Alan Macfarlane

What are the personal and academic reasons behind your becoming a Nepal researcher?

I read history (BA) at Worcester College, Oxford from 1960-3, then did a DPhil in history at the same on 'Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England, 1560-1680' under the supervision of Sir Keith Thomas. In 1967 I went to the London School of Economics (LSE) and did a two-year MPhil in anthropology, my supervisor being the anthropologist Isaac Schapera. In 1968 I went to do a second PhD, this time in anthropology, at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), under the supervision of Professor Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf. I had been born in Shillong, Assam, and spent a few years in Assam with my family (tea-planters). One reason for becoming an anthropologist was a desire to return to India and work there. I had originally wanted to work in Assam (on Garos and Khasis), but in 1968 when the Naga resistance movement was at its height, that area was impossible. Haimendorf, who had been appointed to be my supervisor because of my interest in Assam, suggested that I go to Nepal instead.

What was the thematic focus of your research for your anthropology PhD?

The main focus of my research was on the relations between population and resources. I had been deeply influenced both by the ecological anxieties of the late 1960's about world over-population, and also by the work of historical demographers. In particular the work of historical demographers in France (Louis Henry, Goubert, Ladurie) and England (Wrigley, Laslett, Schofield) had influenced both my interests and my methodology. For my PhD in anthropology I did fieldwork in the Gurung village of Thak, north of Pokhara. I submitted my dissertation in 1972 and it was later revised and published as *Resources and Population: A Study of the Gurungs of Nepal* (1976).

The synopsis on the cover of the first edition gives an idea of what I thought the book was about at the time. I wrote that in many areas of the world the destruction of natural resources and the rapid growth of population are among the most important problems facing individuals and governments. This book utilises the tools of social anthropology and population studies in an attempt to see some of the causes and consequences of population growth and some of the effects of change in natural resources. It analyses a particular 'community' in the Annapurna range of the central Himalayas during the twentieth century, and investigates how the destruction of forests and the growth settled rice cultivation have occurred, and some of the consequences. The Gurungs are famous as recruits to the Gurkha regiments of the British and Indian armies, and the demographic and economic effects of foreign mercenary labour are among the topics examined.

The book is a contribution to the literature on population patterns in small, non-industrial communities and supplements our information on domestic economics. It also contributes to the debate, centred on the work of Malthus and Boserup, on the relation between agricultural system and population growth. The conclusions, predicting major ecological disaster in the central hills of Nepal, are extremely gloomy, especially when set within the context of more general theories concerning the relations between population and economy. Like many predictions in the social sciences, they turned out to be half true. Although in many ways the village has become poorer and the land more degraded, the huge out-migration to other parts of Nepal and abroad have altered the effects of the doubling of the village population in the following thirty years (for more details, see my 2001 article).

What is your research focus now? What other thematic transformations have occurred in your research in the mean time? How do you explain the changes that have occurred in your research focus?

My first research was on witchcraft in seventeenth century England. I published a book on this (*Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*, 1970) and also a study of a seventeenth century English clergyman (*The Family Life of Ralph Josselin*, 1970). After training as an anthropologist and undertaking fieldwork in Nepal I published my study of *Resources and Population* in 1976.

In 1977 I started to work on the history of English peasantry, and then discovered there was no such thing. The result was *The Origins of English Individualism* (1978), which attacked the whole Marx-Weber chronology of history. I then worked with Sarah Harrison on the reconstruction of all

the records of an English village (Earls Colne) which have recently been published on my web-site. In 1983 I published a book on crime and violence in seventeenth century England (*The Justice and the Mare's Ale*).

Soon after this I began a very large multi-media project on the Nagas of Assam, one publication of which occurred in 1991 co-authored with Julian Jacobs. There was also a videodisc and museum exhibition. The whole corpus is now being re-worked for publication as a compact disc. It comprises thousands of photographs, texts and pieces of film and is being developed in collaboration with colleagues in Nagaland.

I was also working on the history of kinship and marriage in England, and my book on the subject (*Marriage and Love in England, 1280-1840*) was published in 1986. This took further some of the themes in my earlier demographic work on Nepal. The following year I published a set of essays called *The Culture of Capitalism*, with essays on love, violence, nature, revolution and other topics.

In 1986 my wife Sarah Harrison and I started to make annual visits again to Nepal and to document life in the village where I had previously worked. Then in 1990 I paid my first visit to Japan and since then have worked extensively on Japan in comparison to England and Nepal. One of the fruits of this work appeared in 1998 as *The Savage Wars of Peace: England, Japan and the Malthusian Trap*. This complements the earlier demographic work by looking at mortality.

During my work on the origins of capitalism and individualism I had been deeply influenced by a number of great social theorists. So in the late 1990's I made a serious study of their work and this came out in two books, *The Riddle of the Modern World* (2000) and *The Making of the Modern World* (2002). This contained studies of Montesquieu, Adam Smith, De Tocqueville, Maine, Fukuzawa, Maitland and Ernest Gellner.

I had now looked at some of the demographic, economic, political and social traps which inhibit development and condemn many people to lives of misery. But the intellectual trap was missing. So in the late 1990's I worked on this and with Gerry Martin published *Glass: A World History* (2002) which seeks to explain why it was that a breakthrough in science (the scientific revolution) and art (the Renaissance) occurred in one part of the world and not, where one would have expected it, in Islamic or Chinese civilizations.

Most recently I have published a book, *Green Gold: The Empire of Tea* (2003) with my mother Iris Macfarlane. My mother writes from her experience of twenty years on a tea plantation in Assam, and I describe the global history and effects of the most ubiquitously consumed substance on this earth (apart from water and air).

These are some of the themes in my work. In total I have published (sometimes in association with others) some 18 books. What unites them is a simple question. How did the modern world of industrial capitalism, with its wealth, science, individualism and political systems emerge? The answers to this question I draw from my deep immersion in Nepal, Japan and English history, with added materials now coming from China.

How has your immersion in Nepal helped you to understand Japanese and English history?

It was only in 1986 that we returned for the first time after 16 years absence from Nepal. Since then we have been back almost every year for between one and three months. Not all of the time has been easy, physically or emotionally, and it has taken some precious 15 months or so of prime time out of the last 9 years. I have written very little directly about this material – a short pamphlet with I.B. Gurung (1990), some of the notes and appendices to Bernard Pignede's book in English translation (1993), a couple of articles, and a long review of Dor Bahadur Bista's 1991 book. There have also been numerous films. But I think the on-going Nepalese experience acts as an equally powerful current, mixing and sweeping against the British, and hence creating tensions and contradictions and puzzles which I am trying to resolve in my writing. It does this in such deep caverns, measureless to man, that is difficult to understand what is going on. But two areas immediately strike me as important.

One is the emotional involvement with our family in Thak, the closest I will ever get to knowing what it must have been like to live amidst the insecurities, physical hardships, but compensating warmths of a pre-industrial society. We can, at least at second-hand, feel what a 'normal' Malthusian world would have been like. In the context of my book *Savage Wars of Peace: England, Japan and the Malthusian Trap* (1998), where the central motif is the miraculous escape from such a world, without having experienced it, if only vicariously, it would have been impossible to write the book. Parts of the English/Japanese past would have been literally invisible because one had no experience of them – a point made by R. G. Collingwood about Roman religion, but even more the case with the material/demographic world. Most historians, however hard they try, cannot begin to comprehend what was important.

The experience has profoundly influenced the way one looks at almost everything and in particular strips away a coating of cotton wool from the historical accounts. To take just a few simple examples. It would have been impossible to appreciate the importance of human labour without the experience of backbreaking work in Thak. Or the importance of fertilizers

and what is done with human faeces without that experience. Or the importance of flies. A thousand questions would not have sprung to one's mind and hence the book would have followed in the jaded and unsuccessful track of so much social history. The Thak experience has thus enriched us immensely, though at considerable cost – not in time and money, but above all in the dangers of involvement and the pains of loss.

A second way in which it has been essential, which is of course linked to the above, can best be described as the backdrop effect. England and Japan are both, in their own ways, extremely 'peculiar'. Thak and Nepal are much more the norm. The difficulty is that now the 'peculiar' has become the normal – and hence invisible. To recover and see the air around us, it needs to be seen against something. The contrast of England and Japan partly serves this function – in so far as there are major differences. But very often the two cultures overlap so much that the tension of difference is lost. It is at this point that Nepal acts as a kind of dark background, to make the foreground cases shine out.

Thus looked down from our mountain village, which in many respects represents the position of most human beings for the last 12,000 years since the development of tribalism, both England and Japan are peculiar, but in different ways. This increase in comprehension is a central feature of the book. Although in many chapters the evidence is taken from larger societies, for example famines in India, China, etc. the basic schemata can be derived from our felt experiences in Nepal. In essence it is a comparison of the life and expectations and pressures on a Gurung and an English child, or as between a village like Thak and a village like Earls Colne, or between the whole of Nepal and the whole of Japan/England.

The Nepalese case shows the deep difficulties facing people trying to escape from 'illth', a concept I played with halfway through writing the book. The natural tendencies towards, 'illth', towards all those processes of agricultural, technological, political and other involution which Malthus and many others have chartered are very visible in Nepal. Dor Bahadur Bista has seized on a few of them, but our experiences in Thak have shown many others.

Without this intellectual and emotional experience, therefore, the dynamic of the book would have been missing. The sense of the narrowness of the exit, as Ernest Gellner would put it, would have not been obvious. Nor would I have known what it was like not to have found an exit. For those of us who can both live in pre-exit and post-exit worlds, the contrasts are so enormous – merely in monetary terms something of a ratio of 100:1, that it would indeed be a dull-brained person who was not intrigued and puzzled about how certain societies did escape.

Do you operate from a traditionally defined department or from an area studies centre?
Yes, from the Department of Social Anthropology in Cambridge. I was made a Lecturer in 1975, a Reader in 1981 and Professor of Anthropological Theory in 1991. I have also been a Fellow of King's College since 1981 (having also been a Senior Research Fellow there from 1970-4).

Do you teach and if so, at what level? What kinds of courses do you teach (or have taught in the past) and what Nepal-related content are included in those courses?
Yes, at all levels. Since 1971 I have given well over a thousand lectures in the History Faculty and Archaeology and Anthropology Faculty in Cambridge. In the latter, I have lectured in the fields of: introductions to social anthropology, kinship and marriage, politics, law, economics, demography, visual anthropology, history of technology, research methods, etc. I use my fieldwork experience in all of my levels of teaching.

I have also supervised five PhD students on Nepal. They are Simon Strickland, Tristram Riley-Smith, Judith Pettigrew, Gil Daryn and Taylor Brown, all are now Drs. Also, I have supervised two Nepali MPhil students, Tek Gurung and Alka Gurung.

Where have you published your Nepal-related books, articles and essays?
The list of my Nepal related publications is given at the end of this text. Further details about them and about my other publications can be found in my home page at http://www. alanmacfarlane.com

Do you converse productively with colleagues doing research and other works related to Nepal in the UK, other parts of the world and Nepal? If so, how (via email, letters, face to face conversations, exchange of draft written works, etc.)?
To a certain extent, using all the forms you mention. I have been an official liaison for one or two asylum applications. I have been asked to advise Princess Diana and the Minister for Overseas Development in relation to Nepal. I have worked with a number of Gurung scholars, and co-written one of my short books on Nepal with Lt. Indrabahadur Gurung. I helped Dor Bahadur Bista with his well-known book on Nepal, *Fatalism and Development* (1991) and hosted him for three months when he was writing it. I have given many lectures at seminars and conferences in many British Universities and also in Scandinavia, Portugal, the United States, Japan, India and elsewhere.

What institutional and human resources were available to you as a graduate student?
Good libraries at SOAS, LSE and Cambridge. Others who have worked in Nepal include Professor Caroline Humphrey and Dr Hildegard Diemberger (on Tibet).

What kinds of funds were available for your graduate studies and for field research in Nepal as well as for the final write-up of your anthropology dissertation? What are the institutional and funding resources in the UK (outside of the UK as well) that have made it possible for you to continue your research and teaching on Nepal?
I received a London-Cornell Fellowship for my fieldwork. In Cambridge there are small travel and research funds, and I have received grants from the Economic and Social Research Council, British Academy, Cambridge University, the Leverhulme Trust, the Nuffield Foundation and the Renaissance Trust.

What was the job market like for you when you finished your second PhD? How many times have you changed jobs since your first post-PhD appointment?
The job market was very lively when I was finishing my two PhD theses and I obtained my first job as a Senior Research Fellow in History at King's College in 1970. In 1975 I started to work in the Department of Social Anthropology at Cambridge, where I have been since then.

Is a new generation (say mostly under 30 years of age now) of Nepal researchers being produced in the UK? If so, how is the next generation being mentored in the field?
To a certain extent, and we have currently a PhD student in this Department working on Nepal and another who has just finished. But with the current situation it is difficult to keep this up. During my time at Cambridge I have supervised about 30 or more PhD students on all parts of the world including South America, Europe, the Pacific, Japan, as well as Nepal. Thus the five Nepal students constitute about 17 per cent of my supervision. As mentioned earlier, I have also supervised two Nepali MPhil students.

What is the attraction for this new generation to study Nepal?
It is really difficult to answer this question. Either one could write pages, or just a line. Time precludes the former. So all one can say is that, as we all know it is a fascinating intersection of cultures, wonderful people, wonderful

scenery. In particular, for me, it is special because of the people I work with (the Gurungs) and their amazing shamanic tradition.

Are the conditions of their recruitment different from the time when you entered the field? How would you compare the institutional and financial resources available to them to become Nepal researchers today compared with those in your own time?
Yes indeed, that was over thirty years ago. There are both more resources (more money) and more bureaucracy involved in getting it. That is to say, while the national wealth has grown considerably and there are grants available, the funding bodies, in particular the Economic and Social Research Council, have become more and more bureaucratic and driven by accountancy and management criteria.

Do you communicate about your research with the national public at large in the UK? If so, how do you do it and how often?
Yes. I have written a number of books. I was the principal consultant and speaker in a six part television series produced for Channel 4 called 'The Day the World Took Off' which appeared in 2000 and was seen by several million people for each installment. This included some considerable section filmed in Kathmandu and in the Gurung village of Thak.

What is the relationship between your current or past research and discussions in the various Nepali public spheres? Do you find that there is a tension between representing Nepal to your colleagues in the UK and making your research theme and conclusions 'relevant' and accessible for discussions in Nepali society?
Not a great deal, though there is no tension in representing Nepal to my colleagues or in showing its relevance.

How has the availability of many Nepali newspapers in the Internet impacted your work as a Nepal researcher based in the UK? Are their contents of research value?
Quite a bit. I look at these (via my wife) frequently and find it very helpful to keep up to date.

Talking about research resources in the Internet, your repeated visits to the Gurung village Thak must have resulted in a large personal archive of research materials by now. Do you have any plans to make them available in the Internet?

Yes I have collected a lot of materials on Thak and the Gurungs in general. The materials I and my co-researchers have collected include notes, diaries, censuses, genealogies, inventories, land surveys, 3,000 field photographs, and approximately 120 hours of moving film. We also have some of the manuscripts and photographs of the late Bernard Pignède among the Gurungs and the manuscripts of tours in Nepal by Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf. Some of this collection (perhaps one fiftieth) is already available digitally and more is going to be available in the years to come. In addition I am also directing a project called *Digital Himalaya*.

Can you please describe the objectives of the project Digital Himalaya and its accomplishments thus far?
I conceived the Digital Himalaya project as a strategy for archiving and making available valuable ethnographic materials from the Himalayan region. The project began in December 2000 and it is based in the Department of Social Anthropology at Cambridge University. The Digital Himalaya project has three primary objectives: (1) to preserve in a digital medium archival anthropological materials from the Himalayan region that are quickly degenerating in their current forms, including films in various formats, still photographs, sound recordings, and field notes; (2) to make these resources available on DVD and/or over broadband internet connections, coupled with an accurate search and retrieval system useful to contemporary researchers and students; (3) to make these resources available on DVD to the descendants of the people from whom the materials were collected by making them both easily transportable and viewable in a digital medium.

Five ethnographic collections representing a broad range of regions, ethnic groups, time periods, and themes are slated for digitisation in the first phase of the project which ends in December 2003. Each includes different media and covers a number of geographical areas and ethnic populations of the Himalayas. At the moment, only individual examples from each collection are available for online viewing. In time, larger selections will be accessible in searchable databases that include still photographs, film clips, sound recordings, and textual materials.

One of the collections is The Fürer-Haimendorf Film Collection based at the Department of Social Anthropology at Cambridge. Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf lived and worked as an anthropologist throughout the Himalayas from the 1930s through the 1980s. Fürer-Haimendorf's specific interests included the Naga ethnic groups of the North Eastern Frontier Area of India and the Sherpa ethnic group of northeastern Nepal. However, he travelled far and wide throughout the entire region, taking over 100

hours of film throughout his career. Extraordinary in both its breadth and its depth, the Fürer-Haimendorf collection is one of the finest extant ethnographic film collections that document Himalayan cultures. The collection includes both archival footage from Fürer-Haimendorf's lengthy research career in the Himalayas, as well as interviews with the Professor himself recorded on video. Samples of both and further details about this project (individuals involved in it, supporting institutions, publications about it, etc.) can be found in our home page http://www.digitalhimalaya.com

How do you evaluate the state of Nepal Studies in the UK at the moment? Do researchers on Nepal languish at the margins of South Asian Studies in the UK?

I am not very well placed to judge this, but I should say that Nepal has moved from the centre (there were once almost as many people studying there as in India) to a position which reflects more accurately its population.

There is a general sense that support for social science research is declining in the UK. If you agree with this reading, can you suggest some ways to arrest this trend so that its negative impact on Nepal Studies can be reversed?

I'm not sure if this is true, though there is growing pressure to study 'relevant' and 'useful' and 'applied' subjects. From my own experience and observing the life of my younger colleagues this leads to a desperation to publish half-digested results and to try to angle one's research so that it is 'useful'.

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