

Asante, Kingdom of Gold

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*Essays in the History of
an African Culture*

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This book is dedicated to
Anna McCaskie
at her request
and with a father's love

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Preface

We have enough to do to make up our selves from present and passed times, and the whole stage of things scarce serveth for our instruction.¹

I

Some years ago I wrote a ‘memoir’ of my working life in and on Asante.² In that, I pointed out the sheer presentist and situational—and hence unstable—quiddity of any such frozen moment of remembrance. I said that on a different day I might well give a different account of myself. So, these prefatory remarks to a collection of fifty essays spread over nearly the same number of years are to be understood in precisely that same sense. I have excused myself here from offering any kind of sequential overview, by the expedient of writing a short introduction to each and every single essay reproduced below. There is some difference of focus, however, from my earlier ‘memoir’ in my reflections here. Then, I tried to supply some account of my personal interactions with Asante people, and with their past history and current realities. Now, I try to say something more personal about the predilections, interests, and drives that made me into the kind of historian I have turned out to be. Hence, this is a sort of *ego-histoire*, but of a markedly selective and episodic sort. Or, to put things in the terms of my published disclaimer of 2007—this is a different day and a different account of myself.

II

Thinking about Asante in the 1970s, I attended to a lot of writing like the following.

106. A. CASCELLIUS A.f.Rom., q. by 73, pr. urb. after 43? (SORA?) *PW* 4; *MRR* Supp. 14 on his inferred praetorship under the Triumvirs. A Cascellius in the nineties was an expert on the *ius praediatorius* (*Cic. Balb.* 45; V.M. viii. 12. 1)—probably the father of no. 106, who was a celebrated jurist. By his tribe, the Romilia, he should come from Sora. At Marrivium of the Marsi, at the upper end of the Liris valley from Sora, was buried a Julio-Claudian senator in the Sergia tribe with the *cognomen* Cascellius (*CIL.* ix. 3666); a relationship by marriage or adoption with Soran Cascellii is quite possible. A. Cascelli are known only in Rome, and only as *liberti*—clearly descendants of the freedmen

1. Thomas Browne to Thomas le Gros, dd. Norwich, 1 May 1658, in his *Hydriotaphia, or Urne-Buriall*, London: Hen. Brome at the Sign of the Gun, Ivy Lane (1658).

2. See Chapter 41 below.

of the jurist's family. One early inscription (*ILLRP* 768) records A. Cascellius A. l. Nicepor in company with an A. Clodius A. l. Apollodorus and a Vettia Q. l. Glucera: A. Clodii are rare and early, but this trail leads only to medical men at Beneventum and Tusculum (*CIL.* ix. 1715, xiv. 2652); Q. Vettii, however, point to the Marsi and Marruvium itself, where Q. Vettius Q. f. Silo was *IVvir i.d.* (ix. 3694). Cf. x. 5719, a doctor at Sora married to a Vettia L. f. A Soran origin, and perhaps ties of *vicinitas* with Marruvine families, may safely be assumed for no. 106.³

This is taken from the earliest book of the now distinguished classicist Tim Wiseman, and it is a 'revised and shortened version' of his Oxford D.Phil. dissertation. His book is 325 pages long, but its 'heart', its signal value to its author, is the 'prosopography' of 'new men' at pages 209–83. Wiseman was self-consciously part of a tradition in Roman prosopography—Münzer, Broughton, Taylor, Syme, Badian—and he acknowledged this to be the case in the preface to his book.⁴

In the 1970s, Ivor Wilks and I applied this prosopographical model to the oral and written Asante sources. For six years (1973–79) the ACBP (Asante Collective Biography Project) accumulated, sifted, and set down on 8×5 file cards, data on literally thousands of Asante persons. I went back and forth many times to Asante to collect further information, and to Evanston (Illinois) where we worked together on the project. For a time, the sheer exhilarating momentum of the ACBP seemed reason enough to carry on. Looking back now, I can see that two things about it were of enduring value. First, it created a resource and a tool that was (and is still) without peer in the study of the African past. Second, it was a sustained exercise in deep research that raised our joint knowledge about Asante to a much higher level than had seemed possible when we began. Ivor has now died (2014), and the dusty file boxes containing the original cards are all now reassembled together in my house in England.⁵

The original idea in the 1970s was that the ACBP file cards would eventually be in some way digitized and made machine-readable. There were technical difficulties that ruled this out (back then computerization was still in its infancy). In truth, I was glad that this was the case, because I had lost faith in what we were doing. Of course, the ACBP had hugely improved our knowledge of who and what we were talking about, but it seemed to me that interpretation, the proper business of the historian (or at least this historian) was being sacrificed to the blind accumulation of (pseudo)-'scientific' data. Such interpretation as the ACBP did practise, in the individual pre-code sheets published in its journal *Asantesem*, was tagged onto the end of these dry factual profiles in a kind of quarantined afterthought where we 'interpreted' (or rather, speculated about) our 'scientific' findings. However, I came clearly to understand that even our assem-

3. T.P. Wiseman, *New Men in the Roman Senate, 139 B.C.–A.D. 14*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1971), 222.

4. *Ibid.*, vii–viii.

5. We might have gone further down the road set out by the ACBP. The NEH (National Endowment for the Humanities) in Washington, which generously funded the ACBP over six years, at one point asked if we had thought about applying our 'method' to other African societies, and made specific mention of the Hausa emirates of northern Nigeria. That, however, was a road we did not take.

blages of ‘facts’ were in and of themselves hermeneutical acts. The data could not and did not speak for themselves, so that their ostensibly neutral ingathering was itself an act of articulated choice or interpretation.

Wilks and I went our separate ways. He had a faith in the objective, in the abstraction of the author from the text, that I did not share. His own masterwork, and it is a magisterial exposition, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century* (1975), is framed by and constructed through the prism of a partial reading of Weber (weirdly, as he told me, via the lucubrations of his Cambridge colleague Elton on Tudor ‘bureaucracy’) that is present in his text as a kind of barely examined guardian spirit. I must add that Wilks was on the side of the (numerically preponderant) angels, for most historians wrote, and many still write, in his manner.

There are analogies, points of contact, between my own subsequent writing career and that of Tim Wiseman. He too put his prosopographical knowledge on a shelf (to be consulted), and embarked on a life of wide-ranging interpretative, often speculative, accounts of the Roman past. He is only six years older than I am, so it might be said that both of us wrote in awareness of the ‘turns’ — linguistic, cultural, and otherwise — that were so potently present in the intellectual life of the academy in our mature years. Certainly both of us refused the inherited straitjacket of ‘historian’, and ransacked and read across disciplines, and outside of them, for usable insights and tools. In 2009, Wiseman published *Remembering the Roman People*.⁶ Mary Beard reviewed this book, and indeed Wiseman’s whole forty-year trajectory, in terms in which I see bits and echoes of myself, and glimpse some of what I have tried to accomplish since that distant time when both he and I were prosopographers.

... to find out what he is looking for, Wiseman must read his sources against the grain, searching out hints of a different view of events, and looking for cracks in the conservative story through which a glimpse of a popular tradition might be seen. He must look beyond the accounts of surviving ancient authors to the alternative versions that they were (consciously or unconsciously) concealing. In doing this, he not only depends on a rare familiarity with Roman literature, from the mainstream to its remotest byways, but also on a capacity for bold historical speculation that takes him right to the edge of (and in some cases beyond) what the surviving evidence can reliably tell us.⁷

III

There are always — and always must be — some things that evade the gaze of the historian, for to reconstruct the past is a partial, oblique, and friable endeavour that constantly reminds practitioners of what *is not* possible even as they cling on to what *is*. In brief, the historical enterprise opens vistas into a suggestive unknowing, often experienced as haunting absence, a sort of intellectual toothache. Perhaps what cannot be done is always felt to be more interesting than what can be done.

6. T.P. Wiseman, *Remembering the Roman People: Essays on Late-Republican Politics and Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2009).

7. See M. Beard, ‘Spinning Caesar’s murder: Putting the ideology — and the people — back into our understanding of Roman political life’, *Times Literary Supplement*, London, 13 May 2009.

I have written briefly about something akin to this before. I noted that ‘texts should be read between the lines and against the grain for the meanings secreted in their silences and absences.’ The historian ‘ought to ask himself and his source materials the novelist’s questions about human motive and behaviour.’⁸

I thought first about these matters as an adolescent schoolboy. In reading Balzac and especially Stendhal, I was made aware of the sense of disengaged boredom (*ennui*, a capacious word) that saturated the inner lives of the post-1815 generation across Europe. After the intensities of revolution and Napoleon, this was ‘the eighth day of Creation’ in which ‘nothing happened.’ *Le Rouge et le Noir* is sub-titled ‘Chronique de 1830’ to signal its intent as a historical account. Years later I discovered that I was not alone in wondering how a historian might approach the subject of ‘boredom’ in Restoration Europe.⁹ After all, the political repression that was an enabling handmaiden of this sentiment was the seedbed of Marx’s youthful thinking and writing.

The novelist’s questions often grasp after, seize, and fix the kinds of things that the historian intuits, yearns to know about, but cannot pin down. The historian is bound by a *fasces* of disciplinary protocols, and for the most part these become internalized as practice to the point of being seldom examined reflexes. And yet, ‘it is history that is, historically speaking, the peculiar and artificial exercise, rather than the creation of legends.’¹⁰ Catriona Kelly, the distinguished historian of Russia who made this observation, has, perhaps, more invested in thinking about such matters than most. The history of St. Petersburg is at once overshadowed and undercut by what has come to be called the ‘Petersburg Text’, a most potent imaginary of what the city ‘means’ in terms of its past in writerly recreations running from Pushkin to the present day. Interestingly, Kelly makes no mention of the most persuasive contribution to the conflation of history with legend in the entire St. Petersburg canon.

This is Andrei Bely’s *Petersburg*, a modernist masterpiece written in 1916. In this recreation, the family life of the Privy Councillor Apollon Apollonovich Ableukhov and his ne’er-do-well son Nikolai is played out against the topography of a city that is as historically tangible as it is shot through with the legends that shape and define that history. Chief among these is the baleful presence of Falconet’s immense bronze equestrian statue of Peter the Great, creator of the city and permanently immanent in his own creation. This is the core motif of the ‘Petersburg Text.’ The statue has the willed capacity to intervene in the affairs of Petersburgers, a theme present in folkloristic history since the city’s foundation, and first put into print by Pushkin. Bely’s version of this is thrillingly suggestive of a mode of experience that is entirely historical in its disposition and transaction, but that lies beyond the means of disciplinary historians. After a night on the town, the hapless Nikolai finds himself before the statue.

8. See T.C. McCaskie, *Asante Identities: History and Modernity in an African Village 1850–1950*, Edinburgh and Bloomington IN: Edinburgh and Indiana University Presses (2000), vii.

9. See now, for instance, J. Lyon-Caen, ‘Histoire et littérature’ in C. Granger ed. *À quoi pensent les historiens? Faire de l’histoire au XXIe siècle*, Paris: Éditions Autrement (2013), 63–79, especially 72–74.

10. C. Kelly, *St. Petersburg: Shadows of the Past*, New Haven CT and London: Yale University Press (2014), 10–11.

All at once the heavy clouds split open, and wisps of cloud wound in a green haze of molten bronze beneath the moon . . . For a moment everything flared up: the waters, the roofs, the granite; the Horseman's face flared up, his bronze laurel wreath; a vast bulk of metal hung down from the shoulders of the bronze-headed colossus, that shone an unreflecting green; the moulded face, the wreath, green with time, and the arm, many tons in weight, stretching imperiously straight at Nikolai Apollonovich, all had a phosphorescent gleam; in the bronze eye-sockets bronze thoughts shone green; and it seemed: the hand would move (the heavy folds would ring against the elbow of the cape), the metallic hooves would fall with a loud crash on to the rock and across all Petersburg would sound a voice that shatters granite:

"Yes, yes, yes . . ."

"It's me . . ."

"I destroy irrevocably."¹¹

IV

What Bely points out is that there is history, with its disciplinary rules, conventions, and objects of investigation, and swirling all about it is the enveloping miasma of that other 'history' which is imprinted on understanding, and which is accessed via a contemplative inwardness (*Innerlichkeit*) that, if given utterance, can invoke a knowing response in those whose lives and memories have shared in it.¹²

I have long sought passageways and doors into that other 'history' in Asante. Sometimes I have succeeded, but much more commonly I have failed. Acquired knowledge, however deep, is never enough, for success requires an unusual alignment of circumstances—intimacy, confidence, opportunity, contingency, and luck—that is as rare in life itself as it is in that part of it that we call research. Here, I describe a case in point and then deliberate on some of its implications. This matter has been with me for years, awaiting—I suppose—confirmation from myself to myself that I have thought it through and finally fixed on a way to write about it. Still, I entertain hesitations, but at my age the choice seems to be between saying something now or being forever silent.

During the 1970s, one facet of the work of the ACBP was to comb through all of the very many nineteenth-century Gold Coast newspapers in search of reports from or about Asante. This was grindingly tedious research, and so it sharpened interest in any item that combined novelty with detail. One such was a succession of lengthy reports that appeared in *The Gold Coast Times* in September–October 1883.¹³ These concerned an early stage of the dynastic civil wars (1883–88) in Asante, and most precisely a

11. A. Bely, *Petersburg*, trans. J. Elsworth, London: Pushkin Press (2009), 288. For context see N.V. Riasanovsky, *The Image of Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press (1985); and compare the perceptions of Komfo Anokye's statue in Kumase reported in Chapter 43 below.

12. See McCaskie, *Asante Identities*, 240.

13. *The Gold Coast Times*, Cape Coast, III, no. 111, 7 September, no. 112, 14 September, no. 113, 21 September, no. 114, 28 September, and no. 115, 5 October 1883.

murderous passage of arms that was followed by a massacre on a huge and unprecedented scale in August 1883. In brief, after a series of bloody battles around Kenyase, then about five miles north-east of Kumase, *Akyempemhene sheneba* Owusu Koko, on behalf of Agyeman Kofi (later *Asantehene* Kwaku Dua Kuma), proposed a truce and a parley to the latter's dynastic rival for the Golden Stool, the ex-*Asantehene* Kofi Kakari who had been deposed and sent into internal exile in 1874.

The truce and parley were acts of deceit. In mid-August 1883, the unsuspecting Kofi Kakari and his supporters met with Owusu Koko near Kenyase. An ambush and massacre ensued. Using breech-loading Snider rifles seized from the royal arsenal in Kumase, Owusu Koko's men shot dead between 1,500 and 2,000 of their opponents, with the high velocity bullets often passing through and killing more than one man. In April 1884, Agyeman Kofi was enstooled as the *Asantehene* Kwaku Dua Kuma. Kofi Kakari escaped from the massacre, but he was caught later and finally done to death in Kumase in June 1884.

We recognized this as biased reportage (but then what account is not?), clearly originating from information received from Asante in Cape Coast by the English-educated *sheneba* Owusu Ansa, the full brother and opponent of Owusu Koko (and that in itself is an intriguing dimension), and a supporter of Kofi Kakari. However, the details provided were rich, and they fitted into the empirically dense mosaic portrait of this short but intense period of Asante history that the ACBP had already built up. The new information was duly integrated, written up, and published.¹⁴

I was puzzled by the silence of Asante oral traditions concerning this unignorably huge and traumatic massacre, but unthinkingly attributed it to a discretion amounting to a willed forgetting about such an aberrant, even unique, and, by the norms of Asante society, abominable, episode. Then, in 1979, I was talking yet again with the formidably well informed I.K. Agyeman. I chanced to mention the massacre (*dwere*; lit. destruction by killing) perpetrated by Owusu Koko in 1883, and ventured to ask if I was right in thinking it had taken place near Kenyase. He stared at me in silence. My notes say that I then asked if I might visit the site. He took my hands in his, a conventional signal of the import of what he was about to disclose, and, looking straight into my eyes, he told me that I must never visit 'that place.'

In the early 1980s, a couple of years before I.K. Agyeman died, I raised the matter of the massacre with him once again. This time he was a little more talkative (perhaps because he knew I intended to write about his long dead cousin and mentor O.S. Agyeman, or perhaps because he was feeling intimations of mortality). Anyway, he told me kindly but firmly that no Asante liked to discuss such a thing, and that the affair was consigned to silence after those who were killed were tumbled into a specially prepared trench (*ɔka*) and covered with dirt. Sometimes he used the word *hunu* interchangeably with *ɔka*, as I found out when I listened to the recording of the conversation. I went back to ask him for clarification and, hopefully, elaboration. Yes, both terms might mean a hollow, hole, or trench, but they were not synonyms. Physically, *ɔka* was a

14. See I. Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century: the structure and evolution of a political order*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1975; reprinted with a new preamble 1989), 549–53; and ACBP/pcs/20: Owusu Koko, *Asante Seminar '76: The Asante Collective Biography Bulletin*, 4 (1976), 5–10.

trench or hole in the ground; metaphysically, *hunu* was also a hole, but in the sense of a void. He said that Owusu Koko's victims had been literally thrown into *ɔka*, but they had also been cast into *hunu* (*a eye*) or nothingness. He said no more.

I sought help elsewhere. In 1990, I mentioned the matter with some trepidation to the *Asantehene* Opoku Ware II. He was singularly relaxed about it. Yes, Owusu Koko had tricked Kofi Kakari and his supporters into meeting him in an 'open meadow' near to Kenyase, and there had 'let his guns say something to introduce himself' (*nnianim ka*). The site of both ambush and burial was widely known. He would send someone with me to show me it, and anyway I would easily identify the place for no one had ever 'presumed' (his word) to build there. I was driven to an open, flat, grassy space just west of Kenyase; it was hedged about with buildings, but indeed no one had built on it. If anything, this whole episode increased rather than diminished my puzzlement. A couple of weeks later a close friend and palace insider told me why the *Asantehene* had seemed so insouciant. Owusu Koko was a son of the *Asantehene* Osei Tutu Kwame, and so patrilineally descended from the first *Asantehene* Osei Tutu in the 'red' (Koko, i.e. *kɔkɔ*) or oldest male line within the ruling *Oyoko Kɔkɔ* dynasty of Kumase. Opoku Ware II was patrilineally descended from the second *Asantehene* Opoku Ware within the 'black' (*tuntum*) male line. The 'red' and 'black' lines were suspicious of and even hostile to one another. Opoku Ware II had told me quite openly about what happened in 1883 because it was 'nothing to do with him' and his 'black' line, but concerned only its 'red' counterpart. More than that, however, he had spoken about it because the whole episode redounded to the shameful discredit of the 'red' line and the terror it inspired because of its possession of a carved doll or puppet (*abaduaba*) that Komfo Anokye had given to Osei Tutu. This doll was named *nipanamdifo*, 'the eater of human flesh' or 'the cannibal.'

After years of working in Asante all of this was news to me. I was perplexed. A decade of hints, confidences, and uneasy disclosures left me with a bare (hi)story that is certainly incomplete. Like many of Komfo Anokye's legacies to Asante, *abaduaba* had two faces. The power (*tumi*) within it might be used for good or evil by its possessor. It was given to Osei Tutu so that his (patrilineal) 'following' or descendants might 'never wither out of Asante.' Everyone knew, so I was told, that *abaduaba* was passed into the custody of one of Osei Tutu's male descendants. Asked how this person was chosen, I was informed (not once, but twice) that the custodian 'made himself known by certain signs.' Owusu Koko 'inherited it' in this chain of succession. Like all his predecessors, he 'manipulated' *abaduaba* to 'strengthen' his (and Osei Tutu's) male line. During the civil war, he had given in to the evil power(s) in *abaduaba* so as to gain his ends. In 1883, it was the doll that told him to summon Kofi Kakari's men to a parley. It was the doll that told him to kill them. It was the doll that covered their remains with dirt and cast them into *hunu* (*na eye*), the void or nothingness. Knowledge, rumour, suspicion, even boastful propaganda disseminated the (hi)story of what terrifying power had brought about at a place near Kenyase. For years afterwards no one would go near the place. It was always referred to indirectly or euphemistically; simply, it was the place where 'people had been abolished' (*ɔyera*).

This (hi)story fascinates, but more than that it resonates strongly with what is known about Owusu Koko from orthodox sources. I will not reiterate here, except to note that it is well documented that on various occasions Owusu Koko entertained two ambitions that were outrageous, even grotesque, in terms of all Asante customary norms and prac-

tices; as the son of an *Asantehene* he aspired to ascend the Golden Stool, in total contravention of all precedent; and he threatened to destroy the Golden Stool rather than surrender it to anyone else. These ambitions were never fulfilled, again for reasons that are fully documented in historical terms.¹⁵

In 2000, I visited Kumase again in the company of my fourteen-year old daughter Anna. She used a camcorder to record our trip. There was now an empty and padlocked concrete warehouse built on a corner of *nyera*. People I spoke with said they had no idea who owned it, and they were notably vague and unhelpful about when it had been built. Back in Kumase, I sought information at the Survey Department of the Kumase Metropolitan Assembly (KMA). A cadastral plan was produced, files were consulted, and I was told the warehouse was the property of a man from Nigeria. I offered this nugget for discussion at the palace. All I was told was that Kumase was now full of people who ‘knew nothing’ and so put up buildings anywhere and everywhere, and that the booming city’s historic identity was under threat from uncontrolled immigration by all sorts of non-Asante people. I had heard this last claim many times.

V

All of my working life, I have searched for ways in which to write that integrate together Asante ‘legends’ (in Bely’s sense) with more orthodox forms of historical narrative. My aim has been to perform this seamlessly, giving equality of claim to all incarnations of reality. Sometimes, but only occasionally, I think I have approached but never achieved this goal. Here I want to shift the optic from my authorial self to the business of writing history as this is commonly understood if safely (and so frustratingly) ill defined. Perhaps the problem lies with our transmission and reception of ingrained ideas (themselves historical constructs, of course) of what the writing of history might be about. In my experience, the vast majority of working historians seldom if ever reflect on what they think they might be about in their daily practice of producing historical writing. True, there are strong disincentives to any such reflection. ‘Philosophy of history’ is too often a hermetic, self-obsessed, and arid sub-discipline in which few beyond its circle of initiates can discern relevance. We live too in an age of theory—or rather ‘theory’—in which ideas are commonly reified to the level of opaque abstractions expounded and explained in a clotted jargon that is (and is perhaps meant to be?) impenetrable. One of the saddest experiences of my long academic life has been watching cowed younger colleagues abandon research and the quest for their own voice in favour of the superficial and the derivative in order to demonstrate that they are *au courant* with ‘theory.’ And all too often, when historians do write about themselves and their work, the result is a kind of autobiographical positioning in which political and other sorts of allegiances do service in place of the writing self, and lists of interactions with friends and enemies of that oblique, even displaced, selfhood fill up the

15. In addition to items cited at fn. 12 above, consult Chapter 19 below.

pages.¹⁶ Alas, we do not live in what has been called, in a wholly different context, ‘a moment of unillusion.’¹⁷

That said, I neither think nor have ever thought that I was alone in my dissatisfactions and aspirations. At one level, for example, the career of my friend and fellow Africanist David Cohen has evolved from that of a close reader of oral historical texts to that of a questioning *Grenzgänger* patrolling the borderlands between history and anthropology.¹⁸ Cohen’s questing adventurousness is all about finding possible ways to write about a past construed at its widest level of intellectual inclusiveness, and miles away from the mechanistic empiricism in which both of us were trained. Sometimes this works, and sometimes not. But like myself, I sense that he reserves the right to accept both these outcomes, the alternative being the deadening, repetitive narrowness of playing it safe. And, of course, playing it safe depends, over and above its tools and procedures, upon the hoary fiction still dutifully maintained, that the writer can absent himself from the writing. Over a century ago, in the age of Langlois, Lavisse, and Seignobos, the brilliant non-historian Charles Péguy castigated historians who made the pretence of writing history cleansed of any point of view, any personal perspective, any implicit authorial ‘I’.¹⁹ Since then, a mass of others have repeated these criticisms, almost *ad nauseam*. Very many historians, however, continue on their inherited path, thinking (if they choose to think about it at all) that the way they write is set in stone and not, as it really is, a vehicle initially manufactured in nineteenth-century Germany, and since then variously serviced, oiled, and adjusted to keep it on the road.

Looking back, I can see that I too have really tinkered (admittedly and deliberately, sometimes quite severely) with the engine of historical writing, rather than scrapped and replaced it. Bolder spirits—significantly perhaps, most of them not academic historians—have groped, severally and variously, towards different ways of interpreting the past. My friend Emmanuel Terray, for example, spent decades conducting ethnographic fieldwork among the Abron of Gyaman (neighbours of the Asante) in the Ivory Coast. This eventuated in work of the highest quality, and I have used it gratefully (and, I hope, productively) in some of the essays that are reproduced in this book.²⁰ After that, Terray produced a book that was a record of his extended stay in Berlin, interwoven with reflections of a personal and general kind on the multiple histories of the sites he visited and thought about.²¹ This was a meditation on the historical quiddity of place—

16. Of course, there are exceptions; thus, G. Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society*, Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press (2005) exhibits, but rises above, these sorts of disfigurements.

17. G. Hawthorn, *Thucydides on Politics: Back to the Present*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2014), 239.

18. See recently, D.W. Cohen, ‘The Pursuits of Anthrohistory: Formation against Formation’, in C. Bhimull, D.W. Cohen, F. Coronil, E.L. Murphy, M. Patterson and J. Skurski eds. *Anthrohistory: Unsettling Knowledge, Questioning Discipline*, Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press (2010), 11–33.

19. C. Péguy, ‘La situation faite à l’histoire et à la sociologie dans les temps modernes’, in his *Oeuvres en prose complètes*, Paris: Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 3 vols. (1987–92).

20. See especially Chapters 35 and 50 below.

21. E. Terray, *Ombres berlinoises. Voyage dans une autre Allemagne*, Paris: Odile Jacob (1996).

a particular place—as a ‘cimetière interminable des possibles’ that enmeshed the observer in, yes, deep reflection on the past, but bathed that process in authorial emotions of nostalgia and hope. Terray situates himself openly as authorial presence in the history he is writing, and this transparency of self invokes deeper reflections in the reader than are, or can be, achieved by the authorial absence of orthodox historians.

Once admitted, authorial presence—the voice of the self—explores and articulates the past from a *point d’appui* that is honest—and honestly illuminating for the reader—in a way that cannot be attained from the fictive duplicity of writing from which the writer has been, supposedly but impossibly, abstracted from the writing. Historical writing in itself is bound by time. It is overtaken, refined, replaced, above all subjected to shifting regimes of concern and interpretation as succeeding generations look to and at the past with their own questions. There can be no final or last word, and so what survives to be read and pondered over is, so to speak, the author in the text(s). It is Thucydides we read, rather than his narrative of the Peloponnesian war; it is Michelet we read, rather than his account of the French revolution; and, to take a contemporary of ours at random, Enzensberger on General Hammerstein and his family circle will be read for him/itself long after more conventionally neutral accountings of Nazi Germany current today have themselves passed into history.²²

VI

All historians, all writers, possess a shorter or longer roster of those of their predecessors who have been important to them. This is a ‘cabinet of curiosities’, for its contents are chosen on the basis of temperamental affinity and intellectual congeniality, but precedently and randomly via the happenstances of encounter and curiosity. The choices thereby made are the product of an individual’s identification of things in himself with things in others. François Hartog, a historian who has always stood at an oblique angle to his profession and who is always worth reading, puts this matter very well. His ‘cabinet’ contains Ovid, Chateaubriand, Segalen, and Lévi-Strauss, because to him these incarnate ‘une forme d’écriture, avec ses reprises et ses résonances, et une méditation sur les effets mortifères des heurts des temps et des discordances des historicités’.²³

Most significantly, in this process of identification with others, one can reveal something(s) of oneself to oneself. Reading is the renewable compost in which writing grows, but it is also a mirror in which the self is reflected in interesting, sometimes odd, ways. In reading through my own writing over the decades in the preparation of this collection, I see myself moving through time. I started as a conventional, orthodox, or ‘guild’ historian, comfortable enough with the canons and practices passed down to me. I wrote accordingly. Then there was a break, quite fast but over a period of time, and so not experienced as a *rupture*. This took the form of a realization that (and I use

22. H.M. Enzensberger, *Hammerstein oder Der Eigensinn: Eine deutsche Geschichte*, Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp Verlag (2008). Compare here the highly intelligent, but much more reticent and indirect, authorial presence in G. Eley, *Nazism as Fascism: Violence, Ideology, and the Ground of Consent in Germany 1930–1945*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge (2013).

23. See F. Hartog, *La chambre de veille: Entretiens avec Felipe Brandi et Thomas Hirsch*, Paris: Flammarion (2013), 189.

the received terminology) I was not engaged by political narrative *per se*, but was much more interested in the social, cultural, and intellectual lives of the Asante past and present. The initial breakthrough was my attempt to take ethnographers (once the dominant presence in work on Africa) seriously on their own terms, and to insert (some of) them into my ‘cabinet’ alongside the historians already there. I became what I chose to call a ‘historical ethnographer’ (although others who took up this sort of practice termed it ‘historical anthropology’). I felt liberated into myself, and for a time (around 1990) I experimented with both topics and writing, exciting some while horrifying others. Well, *tant pis*.²⁴

In the 1990s, a large part of my time was devoted to writing books. I learned from this that I preferred the essay form, shorter, directly to the point, and more congenial to someone like myself whose interests tended to run heedlessly on ahead. After all, when a book is thought about, then what remains of it is execution, and this contains its share of *longueurs*, drudgery, and boredom, as one strives to say what one already knows one wants to say. In the new century, I started seriously and consistently to try to form bridges between the Asante past and present in my writing.

Quite a lot of the papers reproduced below belong to the last fifteen years. Do I have then a ‘late style’?²⁵ I think I do, and if pressed to define it I would say the following. All authors write to secure and to impress an audience. My ‘early style’, like that of many another younger writer, was of that sort, and it contained its share of stylistic tics, subordinate clauses, adjectives, adverbs and, *mea culpa*, over-writing. In places it seems to me now to be baroque, and of course that lack of clarity is a sovereign recipe for creating bafflement, even incomprehension, in a reader’s mind. I took myself in hand (helped by lengthy exchanges with my close friend John Peel), and aimed at a kind of writerly plainsong without adornment. Often I am told that my style is immediately recognizable, but today remarks of this sort tend to be more approving than otherwise. My ‘cabinet’ contains those I regard as masterly historical stylists—from Gibbon to Syme—but I think that such writers should be read as enabling tools in the quest to locate, to learn, and to use one’s own ‘voice.’

Intellectually, my research interests have expanded both within and beyond Asante. The last paper in this collection reveals something of what I am about now.²⁶ One of my greatest regrets is that I never took the time (or perhaps had the time) to devote myself exclusively to an immersion in Asante Twi. That said, I find—perhaps too late?—that working on and with Asante Twi now takes up a deal of my time. The web of language, in all of its rich intricacy, continues to open up viewpoints and perspectives that cannot be made available in any other way.

VII

The working life that I have furnished some insights into here can be inspected in its full evolutionary detail in the papers reproduced below. I have never deviated from

24. It is perhaps worth remarking that I have spent most of my adult domestic life with two Cambridge-trained social anthropologists.

25. See E. Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature against the Grain*, New York: Random House (2007).

26. See Chapter 50 below.

my devotion to Asante, a people and a place that have retained my deep interest and great affection for the best part of half a century. Over the decades, I have been asked to write regional histories of West Africa and general histories of Africa. I am not interested in this sort of work, and have the self-awareness to know that in order to write on such a broad canvas would involve me (temperament again) in the impossible task of getting a purchase on other histories of other places approximating to the level of my understanding of Asante. One simply does what one does, and hopes one does it reasonably well.

Who do I write for? Perhaps a better question is what sort of effect do I hope that my writing has on readers? Understanding the African past, an infant enterprise when I started, is still very much a work in progress. For my part, I have always sought to illuminate the complex *possibilities* in the single African society of Asante, and to bring these to the attention of fellow Africanists, and to the global constituency of those engaged in analogous kinds of work in very different times and places. In brief, there are those who are interested in Asante *per se*, and then there is an army of others—historians of everywhere else, including elsewhere in Africa—to whom my writing is directed in the hope that they will find somewhere in it *possibilities* that might enrich or advance their own work. I think that this sort of informal connection or conversation between like minds is the most fruitful path to real progress.

Possibilities, connections, and conversations (often silent ones with texts) nourish my own thinking and writing. This net is cast as widely as possible. Here is an instance of what I mean. I have long contemplated writing some sort of account of the road, first created in the eighteenth century and still there today, that runs north from Kumase to Mamponen. This has always been a busy artery. Once it was lined with craft and other service villages working for the *Asantehene*; today, it is urban sprawl, and the road is clogged with traffic jams. I have much information on all this (and even a film of the road's whole length taken fifteen years ago). As ever, the problem with writing about all this comes down to a search for a satisfactory approach, a means of documenting the past while furnishing forth its texture. I will not describe work yet to be written, except to say that I have located a most useful tool for the kind of thing I have in mind—possibilities, connections, and conversations—in a famous, and famously difficult, Italian novel from the 1940s. This is Carlo Emilio Gaddi's *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana* (1946). The last part of this book is about life along the *Via Appia* running south from Rome, amongst ancient ruins and modern, postwar displacements. This, I think, has shown me a possible way into retrieving the textural specificities of three hundred years of life along the Kumase-Mamponen road.²⁷

After all this, what one writes can engage and even inspire readers, sometimes years after it appears in print. It is particularly gratifying when such readers not only express appreciation, but also show that they have understood what the writer thought most important in his text. In 2000, I published *Asante Identities*, a book that received extremely good reviews. I was pleased, of course, but also mildly irritated. Reviewers

27. See C.E. Gaddi, *That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana*, trans. by W. Weaver with an Introduction by I. Calvino, New York: NYRB Classics (2007). The book is so full of real (and invented) Roman dialect that it is not an easy read even for native Italian speakers; I thank my friend Pierluigi Valsecchi for his opinions on Gaddi.

celebrated the extremely dense empirical material I was able to bring to my writing, but scanted what I intended as the core of my argument. This was the third chapter of five, in which I addressed the wider significances I saw in what I was trying to do. Certainly, it is a chapter that needs the kind of concentrated attention that reviewers pressed for time (I have been there myself) often cannot accord to their reading. Then, out of the blue, in September 2014 an e-mail arrived from Derek Peterson at Ann Arbor. He and his postgraduate students had spent three hours of seminar time discussing my orphaned third chapter. They did not find it easy, but ‘the reward for hard work was tremendous insight’, and the third chapter—by now fourteen years old—was as ‘fresh’ as when it was written ‘in all of its wonderfully layered complexity.’²⁸ I was much gratified to be told this, for it is an unsolicited testimonial of the sort that inspires to further effort in what is the isolated, and isolating, business that is the act of writing.

I will end here. I hope I have given readers some kind of insight into myself as author and into the kinds of things I think and write about. I do, however, venture to reiterate the disclaimer set out at the start of these remarks. This is an account of myself on this particular day, and not any kind of (impossible) testimony fixed in stone.

Tom McCaskie
Tour Anne
Pont de Cirou
Mirandol Bourgnounac
Tarn
France
9 November 2014

28. D. Peterson to T.C. McCaskie, dd. Ann Arbor MI, 28 September 2014.

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