

Obituary

Sir Christopher Bayly – Pioneer of Global History

Sir Christopher Bayly died of a heart attack in Chicago in April 2015 at the age of only sixty-nine. A gifted Oxbridge historian of enormous intellect and erudition, he was credited with taking an Asian-centred view of the British Empire and with helping to establish global history as a scholarly discipline. He was on record as saying that “historical analysis in the Marxist tradition is the only social theory which displays a rigorous interest in explaining historical change”. Bayly regarded his 2007 knighthood “not only as a great personal honour but, as a historian of India, as recognition of the growing importance of the history of the non-Western world” (*THES* online, 22 June 2007). A member of the Reform Club and a trustee of the British Museum, he was a devotee of the arts (in particular Italian opera) and a great admirer of Venice. In 1981 he married Susan Kaufmann, a distinguished anthropologist.

The “guru of global historians” had a remarkable academic career, culminating as Vere Harmsworth Professor of Imperial and Naval History at the University of Cambridge from 1992 until his retirement in 2013, and then as professor emeritus until his death. He was concomitantly director of the university’s Centre of South Asian Studies between 2006 and 2014. A Fellow of St Catharine’s College from 1970 until 2012, he was elected college President (deputy to the Master) in 2007. He ended his career as Vivekananda Visiting Professor at the University of Chicago (2014–15), concomitantly holding professorships in London and Copenhagen.

The ultimate professional recognition for a British historian came in 1990, when he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy. He was also a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and of the Royal Society of Literature (2006). He received the Wolfson Prize for History (2005) and the Medal of the Royal Asiatic Society (2008).

Christopher Alan Bayly was born in Tunbridge Wells (Kent) on 18 May 1945. His father was a master mariner who became a geography teacher, whilst his mother is said to have exercised considerable influence on his intellectual ambitions.

Bayly was educated at Skinners’ School in Tunbridge Wells and then at the University of Oxford, where he took his MA (at Balliol College) and DPhil (at St Antony’s College, 1970) and was awarded the Stanhope Prize in 1965. His mentors included leading Oxford historians of the age such as Christopher Hill, Richard Cobb and J.A. Gallagher. He was awarded his LittD, however, at Cambridge, with which he was associated for the rest of his life, although he

did become Humanitas Visiting Professor at his *alma mater* in 2013. In his early career at Cambridge, he was Director of Studies in History at St Catharine's College from 1970 until 1992. He doubled as Smuts Reader in Commonwealth Studies from 1981 until 1987 and as Reader in Modern Indian History from 1988 until 1991, before being appointed Professor of Modern Indian History in 1991 and to the Vere Harmsworth chair in 1992.

His doctoral thesis was revised for publication in 1975 as *The Local Roots of Indian Politics: Allahabad, 1880–1920*. It was his next major study, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770–1870* (1983), which cemented his reputation, particularly in India itself. This was followed by *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (1988), which views “the late pre-colonial and early colonial periods as a critical era in the formation of the social order of modern India, and one in which indigenous forces of change continued to flow strongly even after the fuller incorporation of the subcontinent into the capitalist world system” (pp. 203–4). Another key volume, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830* (1989), marked his move towards more global themes. *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1910: Global Connections and Comparisons*, published in 2004, is regarded as epoch-making. His final book was *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire* (2011). Professor Bayly also produced two monographs with Dr Tim Harper, namely *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941–1945* (2004) and *Forgotten Wars: The End of Britain's Asian Empire* (2007). In 1990 he edited *The Raj: India and the British, 1600–1947*.

In the judgement of *The Guardian*, Bayly was “virtuoso historian” and a “brilliant global history comparativist”, whose work embraced economic, social, political, cultural and intellectual history spanning the last three to four centuries; and, from its focus on Asia, extended into the past of the United Kingdom, Europe, the Americas and the Pacific. The *Daily Telegraph* considered that “Bayly had a huge impact both as a scholar and as a teacher, establishing fruitful collaborations with colleagues and attracting bright young graduate students from across the world, particularly from India and other parts of the former British Empire”. Bayly was noted for his generosity, kindness, and humility along with his encouragement of younger scholars. Ulrike Stark, a colleague at the University of Chicago, described him as a dear friend and “a wonderful and inspiring teacher, tremendously generous with his time and knowledge”.

Anthony V.M. Horton