

# Eulogy of George Winius

By Norman Fiering, September 2018

This eulogy, in memory of George Winius, was written for the FEEGI website, so I will begin with that connection. But I admired and appreciated the man greatly and have to trust the members will not condemn me if at the end I enlarge my comments a little to encompass George as a whole person beyond his vocation as an academic historian. I am impelled to give George his due and this is the only available venue.

With regard to the founding of FEEGI, George was the intellectual leader with me providing institutional support. I had not met him before he came to Brown as a visiting professor in 1992, but we took to each other readily for reasons that I understand better now than I did at the time, as I will explain later. In any case, we found ourselves in agreement very early that the new energy back then in the field of world history had more to do with being “fair,” so to speak, than with the assessment of historical evidence in time and place. The writing of history, it seemed, had become like a schoolyard game in which, out of fairness, every single child present had to have a part. To leave anyone out would be hurtful. This generous trend threatened to obscure the astonishing central story of the unique, world transforming dynamism of Europe over a period of five or six hundred years, however it may be assessed. At Leiden, where George had been teaching for a number of years, there was already a center supporting the study of European expansion; so it seemed a natural step to promote such a particular emphasis in the U. S., too, despite the waiting accusations of “Eurocentrism” and “triumphalism”. FEEGI has from the beginning dealt with those issues perfectly well, and certainly neither George nor I had any illusions of European triumph, whatever that might mean. We could have written a manifesto, I suppose, but we chose the more prudent action of organizing a three-day conference in the spring of 1994 at the John Carter Brown Library to discuss the question, assembling only about thirty scholars with something to say on the matter, including two from Leiden, Pieter Emmer and Leonard Blussé. FEEGI was the immediate outcome of that event, and it delighted George, who was the first president, that the organization has sustained and proven itself.

Below I quote from a letter George (at age 88) sent to me in November 2016 that indicates his enduring interest in the subject of European expansion:

“At present I am three quarters through my present (and last) book, a one-volume history of European expansion, which I call ‘Prologue to Globalization’. I intend it to be a ‘scholarly-popular’ account, with emphasis on narrative and readability. It has involved many choices, principally my decision not to clog it with footnotes and references (though I will include a full bibliography). In writing such a narrative history, I find myself slighting to a considerable extent the intricacies of economic history as well as the guilty subjects of slavery and the suppression of native peoples -- both of which (unless short and therefore superficial) would require lengthy analytic diversions and loss of ‘thread’. I will try to insert more detail-cum-analysis once the draft is complete, for then I can better judge the potential distraction from the flow. I have spent an inordinate time on the formation of the Raj--weaving in Clive, Hastings, Alivardi Khan, Siraj-ud-daula, Mir Jafar, and other principals. I still need to treat (as compactly as possible) the settlement of S. Africa by Riebeeck, plus occupations of Australia and New Zealand. I intend to finish with a chapter on how and why all the expansion was confined to Europe. . . . I think a general description of the Expansion long overdue.”

Those who knew George might well ask if he was capable of producing a “popular” book, such was his love of intricate detail, his over-stocked mind, and his tendency towards prolixity in both conversation and writing. For me, George’s long-windedness was an endearing quality because so often these monologues were truly informative and they usually culminated in a witty, amusing judgment. George was the soul of dry wit, a man who saw the world ironically.

Nearing the end, we geezers unavoidably think of posterity, of what will be our legacy, which in the case of professional historians often goes beyond the list of publications in a c.v. It strikes me as meaningful regarding George that in the eight years before he died he sent me, both times completely out of the blue, two books,

neither of which had anything to do with his professional work on the early Portuguese empire. One, W. MacNeile Dixon's *The Human Situation* (1938), which arrived just two years ago, was passed on to George from his father, and George remarked about the book that he "still reads it anew every few years" and thought I would enjoy it. The other book, a memoir of more than 200 pages written by George himself and privately published, *The Brats of Briarcliff: The World of Boys before TV and Video Games, 1934-1942* (Xlibris: 2008), arrived in 2010. The arrival of each of these books, as I said, was a total surprise. They represented George at a more personal level, and I can only suppose he wanted me to know him better.

Dixon's *The Human Situation*, which originated as Gifford Lectures at Glasgow, was totally unknown to me, and one wonders how such a masterly book could somehow have dropped from view although it was much heralded at the time. I regret that George and I never talked about it to the degree that I could get an understanding of his personal appreciation of the book. It is a timeless, learned yet highly accessible work that skewers all kinds of comfortable assumptions about the world and the people in it, and George would be in sympathy with that. Maybe above all Dixon challenges the belief, now stronger than ever, that the salvation of mankind will somehow be through science. So compelling is the book that I, too, want to recommend it widely and can imagine re-reading it periodically. It is possible, of course, that George sent me this book not because he wanted me to know him better but because he felt that I needed enlightenment. It is an enlightening book for almost anybody.

*The Human Situation* is not directed to historians, but it is extraordinarily wide ranging, instructive not only to those specializing in the humanities but also the sciences. Dixon writes with an aggressive skepticism in defiance of simple answers, superficial theories, quick solutions. He faces the "stupefying chaos" of the world dead on, the unavoidability of conflict and disagreement, and he acknowledges the incessant change that every historian knows. It is a book full of fresh thoughts born of direct observation. Few abstractions get in the way.

The *Brats of Briarcliff* is an altogether different proposition. How George could have made the mistake of publishing this book via one of the vanity presses, Xlibris, baffles me. Properly marketed by a top-notch publisher, I could imagine it featured in the *New York Times*. It is not only a sharply observed historical reminiscence of his

boyhood from the ages of about 6 to 14 in a town near St. Louis, Missouri, but given George's talents it is an anthropology or sociology, with the games, the toys, the play, the reading, the rituals, the objects of all sorts that consumed the time outside of school of a middle-class child of that era, largely untouched by the Depression. It is all meticulously recorded, with the eye of an engineer or the historian of technology, on such matters as the competing types of cap pistols, the virtues of different sleds, wagons, electric trains, radio programs, comic books, ice cream sodas, on and on, told with irresistible humor and affection. I doubt that there is any other book like it. There is text in it for a several Smithsonian Institution exhibitions--if they have collected the material ingredients George cites. Although extremely limited in time and place and focused exclusively on boys (and to a small degree on parental styles), one can call it without exaggeration an American classic.

I mentioned above that George and I fell into a sympathetic relationship quickly. One reason may be that our being close in age, my boyhood years were virtually identical to George's, although I was an easterner. Everything he referred in in ca. 1940 was part of my direct experience, but I do not have half the observational skills that George had. We shared the sentiment that boys today, absorbed by one sort of glass screen or another and over-protected, have missed out on the textured experience of playing for hours out-of-doors every day unsupervised in immediate contact with various forms of earth, air, water, tin, lead, iron, clay, rubber, wood, paper and, of course, sharing this all directly with a set of neighborhood friends in the midst of wild fantasies concerning cowboys and Indians, cops and robbers, and other heroic ventures.

I will proffer one quote only, from a chapter on pets. "In Briarcliff we had our fish, turtles, canaries, toads, frogs, snakes, bats, and dogs, but nobody had cats, which was a pity for the cats. But that is simply how history is: you can't make it up. You can only analyze it and push it around a little to suit what you think it means."