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Recipient of the Kalman Silvert Award for 2014

I would like to open my autobiographical statement with the same words chosen by the last recipient of this distinction, my old and dear friend Peter H. Smith: my academic career, as his, “has followed a serendipitous path . . . marked by abundant opportunity, generous encouragement, unstinting intellectual support—and exceedingly good luck.”

Mine hasn’t lacked in moments lived in anguish (which one in the atrocious twentieth century has?) but those have been essential in creating opportunities to indulge my omnivorous curiosity for the ways of the world, opportunities that I have found as enjoyable as the ones a less agitated career has granted Peter. Thanks to them I have learned—to say it in Kipling’s verse—

“There are nine and sixty ways of
constructing tribal lays

And every single one of them is right!”

(Rudyard Kipling, “In the Neolithic Age”)

This is why I retain particularly enjoyable memories of my brief career at Oxford, a not particularly happy time in my life but one in which I witnessed and passively participated in the construction of tribal lays as bizarre as those that have fascinated several generations of anthropologists who played the role of participant observers in Melanesia. I was then lucky enough to continue my exploration of the world in Berkeley, where the spectacle of (and participation in) ritual combats as fascinating as those witnessed by Clifford Geertz in Bali is as available today as it was in 1971, when I joined the faculty of its Department of History.

To this long exploration of the world I owe fond memories of the many people whom I found on my way, beginning with Kal Silvert, whose house in Hanover, New Hampshire, was the first in this country in which on his invitation I spent a night, followed by a sumptuous breakfast “straight from the shtetl” (Frieda dixit), when he took in charge the help of his former colleagues in Argentinian universities who were forced to continue abroad careers cut short by the military takeover of 1966. They are too many who helped to mention all of them here, but I cannot pass in silence the names of Woodrow Borah at Berkeley, Richard Morse at Yale and then Stanford, and Albert Hirschman at Harvard and then Princeton.

But it was in Argentina and Uruguay where, while I found so much to enjoy in the vast world, too many of my former colleagues found it increasingly difficult to continue doing work along the lines defined before 1966, and I was reminded of how privileged my fate was, and of the responsibilities that such privilege entails. For the moment there was little that I could do in favor of their increasingly heroic efforts, but after 1983, in a country in ruins, I was blessed with the opportunity to play a part in the emergence of a vigorous historiographic community that is one of the depressingly few success stories of the period opened by the return of democracy to Argentina.

As you see, it is only fit that in looking back at my career I close these few words of thanks for this too generous award by repeating the words of Peter Smith: it has indeed “followed a serendipitous past . . . marked by abundant opportunity, generous encouragement, unstinting intellectual support—and exceedingly good luck.” ■