

Geoffrey Roberts

Did the ancestors think of the future?

Meditations on the nature of historical knowledge come in two main varieties. Foremost are those from the philosophers, who want to contribute to theoretical discourse on history as a discipline. Then there are those from the historians, who are concerned to offer reflections on their craft from a practical point of view.

While Ged Martin presents his book as the "reflections of a jobbing historian upon a worthwhile craft", *Past Futures* is more interesting and important than this modesty suggests.

Martin thinks that history is both an impossible and necessary discipline. Impossible because

causal explanation of what happened in the past is not possible: there is too little evidence, too much complexity, and no means of conducting experiments to demonstrate even the simplest of causal chains. Yet the effort to reconstruct the past remains socially and psychologically necessary.

The alternative to causal explanation is reason-giving explanation — the exploration of the reasons for past action. This approach typifies much historical work, but, as Martin points out, many past decisions were instantaneous, intuitive and irrational — and hence beyond the rational reconstructions of historians.

Thankfully, much human decision-making is rational and recoverable on the basis of surviving evidence, and Martin agrees that decision-making analysis and narrative constitute a viable foundation for the discipline of history.

For Martin, the "why-when" of decisions — why a course of action was adopted at that particular time — is primary. Why-when is critical for understanding the actual content of decisions (the why-what) and also for assessing their consequences.

Martin's focus on why-when questions is part of his general argument that the primary function of historians is to locate events in time, to explain why events happened when they did. In Martin's view, the key to locating events in time is how participants saw their futures.

These "past futures" come in many different shapes and sizes. For some, the future is inevitable; for others, it is determinable. Some people are pessimists, others optimists. Some take a short-term view, others a long-term view. Some care about the future, others do not. Some

people act because they think they know what is going to happen next, while others just want to see what happens.

Understanding the type of future that was envisaged by historical actors will take us a long way towards the explanation of why-when.

I doubt that many historians would object to Martin's proposed procedure, and I am sure that they would be enlightened and entertained by his many case studies. Martin was professor of Canadian studies at Edinburgh University, and *Past Futures* began life as a series of guest lectures at the University of Western Ontario. Much of his illustrative material is drawn from Canadian history, but he also cites imperial history and the history of Ireland.

My favourite example is the case of the Earl of Kildare, who was asked in 1495 why he set fire to Cashel cathedral: he replied that he thought the archbishop was inside. But Martin does not explain the why-when of this particular legend.

More contestable is Martin's attempt to tackle the issue of significance in history. He needs to do this because to locate events properly in time, the past needs signposting — and one way of doing this is to assess the significance of events.

Martin's solution to this thorny issue is counterfactual: events are significant if we can reasonably argue that the past would have been radically different in their absence.

This takes us into the endlessly speculative realm of what might have been, but, Martin says, this is a necessary exercise that provides us with a series of signposts pointing the way from the past to our present. Moreover, counterfactual reasoning remains central to historical explanation, irrespective of the question of significance.

To understand what happened, we need to explore the alternative past futures of participants, who continually used counterfactual reasoning to assess their options, as we do ourselves.

Ultimately, Martin's conclusion is a traditional, historicist one: the past must be understood in its own terms as well as our own. We cannot talk to the past but we can have a dialogue with it, one that moves back and forth and through time.

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Past Futures: The Impossible Necessity of History

By Ged Martin

University of Toronto Press, 305pp
£32.00 and £16.00
ISBN 0 8020 8979 8 and 8645 4

The key to locating events in time is how participants saw their futures. For some the future is inevitable, for others it is determinable

he first recorded contact between the Mughal emperor Akbar and the Portuguese took place in 1573, the year that the ruler conquered Gujarat. While at the port city of Surat — a contemporary centre of international trade — Akbar was approached by a delegation of Portuguese from Goa who presented him with "many of the curiosities and rarities" of the West.

These excited the ruler to the extent that, two years later, he sent a delegation to Goa to procure more. But the impact of Europe at the Mughal court was even more evident in 1580, with the arrival of the first of three Jesuit missions, each hoping to convert the emperor to Catholicism.

Akbar had for some time questioned orthodox Islam and regularly staged debates with holy men of different

faiths at which he would sometimes spend all night discussing questions of religion. In the company of mullahs and sheikhs, Hindu and Zoroastrian priests, the Jesuits joined in dialogues with the emperor at his *Ibadat-khanah* (literally, "house of worship").

From Jesuit accounts and letters, it is evident that Akbar grasped the tenets of Christianity and understood the similarities and differences between that faith and Islam. He also showed an affinity for Christian imagery. In an account from 1580, Akbar is described as visiting the Jesuit chapel at court and being "so enthusiastic about the pictures that he continues to order replicas of the crucifixes and the other pictures made in ivory, gold, etc". To what extent such commissions reflected Akbar's curiosity about Western art, rather than his leaning towards Christianity, was clearly difficult for the missionaries at the imperial court to ascertain.

The dialogue between the Mughal emperor

less than a decade ago, the exploits of Ernest Shackleton were largely forgotten in Britain and America. Then, in 1999,

an exhibition in New York and a book by Caroline Alexander fixed attention on the astonishing story of Shackleton's *Endurance* expedition (1914-17). Books about the "heroic age" of polar exploration have proliferated over the past five years. Yet, amid this torrent of publications, the expedition that propelled Shackleton to fame in 1909 has been largely neglected.

Beau Riffenburgh's readable and superbly researched *Nimrod* presents the first detailed history of Shackleton's greatest expedition. It has been worth the wait. His book entertains the general reader and provides polar specialists with a definitive account of one of the key expeditions in the history of exploration.

Chapter one describes Shackleton's participation in Robert Scott's earlier *Discovery* expedition, in which Scott, Shackleton and Edward Wilson achieved a new "farthest south", about 772km from the pole. The three men barely survived, with Shackleton suffering worst. The chapter provides a dramatic opening and establishes the personal rivalry and feelings of failure that would drive Shackleton back to the Antarctic. Chapters two to ten narrate Shackleton's early life, interspersed with discussions of the history of exploration, the political climate and the popular imperialism that, Riffenburgh argues, dominated British society then.

Amin Jaffer

East- curio exch

ors and the Jesuits at court is at the core of a new volume edited jointly by Jorge and Nuno Vassallo e Silva, both distinguished scholars of Indo-Portuguese art and material culture. The book accompanies an exhibition of the same name held at Calouste Gulbenkian Museum last year and a list of those exhibits is included.

Goa, the capital of the Estado da Índia, was the centre of Christian missionary activity in Asia and the port at which "exotics" from the West arrived in Portugal. The ten essays deal with different aspects of the Portuguese-Mughal encounter, stressing Goa's role as a source of goods and the headquarters of the Portuguese exchange with Akbar and his successors.

The volume brings together work by a leading group of scholars that offers a

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Nimrod: Ernest Shackleton and the Extraordinary Story of the 1907-09 British Antarctic Expedition

By Beau Riffenburgh

Bloomsbury
358pp, £17.99
ISBN 0 7475 7254 2

Sir James Wordie, Polar Crusader: Exploring the Arctic and Antarctic

By Michael Smith

Birlinn, 371pp, £25.00
ISBN 1 84158 292 1



Nimrod: battered sealer

Scott insisted that Shackleton return to England with the relief ship *Morning* after their southern march. The relationship between the two men appears to have remained healthy after the return of the *Discovery* in 1904.

But the stain on deepened, and Scott solved to commit southern voyage that would fract ships with Scott Shackleton str