they are very critical of the British, but there is also a sneaking admiration in some ways. I found it very striking in the Indian sources which indicated their desire to have Britain leave, that it wasn't a 100% antagonistic relationship. I think for me one of the most interesting people is Gandhi in all of this, because Gandhi's idea of non-co-operation of course implies that there was co-operation or collaboration – that's what's interesting about it.

**C:** Percival Spear wrote more than 50 years ago about how the Indians broke their British chains using British hammers.

**A:** That's what I said about Iran. In a way it broke through by appropriating and learning many of these things, and that's why one of the interesting things is how Gandhi was a British dissident, in a curious way. It doesn't mean that he and other Indian nationalists were any less patriotic, not at all. I could give an equivalent say of Taqizadeh and Foroughi in Iran. Staunchly nationalistic, but the ideas that excite them are basically what we would call Whig ideas – radical Whig ideas about parliamentary democracy, the rule of law, etc.

**C:** If you can bring us back to the here and now in St Andrews. My final question would be about where you see history in St Andrews going in terms of the stated impetus towards expansion into more non-western and global history. What ideas do you have about how we might do that?

**A:** I think St Andrews has a fantastic reputation for the teaching of history. When I came here one of the things they clearly wanted to do was to expand into the Middle East on the understanding that the Middle East would be a growth area, and I think (obviously) they are absolutely right on that. I think there are far too few places today in the United Kingdom that teach Middle East history as opposed to politics, in any depth. Now we have more people working on Iran in St Andrews than any other university in the United Kingdom, which is excellent. I fully agree that I think the way forward now is to look increasingly at global history, but for me global history is a bit too vague a term. The Americans do a lot of this when they talk about global civilisation – from Plato to Nato – and that sort of thing. That I have always felt was not the right way forward. I think we need to develop areas where we already have some strengths and build on it. South Asia, for me, builds on the Middle East expertise we have, not only from geographic proximity but also cultural interchanges. Then I think to go into East Asia which is also important, certainly China and Japan. Again, if we look at Africa, because we already do Middle East and North Africa, it's not difficult to be able to look at East Africa, Southern Africa and so on.

It would be good to genuinely develop the global reach that builds on the strengths we have but also emphasises the fact that St Andrews is an international university. Obviously, in order to do that successfully, it has to be properly thought out, planned and built on incrementally, because there is nothing worse if you are the only historian in South East Asia and you are brought in and there are hardly any resources in the Library – it's quite difficult to build on that. I have always benefited from the fact that Iran is the bad boy in the news, we have always had the 'advantage' of some firebrand in Iran who could shout and swear that there might be a war tomorrow. I suppose when you look at India they are comparatively peaceful and people aren't necessarily paying as much attention, but I think they should. And of course, India is part of British history. You can't get away from it. One of the things I think you would agree on is that we don't do enough of cultural interchange in the other direction, to look at the ways in which India and 'Persia' influenced the West. Global history as integrated. We could even call it transnational!



# Where Are They Now?

Beginning with this issue, we are turning the spotlight on alumni careers and showcasing specific areas. Our first area, broadly defined, is Media and Communications.

The University does not keep relevant records, but by sleuthing on internet sites (primarily LinkedIn), we were able to deduce that University-wide (and not limited to History), over thirteen thousand alumni work in media-adjacent fields, about half of those overseas. This broad category covers such jobs as business

development, media and communication, education, marketing, research and sales. The numbers drop substantially to 2,345 if the category is limited to only media and communication. This figure represents 5% of total alumni (47,186 as listed on LinkedIn). If we work with the wider definition of media, then it appears that 28% of St Andrews alumni seek gainful employment in this sector.

Here we feature the personal reminiscences of three of our History alumni who have carved out successful careers in this field.

**Alex Hamilton** graduated with an MA in Modern History in 2003. He worked first in journalism and then joined the press office of the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills in 2008 before becoming Deputy Head of News in 2014. Following a stint with the BBC’s former governing body, the BBC Trust, he is now Head of Media & PR at ADS, the UK’s aerospace trade association.



“Arriving in St Andrews as a History student in the final months of the twentieth century, I had only the vaguest idea of what topics I might study, the career I would eventually pursue, or long-term plans of any substance. My decision to study here had been taken approximately a month earlier, as a participant in the dreaded process of ‘clearing’. Despite the slightly rushed nature of my choice, it turned out to be one of my better ones.

My years making the short walk along The Scores from what was then Hamilton Hall – a residence that gave me, among other things, a fantastical postal address – to St Katharine’s Lodge offered me the chance to study subjects as varied as modern Egypt, the 1960s, and the nineteenth century construction of the United States. When deciding module choices, I avoided topics I had studied before as far as possible. Journeys into the unknown past were more challenging and more enjoyable for me.

This experience would serve me well in my career. In my few years as a reporter and my longer years in media relations, the ability to pick up new subjects and run with them despite limited background knowledge has proved invaluable. Studying modern history allows a student to gain important insights into other disciplines like economics, or politics and government. Joining the Government’s Communications Service as the financial crash took hold, I could wonder how many senior bankers and policy makers might benefit from some knowledge of the collapse of the

Egyptian Government in 1882 after interest rates on its loans spiralled and a bet on borrowing to fund massive national infrastructure improvements failed to pay off in the manner intended.

Of course, this simplifies a complex web of issues wildly – a regular feature of my career, as detailed policy and business strategies must be summarised in a few lines. Any more would risk losing the attention of readers and viewers as well as, crucially, reporters and their editors.

Alongside a familiarity with working at pace and rapidly getting up to speed on the unfamiliar, perhaps the most important benefit from my studies is trust in my own analysis of a situation. Time spent in exam halls on multiple analyses of sources either half-remembered or previously unseen proves to be well spent whenever a snap decision is needed on how to advise a Chief Executive or Government Minister about to appear on TV or radio responding to developments in the previous minutes.

One final lesson I took from studying history is that making what interests you a key factor in deciding what courses or career to pursue will rarely backfire. There are plenty of worse reasons for following a particular course than because you enjoy it.”



**Amanda Litherland** graduated with an MA in Mediaeval History in 2012. She works at the BBC where she produces her own programme, Podcast Radio Hour.

"I'm a producer and presenter for BBC Radio 4 and 4 Extra. People often assume I have a journalism degree and are usually very surprised to learn that I studied Medieval History (but are always glad to be on my team in a pub quiz).

My first job at the BBC was in development for Arts Television. To my surprise, my fourth year special subject on medieval Wales immediately came in handy when I successfully pitched a programme about *The Mabinogion*. I considered working as a researcher in History Television, but when I was given a placement on Radio 4's Front Row I realised I much preferred the autonomy of radio production.

Having a good general knowledge of history and culture has been really useful at Radio 4 where everyone seems to know a little bit about everything. I am particularly thankful to Alex Woolf for his classes which would be peppered with various historical anecdotes, both pertinent to the module and otherwise! I learned a great deal about how to capture an audience with history, even an audience that might think they are not interested in history.

It was not until my second year of university that I listened to Radio 4. A lecturer suggested listening to In Our Time as a starting point for essay topics, and I quickly became hooked. These days it's a firm favourite of mine, and my ears always prick up a little more when there's a St Andean on the panel.

I never necessarily intended to work in radio. When I came to university I had no idea what I wanted to do, and actually thought about going into law. In my third year I went to an event run by the School of History where staff talked about

their careers before academia, and thankfully I was put off the legal profession after hearing from a former solicitor! At St Andrews I was also active in Mermaids, STAR, and I co-founded The St Andrews Revue. After graduating in 2012, I was successful in applying for the BBC trainee scheme. I had the intention of becoming a comedy producer, but I have found I prefer being on the other side of the mic.

This year I have begun presenting and producing my own programme, Podcast Radio Hour, where, along with a guest, I recommend popular podcasts and interview the people who make them. Aside from the technical challenges of recording and editing, it's a remarkably similar skill set to studying history; working alone wading through masses of material, researching incredibly niche topics, and hoping it looks like I know what I'm talking about! I curate the programme by asking my guest for a couple of favourite series, listening to those podcasts and choosing a good episode to feature, and then I try to match that somewhat thematically with a pick of my own. This requires listening to hours and hours of content (usually on double speed) and having a broad enough knowledge of the vast podcasts out there to be able to draw upon something which is relevant and interesting to the audience. My favourite kind of podcast is one that you never thought you would be interested in at face value, but you come out completely enlightened. My favourite example of this is a '99% Invisible' episode about bins in Taiwan – it sounds boring, but it's fascinating!

History has taught me to find interesting stories in the strangest of places, and not to be afraid of venturing outside my comfort zone. In my programme I face the challenge of summing up an entire medium of audio in just one hour a week, and I'm reminded of the feedback to my final year dissertation: 'A semi-serious attempt at a near impossible topic!'

**Gary Heatly** graduated with an MA in Scottish History in 2004. He currently works as a freelance sports journalist, and credits his experience at St Andrews with acquiring many of the skills he uses for his job.

"I look back on my time at St Andrews with a great sense of fondness. I loved studying there for four years, and there is no doubt that it helped launch my career in journalism – a career which now stretches back nearly 14 years.

Hailing from Edinburgh, I had always wanted to make the short journey north to Fife after school. I started off studying for a general history degree at St Andrews as I loved the subject. Most of all, though, I loved writing. Whilst at school I had begun to write match reports on sporting fixtures that my friends were playing in and found it very rewarding. As a result, when I reached St Andrews as a wet behind the ears 17-year-old I quickly joined the student newspaper. Researching and writing stories for the paper was really helped by the work I did in the early stages of my degree.

Soon into my first year I found that history can be all about a love for the subject, reading numerous sources to piece together a picture of events and cross-checking facts to make sure that everything adds up and makes sense. This is much like journalism, and progressing through a history course – I ended up specialising in Scottish history – I learnt so many things which just became part of my routine and have served me well in the years since my studies.

I have a fascination for different versions of events, because at the heart of it all is a real interest in the human species



and the stories we all have to tell. Everyone has a backstory to share about why and how they chose the path that they did. This is as true in history as it is in journalism. I love telling people's stories in my day-to-day work, and this is built on many of the things I learnt during my period in the East Neuk.

Now I work as a freelance sports journalist. Recently I was lucky enough to head to the Gold Coast in Australia to cover

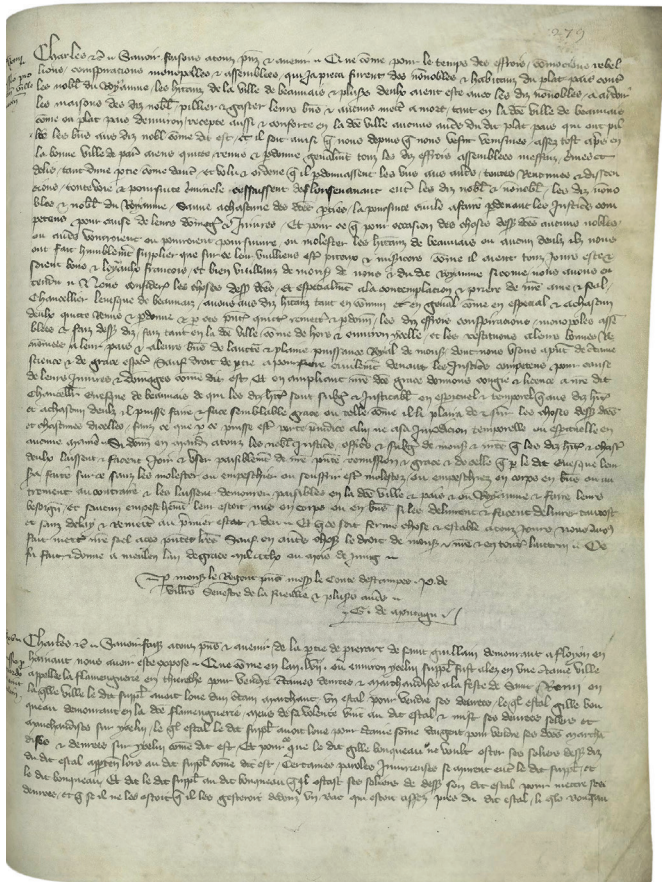
the Commonwealth Games 2018. It was special to cover a multi-sport event on that scale, but it was extra special because my cousin, James Heatly, was diving for Scotland and won a bronze medal. To be in the 'mix zone' and see him just moments after he had secured a podium spot was a career highlight. I have no doubt that my spell at St Andrews played a big part in where I am now and the opportunities that I have in my current job."

# Staff Research in Focus

## Medieval Violence in Context

by **Dr Justine Firnhaber-Baker** (Senior Lecturer in Mediaeval History)

'Medieval' is often used as a synonym for 'violent'. The famous line from *Pulp Fiction* springs instantly to mind. Even in this age of school shootings and terrorism, most people assume that our society is much less violent than that of the Middle Ages. But as a historian of violence in late medieval France, I am not most struck by how much – or how little – violence there was, but by the fact that it was employed by a much wider variety of people and often for very different reasons than it is today. There may not have been *more* violence in the Middle Ages, but it meant something different.



Royal pardon for revolt  
(Paris, Archives nationales JJ 90, folio 279r.)



My first book, *Violence and the State in Languedoc, 1250-1400* (Cambridge, 2014), focused on the wars that lords in Southern France waged against one another in the period after the Albigensian Crusade. I wanted to know how often this kind of violence happened and whether the French crown tried to stop it. Using archival sources in France, I discovered that at least one of these wars was waged every other year and that their frequency did not decrease over time. French kings did sometimes try to outlaw these wars, but they were more focused on making peace than in punishing perpetrators. The crown also ran up against the fact that lords had responsibilities for governance that required the use of force. In the political context of late medieval France, where power was diffused among many holders, there could be no question of the kind of 'monopoly on legitimate violence' that states have today.

The book that I am working on now looks at the use of violence in the very different social context of a peasant revolt called the Jacquerie that took place near Paris in 1358. Medieval chroniclers, mostly aristocrats themselves, dwelt heavily on the violence of this revolt, accusing the rebels of graphic acts of incredible cruelty. However, my work with court records from the time shows that those accusations are almost entirely untrue. That raises the question as to why these writers chose to think about the revolt in the way they did. Part of the reason that medieval lords could wage war with impunity was not just their political prerogatives, but also the social clout of being noble. Peasant rebels, on the other hand, did not enjoy that kind of social licence. Although nobles were actually more violent more often, non-noble violence was presented as more socially and culturally aberrant. I hope that this book will help people to understand violence as something more than simply disruption, and to think about how and why violence is characterised in different ways in different contexts.



## Cultivating Commerce: Cultures of Botany in Britain and France, c. 1760-1815

by **Dr Sarah Easterby-Smith** (Lecturer in Early Modern History)

This portrait depicts the gardener James Lee (1715-1795), who ran a commercial plant nursery in Enlightenment London. Lee's heavy-set features and his large oversized hands show that he hailed from a world of physical labour. A shaft of light, however, falls on his forehead, leading down to his eyes and to a tiny magnifying glass. Just like a gentleman scholar, Lee is engrossed in intelligently studying the plant in his hands. No rough gardener after all, the portrait depicts a man of understanding whose whole character is subsumed in the study of botany.

James Lee and his associates were the subject of my recently published book, *Cultivating Commerce*. The book uncovers the previously hidden histories of people who, although they hailed from the lower middling ranks, participated in genteel Enlightenment culture. Using case studies from Britain and France, I explored how such men and women forged connections with their counterparts in Europe and further afield. Through combining practical horticultural expertise, an intellectual understanding of the science of botany and a strong understanding of polite sociability, people like James Lee made significant intellectual and social contributions to Enlightenment science.

Tracing the gardeners' involvement in the natural sciences led me to question broader assumptions about eighteenth-century society and culture. In particular, I sought to understand how the masculine culture of Enlightenment scholarship responded to expanding public participation. The eighteenth century was, after all, a key period of change in terms of public access to science. Botany was one of the first sciences to become accessible to a wider non-elite public, which included women as well as men. By linking the history of science to economic history, I was able to

identify how science became fashionable in eighteenth-century Europe, and how the possession of commodities associated with Enlightenment – including rare horticultural specimens – carried a significant cultural cachet.

Public science, however, was often at odds with that of the scholarly elite who comprised the Enlightenment's 'Republic of Letters'. It was feared that public participation would dilute scientific standards and create confusion



rather than clarification. Lower-ranking individuals, including those who achieved considerable levels of expertise, struggled to gain respect and trust from Enlightenment intellectuals. James Lee's portrait, which was produced towards the end of his life, is testament to how one non-elite man tried to assert his expertise in public. Women of all ranks, however, found that claiming intellectual status was much more problematic. My book explores how they negotiated the gendered hierarchical world of Enlightenment science.

Retrieving the histories of these humble individuals from the scant records available in archives was a fascinating but complex task. The process of researching and writing *Cultivating*

*Commerce* showed me how writing history from the perspectives of non-canonical individuals can offer a fresh – and significantly different – understanding of eighteenth-century science, culture and society.



George Garrard, *James Lee (1715-1795)*.  
(Photo: by permission of City of Westminster Archives Centre  
(<http://bit.ly/james-lee>))

## Drawing Back the Veil on Science, Nature, and the Environment

by Dr John Clark (Senior Lecturer in Modern History)

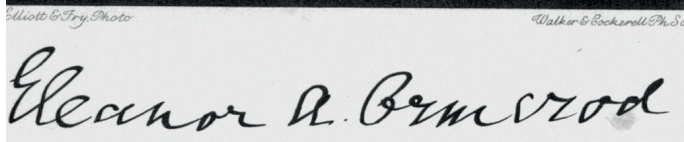
When it was founded in 1992, the Institute for Environmental History at the University of St Andrews was the first of its kind in Western Europe. Its remit was – and remains – relatively simple: to study human interaction with the natural world through time; to ensure that there is more nature in history. To do this effectively requires a willingness to engage in interdisciplinary scholarship. Working within the rubric of environmental history, my research has explored intersections of the history of science, medicine, and the cultural history of Britain and its empire, from the late eighteenth to the late twentieth centuries. More specifically, this work has encompassed the history of natural history, waste, and environmentalism. All of these themes recently converged in an examination of a minor toxic waste spill in Smarden, Kent in 1963. This incident gained national and international prominence because it coincided with the UK publication of a seminal text for

modern environmentalism, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. My exploration of the 'Smarden incident' was part of a larger endeavour to discern the historical relationships between nature, science, expertise, and the modern state. To understand the nature of this work, an especially apposite and helpful comparison might be drawn between Eleanor Ormerod, a late nineteenth-century entomologist, and Rachel Carson, a late twentieth-century marine biologist.



Eleanor Ormerod was a wealthy 'spinster' who achieved notoriety as an economic, or applied, entomologist in late nineteenth-century Britain, and later inspired Virginia Woolf to write a short story based upon her life. Ormerod provides historical perspective on the place of women in science, and on the role of the scientific expert in rationally managing the environment. For close to a quarter of a century, she was Britain's *de facto* government entomologist. The nature of her science and of her public campaigns provides timely insight into the complexities of gender, nature, science, and history. As an economic entomologist, Ormerod defined herself as a technological scientist. The latter half of the nineteenth century truly was the age of industrial chemistry in the Western world. In agriculture, this first manifested itself in the search for effective artificial fertilizers. The mass application of insecticides was another facet of the enduring push to increase agricultural productivity through the application of science. Ormerod played a pivotal role in this process in Britain. She, an unmarried woman, convinced farmers to drench nature in a slurry of a poison (called Paris green), to squeeze parasitic flies from the warbled flesh of cattle, and to pursue the extermination of the house sparrow. For Virginia Woolf, this made Eleanor Ormerod a 'pioneer of purity even more than of Paris green', because she so openly challenged ideological assumptions about the roles of women by aspiring to be acknowledged as a professional scientist.

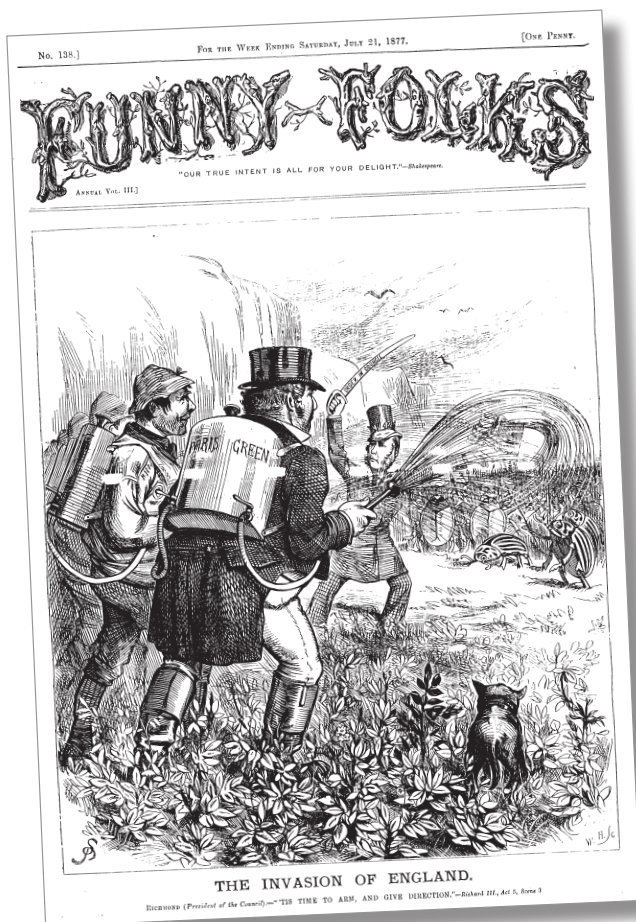
In many ways, the life and career of Eleanor Ormerod bear a striking resemblance to that of another renowned female scientist. As an unmarried woman, American Rachel Carson suffered attacks on her intellectual credibility in the wake of the publication of *Silent Spring* (1962). Like Ormerod, Carson constructed a significant portion of her career in government service; and as with Ormerod, cancer tragically intervened and deprived Carson of a well-earned and comfortable retirement.



Photograph of Eleanor Ormerod

*Eleanor Ormerod, LL.D. Economic Entomologist. Autobiography and Correspondence*, Ed. Robert Wallace (1904), frontispiece.

Eleanor was Britain's *de facto* government entomologist in the late nineteenth century.



'The Invasion of England', *Funny Folks*, July 21, 1877.

The beginning of mass application of insecticides: a cartoon from 1877 depicts a British defence against the onslaught of Colorado beetles. The only weapons against these potential American invaders are an insecticide (Paris green) and the 'sword' of legislative action.

Whereas Ormerod proudly celebrated her role in the introduction of mass applications of insecticides, Carson warned that the ensuing 'chemical death rain' portended 'the pollution of the total environment of mankind'. But it would be wrong simply to reduce this comparison to good and evil science. Ormerod was a child of the age of progress; she firmly believed that her science would act as a beacon in the inevitable triumphal advance of humanity. Consequently, she implored the public to place unquestioning faith in the scientific 'expert' (a term which only gained currency in the nineteenth century). Rachel Carson was a child of the Cold War; she wrote in the shadow of apocalyptic mushroom clouds over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Wary of the myopic power of fragmented scientific and technological specialties, she became a vocal critic of technocracy – of scientific expertise in aid of governance.

Eleanor Ormerod and Rachel Carson remind us that the past, present, and yet to come are part of a continuum. Gender, for example, has been inextricably entangled in the rise of the technocratic society, and it has been an enduring issue. In January 2005, Lawrence Summers, President of Harvard University and former treasury secretary under President

Clinton, suggested that women were under-represented in academic science because of innate genetic differences. Once again, the role of women in science was challenged on the basis of biological determinism. Science, however, is neither inevitably flawed nor hopelessly relative. Like history, it can enhance our understanding of the world. But Ormerod's impatience to use science to change the world represents a potentially worrisome facet of an enduring post-Enlightenment faith in a systematic knowledge of the natural world. Too often, agribusiness, which has arisen in the wake of scientists like Ormerod, remains dangerously blind to the complexities of nature – a point which Rachel Carson forcefully made in *Silent Spring*.

Relatively recently, Harvard zoologist Edward O Wilson suggested that the post-Cold War era should be named 'the Age of the Environment'. The increasing awareness and evidence of human-induced environmental change inspired this suggestion. Ormerod and Carson remind us that politics, economics, and culture are inextricably linked to our relationships with the natural world; and that science has a complex socio-cultural history. As she faced the approaching spectre of death, Eleanor Ormerod, renowned scientist, raced to complete a book that she tentatively entitled, 'Recollections of Changing Times'. To expedite this project, a colleague and friend suggested that she employ a secretary to sit behind a screen and record her vocal musings on the past. As we draw back the veil of history, the past record of science, as a culturally-embedded systematic investigation of the natural world, can inform our present and future.



7.2 J.O. Westwood lecture illustration of the 'Colorado Potato Beetle', 1878, Hope Entomological Archives, Oxford University Museum of Natural History. This nineteenth-century illustration depicted the Colorado beetle, an insect which led to the mass application of poisonous insecticides. Eleanor Ormerod rose to prominence as an expert entomologist when Britain feared a possible invasion of this North American beetle.

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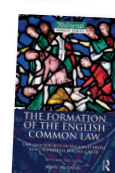
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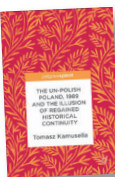
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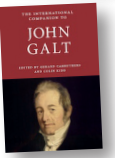
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