

PHILIP D. CURTIN (1922–2009)

Contributing to a University Beyond Teaching and Research

I enrolled in the graduate program in History at the University of Wisconsin in January 1957, intending to major in East Asian History. When I met with the Department Chair, he informed me that the professor with that specialty would be on leave for the spring semester. He said that he would assign me to Prof. Phillip Curtin because “he was the only other member of the History Department who had an interest outside of the U.S. or Europe[!]”

Within a decade, the department would have, in addition to the traditional group of U.S. and European historians, a Third World caucus of historians, with professors of Latin American, South Asian, and Southeast Asian history—and three in African History alone. Still not certain of the validity of those histories as sufficient entities in themselves, the department permitted graduate students to earn a degree in Comparative Tropical History, embracing aspects of all the above. That too soon changed to permit degrees in specific areas such as Africa.

The driving force behind this dynamic expansion was Phillip Curtin, and his talents were not limited just to the History Department. Identifying kindred spirits in other areas, he and his colleagues pushed the University to broaden the international dimensions of a host of departments. As a capstone to these efforts, and working with Jan Vansina, Phil Curtin led the University into being recognized as a major center of African studies by developing a department in African Languages and Literature.

There were many reasons for this amazing growth: Sputnik and the Peace Corps, a very generous Ford Foundation, and a UW administrative team with international interests who supported initiatives by leaders such as Philip Curtin. Phil has long been recognized for his teaching and research. He needs also to be remembered for his administrative skills and fund-raising ability, which made him a major faculty catalyst at

UW–Madison, helping to bring it into the forefront for Third World Studies within a very short period of time.

Joe Corry

In at Many Births

One summer day in 1973 I wrote Phil Curtin a letter from my office at the Centre of West African Studies at the University of Birmingham (see above). In it I expressed my belief that there was a need for a journal devoted to method in studying the African past. In quick order—for those days—I had a reply expressing interest and saying that he would take up the matter with Jim Duffy, then the Executive Director of the African Studies Association. Both Phil and Jim believed that the Association should get into publishing more seriously, and apparently my inquiry was fortuitous in that regard. In any case, before long (a few weeks) Jim Duffy presented me with an offer to pursue the publication of what was to become *History in Africa* under the auspices of the ASA. I was at once gratified and astonished that such a venture could be so quickly consummated.

I realized in retrospect that I should not have been so surprised. After all, Phil Curtin's signature trait was getting things done. In fact, he had *already* been instrumental in arranging for the University of Wisconsin Press to publish my first book. Moreover, in 1974 was I not a recent graduate of the University of Wisconsin–Madison's Comparative Tropical History program, conceived and implemented by Philip Curtin? In his modestly titled memoir, *On the Fringes of History*, Phil provided ample discussion of how CTH came to be, but chose not to discuss its effects on the many students who passed through the program and its successor incarnation, Comparative World History. Students were expected each semester to take a seminar on a particular topic (slavery, indirect rule, long-distance trade, "divine kingship," etc.) and then to choose a world area about which to write one or two papers on the subject as it manifested itself in that area.

I might be wrong here, but I recall that students were *not* permitted to write solely on the area of their declared academic interest, but were expected to make *comparisons* between/among various areas. The idea was to discover commonalities and differences that would in aggregate contribute toward explaining the trajectories of the past. I wrote on, among other things, Afghanistan and the Shan states of Burma. In this respect, I want to emphasize how both Phil and Jan Vansina preferred that students choose their own dissertation topics—based on their own experience, interests, and

strengths—rather than feed into some master plan of their own. My own dissertation ended up being only about one-third African in focus. I see this—not necessarily very common—attitude as a key reason why so many UW–Madison graduates—and in turn their students—have contributed so much to the field.

Here, as so often, Phil Curtin was ahead of his time. Shortly thereafter—and especially in the 1980s—comparative history became world history or global history, which has gone on to become one of the most prosperous and energetic domains of historical inquiry. It is hardly a surprise that many—probably most—of its most notable practitioners emanated from the CT(W)H regimen at UW–Madison. In this sense Phil's influence remains decisively enduring.

Phil Curtin was never one to suffer unevidenced arguments gladly. The myth for which he is most widely known for busting was that which asserted that 50 million or more Africans had been enslaved by being taken across the Atlantic to the Americas. He had no difficulty in demonstrating that such figures had entered a welcoming public domain as a concatenation of mere assertions, lacking even a scintilla of quantitative evidence to support them. Not satisfied to have refuted this myth, Phil undertook to replace it with a range of numbers that, if susceptible to modification, at least were based on *data*. The result was a global number much lower than just about any that had previously been bruited. This result did not please everyone, since there existed a facile belief the greater the number, the more detestable the deed. Nonetheless, despite numerous efforts to raise Phil's numbers dramatically, it seems safe to say that the presently accepted consensus, while higher than Phil's own projections, is not higher than the range he predicted would eventually be reached.

It seems no less safe to suggest that Phil enjoyed, even appreciated, the long, if sometimes vituperative, shakedown process that he had initiated. While we can never know the exact numbers involved in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the numbers now being used are orders of magnitude more justifiable—because justified—than those in currency before the publication of the *The Atlantic Slave Trade: a Census* in 1969. It was one of those rare works that instantly defines a before/after watershed in the historiography of a particular subject.

Typically, the Atlantic Ocean had been seen as a vast impediment—physically, but also culturally and naturally—separating the 'old world' from the 'new world'. Phil Curtin saw it differently; for him the Atlantic was a bridge rather than a chasm. When he left Wisconsin it was to establish an Atlantic Studies program at Johns Hopkins University. Like world history, Atlantic studies flourishes today and, while I have no supporting figures,

I might well suspect just the same that its landscape and progress have also been highly influenced by former pupils of Phil Curtin.

These examples, and no doubt there are many others (epidemiology comes to mind), testify that Philip Curtin went global well before this became a catch-phrase. While he always gave credit here to the work of William O'Neill, he was more careful than McNeill to consult relevant local sources before he would claim interconnections. His ecumene was buttressed by many case studies produced by himself or his students.

As evidenced by the debate occasioned by the appearance of *The Atlantic Slave Trade*—indeed, as evidenced by the publication itself—Phil Curtin was never loath to make an argument that owed more to the available evidence than it did to the behests of public opinion. On other occasions as well, he took up positions that did not always sit well with all parties. I see these as cases where Phil's goal was first to provoke, then to initiate and participate in debate, and finally to convince or be convinced otherwise. In short, he acted as devil's advocate, occasionally leaving observers unsure as to his own innate position, but inspiring discussion that contributed to the strengthening of the evidentiary and argumentative bases of the matter at hand.

Clearly Phil Curtin achieved all scholars' elusive goal—to leave behind not one, but several, progeny that will testify to his prescience and dynamism for many a scholarly generation to come.

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A Note of Respect—Philip D. Curtin

Philip D. Curtin was a pioneer in the study of Atlantic history and the history of Africa. He assembled a team of historians and scholars from other disciplines at the University of Wisconsin that produced more than a generation of top scholars in history and other disciplines. His research in demography revolutionized the study of the enforced migration of African peoples. His publications in comparative history, epidemiology, and economic history have become standard reference for historians and other scholars in many fields of enquiry.

Perhaps some appreciation of Professor Curtin's scholarship can be gleaned from my own personal experiences under his mentorship. It was an honor to be studying at Wisconsin when he was focusing on various important methodological issues. First, he pioneered in the biographical reconstruction of the lives of Africans during the era of slavery. Second, his

efforts to quantify the enforced migration of Africans, leading to his path breaking *The Atlantic Slave Trade: a Census*, transformed the study of the African diaspora and the impact of slavery on Africa and the Americas. Third, he led a comparative tropical history seminar that focused on slavery and included weekly discussion involving five faculty members and graduate students who had to present two papers on slavery, on two different parts of the tropical world (in my case the Niger delta and Saint-Domingue). These three areas of focus have resonated through the scholarship and the published literature since then.

Professor Curtin's early and somewhat neglected work on *Two Jamaicas* contributed to the evolution of the concept of "creolization" and the plurality of cultures, peculiarly shaped by slavery and racialized society. His study of Jamaica led him into intellectual history and his astonishingly rich *Image of Africa*, with its appreciation of epidemiology and the history of science. His early research merged imperial history with African and diaspora history. He pursued a comparative analysis that privileged the tropical world and that allowed scope for the history of Africa. His move from Swarthmore College to the University of Wisconsin–Madison heralded a shift in emphasis from imperial British history to the history of the subaltern victims of slavery and their "colonization" in the Americas. His final years at Johns Hopkins University marked the height of his professional recognition as one of the pre-eminent historians of the last half century.

Although Curtin intended the demographic analysis of the trans-Atlantic slave trade to be merely a paragraph in a book and then an article, the tabulation of data demonstrated that a full census of slavery was warranted. In stating the impact of his *Census* on scholarship has been revolutionary in impact, one only has to reflect on the generation of scholarship that has amplified, refined, and transformed his initial calculations. The result is the astonishing on-line database of more than 35,000 slaving voyages across the Atlantic (www.slavevoyages.org/tast/index.faces). Curtin's initial breakthrough led to extensive collaboration in primary research that has greatly enhanced our understanding of the enforced migration of Africans under slavery.

Professor Curtin was first and foremost an historian and teacher. He wrote in various historical genres and on several geographical regions. His study of Senegambia is a work of economic history, and he also wrote on monetary history. His most important intellectual and conceptual insights are the subject of two works of synthesis that drew on his lectures at the University of Wisconsin. *Plantation Society* conceptualizes the emergence of the Atlantic world. Initially, his concept of plantation society focused on what he termed "the South Atlantic system," by which he meant that the

study of slavery had focused too much on the North Atlantic and North America specifically, rather than on the Caribbean and especially Brazil. As his *Census* had demonstrated, the movement of Africans to the Americas was far more important south of the Equator than previously thought. In *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History*, he developed the concept of “commercial diaspora” as a contribution to transactional economics by demonstrating how trade is embedded in culture and society. His influence on biography can be seen in the debate that has arisen around the birth and influence of Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa), whose African birth and early life were published in Curtin’s influential *Africa Remembered*, as analyzed by G.I. Jones, and subsequently disputed by Vincent Carretta, and strongly influencing my own work on the life and times of Gustavus Vassa.

Curtin’s influence has profoundly affected many scholars who never personally met him. Ibrahima Thioub, Head, Department of History, Université Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar, praises Curtin’s influence on the development of the discipline of history in Senegal and more widely in francophone West Africa.

Ses recherches et son héritage académiques continueront à féconder nos interrogations et nos réponses sur les sociétés africaines et leurs diasporas. Personnellement, je n’ai pas eu la chance de connaître personnellement le Pr Curtin si ce n’est par ses travaux. Je sais que le dialogue qu’il a eu avec les historiens de Dakar a beaucoup contribué à faire avancer la recherche historique en Afrique et en particulier sur la traite Atlantique des esclaves.

Curtin’s work has been central to the debate over historical reconstruction of West African history and the emergence of the Atlantic world because his extensive archival research. He collected oral histories in Senegal, and contributed to the scholarship on the *jihād* movement in West Africa. When I was first in Dakar in 1970, he was referred to as Professeur d’Curtin, reflecting the honor that he had already achieved. His influence crossed language barriers; he dared to compare and contrast human experience from a global perspective; and he helped shape more than a generation of scholarship.

I am humbled to have been one of Philip Curtin’s students and to have benefited from his scholarship. He inspired people, he worked hard, and he has left a strong legacy.

Paul E. Lovejoy

Philip Curtin and History, Broadly Conceived

Philip Curtin placed the term “world history” prominently in the opening pages of his early publications. While he left the term undeveloped, it clearly referred to a broad conception of human history and its study. A half-century later in his 2005 memoir, Curtin observed that, “[l]ooking back over my whole career, I am struck by my incremental approach to world history.” Indeed, he moved from British history to British Empire studies, to a dissertation and book on the Caribbean, to immersion in African history, and on to global historical studies. In topical terms he moved from intellectual history to social, economic, and medical history, always with a strong sense of political narrative. Moving by increments, he covered a lot of ground.

He was an extraordinary teacher of graduate students. When his 1959 proposal for a program in Comparative Tropical History was accepted at Wisconsin, and after Jan Vansina arrived, the two worked together as part of a growing program until 1975. During that time they trained a remarkable number of successful PhDs. Why were they so successful in training doctoral students? In part, it was that Curtin and Vansina were the two of their generation who cared most about expanding the study of African history (and, for Curtin, Africa in comparative context). They identified exciting issues, and Wisconsin had the institutional strength to support them. They were accessible, though they were too busy to be doting mentors. Each demonstrated methodological skill and modeled ways to learn new methods—Curtin had great strength in core historical methodology and Vansina stood out in cross-disciplinary approaches. Each revealed his willingness to go beyond the comfort area of his initial training to address new regions and new methods. Further, rather than ask students to become apprentices on the master’s project, they encouraged the interest of each student, and guided students in developing appropriate resources. After 1975 Curtin directed smaller numbers of graduate students at Johns Hopkins, with a more explicit focus in global comparisons, but most often with an African dimension to their work.

He was a remarkably effective researcher as well. *The Atlantic Slave Trade* appeared in 1969, half way through Curtin’s African-history years at Wisconsin. It was at once a study in African history and world history, thus demonstrating that, for Curtin, no clear boundary existed between the fields. It showed how a single scholar could encompass a massive issue and open the exploration of linkages among regions that would be studied long thereafter. It linked African history more firmly to the Atlantic; it required Atlantic history to connect to Africa. It launched a field of cosmopolitan

studies in slavery, in which research and debate continue to build recognition of slavery's importance in the modern world. Slave-trade studies became an important subset of world-historical studies.

Phil set parameters for world-historical research. From the 1970s he, who had long taught a version of world history through his "Expansion of Europe" course, explicitly took up world-historical research. Still, as another indication of his incremental approach, he was neither a grand theorist nor an author of master narratives. He preferred what he called "an intermediate level of synthesis," as he put it in *The Atlantic Slave Trade*. His mix of broad conceptualization and tight analysis contributed greatly to defining a new academic genre, the world-historical monograph. His world-historical monographs include *The Image of Africa*, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History*, *Death by Migration*, and *Disease and Empire*. He also published interpretive or synthetic studies in world history.

Curtin emphasized pursuit of interesting questions, sound methodology, and a relevant scope of analysis. He trained students in comparative history, not world history. Nevertheless, Curtin's approach was fundamental to the rising generation of self-trained world historians who founded and developed the World History Association.

Phil spent his academic life in politically contentious fields of study. He generally eschewed political involvement, though he was inevitably a part of the conflict at the 1969 African Studies Association meeting in Montreal. Late in life, however, he entered the fray of academic politics with a 1995 op-ed piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, decrying tendencies to avoid hiring white candidates in African history jobs. In the ensuing tumult, he spoke before a large and generally unsympathetic audience at an ASA meeting. He was not quick on his feet, and could only restate his basic position. I did not speak out, but disagreed with him on this issue. I too had lost jobs to the argument that my whiteness was not adequate for a position in African history, yet ultimately won a valued appointment in the African-American Studies Department at Northeastern University. I think that the real discrimination was against the study of African history, as both white and black scholars lost out to continuing academic disregard for Africa. But that was politics more than history: whatever the passions of that moment, scholars of all outlooks rely on Curtin's historical writings because of their great value.

I cannot complete these remarks without affirming my personal debt to Philip Curtin—as model and inspiration in the good times, but also as a mentor in the bad times. When my doctoral field trip collapsed through bad judgment, illness, and family crisis, his confidence enabled me to remain a historian. I remain grateful. The field of history is different now from what

it was when Curtin began teaching at Swarthmore in 1953. He caused some of that change, and his 1983 AHA presidential address provides a clear statement of the need for change. In any case one can say that his dedicated work in research and teaching provides one of the most salutary examples of the fundamental broadening that is taking place in the historical profession.

Patrick Manning

Philip Curtin: Some Recollections

When I joined Phil Curtin in 1960 at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, our professional lives immediately became closely intertwined for a decade or so, not only because we were colleagues, but to a large part because America really was a wholly New World for me, of which I had absolutely no experience, and that was just as true for its academic practices and conventions as for other facets of American life. Hence Phil became a guide from the very day of our arrival who showed me by precept and by example how to teach, how to conduct a seminar, how universities work, how to talk to foundations, and even how to cope with departmental politics. Such has been his legacy for me that as a result I am not quite certain how much my opinions today about all these matters still reflect his views, except that it must be to a considerable extent.

In any case, I still see him quietly teaching an end-of-semester December lecture in African History about the latest drama in Nasser's Egypt to a small class in a dingy room with a superb view over Lake Mendota. What I most vividly remember, though, are meetings in the evening at his house, and among these particularly a few dramatic sessions of his famous Comparative Tropical Seminar, where nervous graduate students presented papers on topics about which they had known nothing at all six weeks earlier. Hence their nickname for it: comp-swamp. Yet they were fascinated by it; they boasted about their own academic toughness to their weaker brethren in other fields, but of course they dreaded the day when it was their turn to speak. Nevertheless, over time it has become evident how much these seminars have molded both their approach to, and their understanding of, comparative history to the point that even today a Curtin approach still remains a distinctive strand in comparative and global history.

From the outset I was struck by Phil's scholarship, both by his then unusual choice of themes and by the way he approached them. As his research developed and bore fruit, my appreciation soon reached the point

that I began to think of him as one of the great master-scholars. He was a virtuoso in the *arcana* of the historian's craft, meticulous and painstaking in his handling of sources and in his search for even the most humble of sources. He was exemplary in recording for posterity both the written and the oral evidence he encountered. At the same time he was not afraid to tackle large issues. It worked because he was also ready to follow his topic wherever it took him, so as to interpret his sources properly, as in the case of *The Atlantic Slavery: a Census* (1969), a work that led him into a serious study of demography, and later also into epidemiology, as shown by his *Death by Migration* (1989). In addition, he was blessed with an insatiable curiosity and an imagination to match. Hence he could be equally enthralled by the implications of a single expression in a eighteenth-century document, or by the use of mangrove poles from Lamu to build dhows in Oman, or by the grand migration routes of Central Asian pastoralists. As a result of this combination of vision and craftsmanship, all his major works have been seminal, and even today continue to inspire new research.

It never was quite clear whether Phil was an enthusiastic globetrotter because at the outset his field was the British Commonwealth, later the tropical world, and finally comparative history anywhere in the world, or whether it was his restless curiosity that prompted his travels and induced the broadening of his mind and his field of research. One suspects that it went both ways. That would certainly explain his passion for photography (memorable landscapes, portraits, and historical monuments—but also yards of microfilmed documents), as well as for all sorts of new gadgets, including novel tape recorders and microphones. Still, not all his hobbies can be ascribed to the need to record or copy historical evidence. It is hard, for instance, to see the historical uses of kayaking in Europe.

All who knew him, however, realized this to be merely an expression of his love for the great outdoors. I have no doubt that, if environmental history had existed in his formative years, he might have become one of its most devoted practitioners. In any case, it is worthwhile observing how much of his academic work and how many of his photographs deal with the countryside, and how little and few with strictly urban themes. His appreciation of nature was a dominant facet of his personality, the same facet that also highly valued literature—and the poetry of Walt Whitman in particular. Yet it is another emotion, his passion for the underdog in history, that provided the energy behind the creation of most of his academic works.

Perhaps I enjoyed Phil, the author of *The Image of Africa* (1964), the most when he was in one of his rare indignant moods about cultural prejudice or racism. All his students knew and heeded the rule from Day One that the only tolerable “tribes” in the world were the tribes of Israel. So, when

one evening Phil's dinner guest, the most celebrated art historian of Africa in Great Britain at the time, launched into an arrogant postprandial argument about tribal art and lack of individual creativity, it was good to behold Phil's usually exemplary courtesy as it snapped in a memorable outburst that swept the opposition like a tsunami and prompted the hurried departure of his misguided visitor.

As is well known in Madison, Phil was not only a great researcher, but also an impressive administrator who built several programs at the university that flourish unto this day. For this purpose he benefited from considerable decisiveness allied to an equally remarkable impulsiveness, qualities that ordinarily are not unmitigated blessings. Yet in this context—and allied to his imagination—they proved to be very fruitful, if only because once he had made up his mind he never looked back, but sprang immediately into action. How can I forget this when not quite a fortnight after I had arrived in Madison he dragged me back and forth to New York on a single snowy day just to present a program to the Carnegie Foundation officers there, using me as an exhibit and to request a grant? And, yes, it worked.

Later that same year we discussed the need for a department of African languages and literature on the grounds that, like any well-trained scholar in European or East Asian history, serious students of African history should master the language or languages of the area they dealt with, including Arabic and Afrikaans. Once he was convinced that it was indeed possible to create such a department, he quickly made up his mind as to exactly what he wanted and soon managed to obtain the assent of the relevant senior administrators (who also happened to be colleagues in his department) to submit a proposal. At that point he created the whole required institutional framework for a new department in African Languages and Literature, complete with all the regulations for undergraduate and graduate teaching in less than a week, most of it during a single weekend by the simple expedient of copying or adapting the rules that then prevailed in Slavic Studies or in the Department of French and Italian. That too was Philip Curtin.

Jan Vansina