



PETER WARD FAY
(1924-2004)

INTERVIEWED BY
SHIRLEY K. COHEN

April 7, 1997

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Subject area

History

Abstract

Interview in April 1997 with Peter Ward Fay, professor of history, emeritus, in the Division of Humanities and Social Sciences. Dr. Fay, an authority on India and China, received a BA from Harvard in 1947 and from Oxford in 1949. He received his PhD from Harvard in 1954 and joined the Caltech faculty as an assistant professor in 1955.

He discusses growing up in Cambridge, Mass., in a musical family; both parents were pianists. Early education at Browne & Nichols [now Buckingham Browne & Nichols] and Deerfield. Matriculated at Harvard in 1941, where he joined ROTC; called up in June 1943; Officer Candidate School, second lieutenant in field artillery at Camp Gruber, Oklahoma. In February 1945, he was sent to the Italian front north of Florence, had six weeks of active service. He stayed in Italy for a year and then returned to Harvard as a senior, majoring in history.

Rhodes scholar, 1947 to 1949, at Balliol College in Oxford; returned for a year of graduate work at Harvard, then spent a third year on the Rhodes Scholarship at Oxford, doing research on his PhD thesis on the rural constabulary. He was an instructor at Williams College 1951-1954 before joining the Humanities Division at Caltech.

Recollections of the division chairman, Hallett Smith, his colleagues Alan Sweezy and David Elliot, and the humanities curriculum. He recalls the advent of social sciences, the friction within the division at the time, and the chairmanship of Robert Huttenback. Discusses the genesis of his research while at Williams; his interest in modern European history and in the Opium War; his visit to India, 1964-1966, resulting in publication of *The Opium War 1840-1842* (1975, University of North Carolina Press; 1976, W. W. Norton). Recalls the research in India that produced *The Forgotten Army: India's Armed Struggle for Independence 1942-1945* (1993, University of Michigan Press).

Recalls his work on Caltech's Admissions Committee and his establishment of the "Introduction to Asia" course in Freshman humanities curriculum. Recruiting of historian/anthropologist Nicholas Dirks and the building up of Asian studies. Concludes by discussing the challenges in getting science students interested in history and his disapproval of the growing specialization in the Humanities and Social Sciences Division.

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CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH PETER WARD FAY

BY SHIRLEY K. COHEN

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

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CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Interview with Peter Ward Fay
Pasadena, California

by Shirley K. Cohen

Session 1

April 7, 1997

Begin Tape 1, Side 1

COHEN: Why don't we start at the beginning. Why don't you tell us a little bit about your family—your parents.

FAY: Well, my parents were both pianists. And my father in particular was, I think, quite talented in an odd respect. He apparently never played the piano until he got to Williams College. He picked it up there. He largely taught himself. He had a natural sense for music of all sorts. Later in life he would sometimes play for us the kind of music that he would play for dance bands when he was in the army. Although he was not a trained classical pianist, he could shift—what is the term—transpose from one key to another. He could do this. He could simply improvise, and I think this was a natural talent. My mother didn't have this. They were both pianists, and by the time they got married, after the First World War, they were studying piano. They were helped by the circumstance that Dad had a private income—a really quite handsome one, I think—so they did not have to work. They went to Europe twice, to Paris to study with a particular man there. I was born on the first of these trips, in 1924. It was kind of my mother—she took me along. So I was born in Paris, and then we went back to Cambridge, where they lived. We went a second time and came back to America when I was seven, from 1930 to 1932. We spent the two summers in Surrey, England. Then the Depression, which of course had begun by then, stripped my father of a good part of his private income. So my parents came back to America determined to earn a living—in some proportion at least—with their pianos.

My father, who had promise as an accompanist—but at that age I think he never could have broken into concert performance on the piano, and my mother would not have tried it—

they both turned to teaching, privately and also in schools. Eventually my father taught for a while at the New England Conservatory of Music. But all through the thirties they worked, both teaching private pupils at home. We lived in a large house, quite close to Harvard Square, that they had bought before the Depression. The living room, which was a large room—half again as big as this one—had two Steinway grand pianos, and in another room upstairs there was a baby grand. When I came home from school—I went to elementary school in Cambridge before I went off to prep school—I'd come in in the afternoon and find the doors to the large living room shut and the sound of piano lessons. And my mother was upstairs doing the same thing. So I heard music all the time.

COHEN: Did you play the piano?

FAY: Yes, I played the piano.

COHEN: Did your parents teach you?

FAY: Yes. I was taught to play the piano first by my mother, then by my father. I could have been, I suppose, quite good. But I was lazy. I play the piano still, but not well. I have one of the Steinways. My older brother Ted—who took an MS in aeronautical engineering at Caltech in 1942—has the other one. He doesn't play at all, but he was the eldest. And my younger sister, Barbara, has the baby grand. We four children were all musical to some degree. And that, I think, is all one needs to know about my parents, particularly that their circumstances and desires took us all to Europe for those two years. That experience made an indelible impression upon me and at least one of my other three siblings. I think that's why I managed to go there while I was in the service during World War II, and one reason why I was delighted to get a Rhodes to go to Oxford. So I suppose that what my parents gave me were two things. One was the feeling for music, and the enjoyment of it, especially particular kinds of music. My father had discovered Ravel when Ravel was new, and I continue to love modern French composers—modern French in that day, Ravel, Debussy, Poulenc—more than any other kind of music. So that was lovely—that, and the contact with Europe.

COHEN: So you really had a very—in some way—expansive childhood.

FAY: Yes, I did.

COHEN: And so you attended elementary school in Cambridge?

FAY: In those days—it's probably still somewhat the case—Cambridge was really a “two sides of the railroad track” place. My brother and I went to a school called Browne and Nichols [now Buckingham Browne and Nichols], which was then only a boys' school. Now, those schools were very simple then. The lower school was right next to the much better known Shady Hill School, which is where my sisters went. The Browne and Nichols lower school was a single building with a detached carpentry shop. That's all that it had. And it took children from the third grade right up through the seventh. There were not very many in the class, but all in one building—the kind of facilities that would be shocking nowadays. The upper school, which was quite near the Cambridge common, had no playing field. The lower school had a large playing field, because it was next to the river and there was room for that. At Browne and Nichols the upper and lower schools have now combined on the site of the lower school, and they have those playing fields. Today no reputable private day school would have as its building a single structure with nothing around it. The building itself was really quite—by current standards—crude, quite simple.

COHEN: But you got a good education there? And then you went off to prep school.

FAY: I got a good education there, but my parents sent me off to Deerfield. I'm not quite sure why, except that we had cousins who had gone to Deerfield. And my parents could, to some degree, afford it. I got a scholarship there. I went off at the age of thirteen for the last three grades, tenth through twelfth. I was ahead of myself in grades, because of the two years in a French school in Paris. I'm sure you're aware that continental schooling, like Indian schooling, moves much faster. And my arithmetic and whatnot was a good deal ahead, so at the age of seven I was put into the third or the fourth grade. At that point I knew French about as well as a seven-year-old French boy knows French. My French continues to be roughly that of a seven-

year-old boy as far as vocabulary is concerned, but I can pronounce it quite well. That may have been one reason they sent me to boarding school, because I was younger than the others. Deerfield was then and is now even more a very well-known prep school and I was awfully glad I went. I loved Deerfield. I was just delighted to go there. I finished at Deerfield in June, 1941, and then went to Harvard. So I ended up going to college when I was sixteen instead of seventeen.

COHEN: It was the next step.

FAY: It was. And it was much easier to get into Harvard in those days. I did very well at school, but Harvard was not as hard to get into as it is today. A large percentage of the Harvard class came from New England and the eastern seaboard. After all, it was a long way by train, even from Peoria. Harvard did not draw from right across the nation. It drew from the East Coast.

COHEN: Probably from the Northeast even.

FAY: So I went to Harvard. My father asked me to figure out how much it would cost, and I came up with \$1,300 for the total cost of a first year at Harvard. That first year I lived in the Harvard Yard, although I was almost within stone-throwing distance of home. I got a National Scholarship, a merit scholarship whose stipend varied with the means of the parents. By then, my parents were beginning to recover financially so the award only gave me \$100. My parents took care of the rest. I didn't have a car, of course, but it was so much cheaper then than now, given the amount of inflation.

COHEN: So, did you major in history right off? I mean, what made you go that route?

FAY: Well, almost. What is called political science anywhere else is called government at Harvard. And political science was what most interested me, in part because I followed current events—that was my hobby. The *Globe* didn't exist then. The only other Boston newspaper was an evening paper, rather thin. But my family took the *New York Times*, and I used to follow what was going on in Europe very closely. I mean, I had scrapbooks, I had a card file, I knew an

enormous amount about what was going on in Europe. I remember the Ethiopian War. Now that's 1935, which means, essentially, that I was ten, because I was born in December of '24. I knew a good deal about that war. I also followed the Spanish Civil War.

COHEN: Well, that's really quite precocious, Peter.

FAY: Well, my parents loved France. They loved England. And my father had been in the service. All those people went into the service in World War I if they could, by the way. My father went into the embryonic army air force. He washed out of pilot training. The tale that I have been told is that he went into the army air force but washed out of pilot training because he just couldn't bear the noise on those training planes—those open cockpits. So he ended up playing the piano in the officers' club. But he was in the army. My mother was called off to work on a farm, as was my younger sister in World War II. My uncles all went into the service as a matter of course. Nobody got killed, fortunately.

COHEN: This was the First World War?

FAY: First World War.

COHEN: So, your family was interested in current events.

FAY: But more than that. They loved the French. They loved the English. And they were as upset, but more knowledgeably, about what was happening in the thirties in current events as I was.

COHEN: So it sounds like there was a lot of discussion in your house.

FAY: Yes, there was. And we listened to the kinds of radio programs that dealt with these things. And so, when I went to Harvard I continued to have these interests. And I joined the ROTC instantly, in 1941, because I wanted to be in the army.

COHEN: Were your parents sympathetic to that?

FAY: Yes. And I thought I would study government, which seemed more current-eventsy to me than history, although I did take history courses. I thought for a while of combining a BA in government with a law degree from Harvard Law School. There was an arrangement then for combining the two and getting the two degrees at the end of seven years. But at some point in my sophomore year I abandoned that notion and decided that history would be my major. And then, at the end of my sophomore year in '43 the ROTC class was called up, and we went through basic training in Fayetteville, North Carolina.

COHEN: And what was your army experience like?

FAY: I was very lucky, in a way. If I had stayed at Deerfield for a postgraduate year, which is what the school wanted me to do, I would have gotten into the following year's [1944] ROTC class, which dissolved almost at once, and I would not necessarily have gone off to Officers' Candidate School [OCS]. As it was, in the spring of '42 classmates of mine were leaving—because they were older—and I didn't want to be left behind. But my ROTC class largely remained intact right through the sophomore year. In June of 1943 we went off to basic training in Fayetteville and were brought back to Harvard for a few months in the autumn of '43 while we waited for room in Officers' Candidate School. We attended classes. And then we went off to Fort Sill in Lawton, Oklahoma. It was and still is the field artillery training site. I had thirteen weeks or so there—perhaps a bit more—of Officers' Candidate School. I was commissioned in June of '44. Because I had done particularly well in the classes there, I was called back for a month's further training in survey. The problem in field artillery is that you want to direct a gun's fire upon a target that is out of sight. For years guns have been placed generally out of sight of enemy guns, in part because if you move yours up to within their sight they will shell the heck out of you before you shell them back; but mostly because field guns even of modest caliber send shells to a distance such that sighting the target from the gun itself would be virtually impossible even if that target was in a direct line-of-sight. The solution has, for years, been to map the ground you and the enemy occupy, marking exactly where your guns are (they've just moved in) and thus making it possible to direct fire at observed enemy targets (which may, of course, include enemy guns) by map readings: so and so is two miles 600 feet distant on an exact line. That's done by surveys, much like what you and I see on roads every

day. Surveys carried into the enemy territory by making observations from the ground—or, if possible, from the air.

I was always very good at examinations and that kind of thing which, in some respects, is a mistake, because it gives you notions. I don't think it has much to do with what you do subsequently, let's put it that way. It has something to do with it, but not very much.

COHEN: Well, it shows something.

FAY: All right. Anyway, I was sent back to survey school. An artillery unit has to have somebody who can do the kind of surveys that you see people designing roads do. You have to be able to locate where the guns are in reference to where an observation post is so that, when you are observing from the observation post, the guns can fire at what you're looking at.

COHEN: So did you use your survey training overseas?

FAY: Well, I never actually did it in wartime. You did the survey behind your own lines, up to the observation post.

COHEN: So, you learned all this?

FAY: I learned all that. And that skill gave me a berth with a battalion of eight-inch howitzers, which had been a National Guard unit in the Coast Artillery, C Battery of the 527th Battalion. Coast Artillery was a separate service in the army in those days; it has long since disappeared. This battalion had been up in Alaska doing nothing, because the Japanese never threatened the Alaskan coast, so they were brought back to Camp Gruber in Oklahoma for retraining. They were older men, because they were National Guard. They would have liked to have gone home. But they were sent to Camp Gruber with young recruits, including most of the officers who were brought in from OCS. And I was one of those. I was the survey officer for C Battery. I eventually became—in '44—a second lieutenant in the field artillery. We remained at Camp Gruber until we passed our ground forces tests just after Christmas of '44. Then we were shipped to Italy in early February of '45 and sent to the Italian front north of Florence. And I

had about six weeks of active service which was very exciting. I was an air observer in a Piper Cub. By now, on the Italian front, air observation was widely used.

COHEN: Did your ten-year-old feeling about Ethiopia have any influence? Did you think of it?

FAY: No, no. I didn't think of it. But, you know, I think that World War II was a very popular war. I would have been very upset if I had been 4F. And also, I was very lucky, as I was saying a moment ago, in having gotten into the ROTC when I did. Because that made me automatically go to OCS. And to be an officer was much more fun than being an enlisted man.

COHEN: Oh, I'd imagine so.

FAY: Some of my friends ended up in odd places or they never went overseas at all. And some went over and got killed. And some had more service than I. But at least I had some service. And, like most young men, I thought—

COHEN: It's an adventure.

FAY: It is. I think it makes a lot of difference in one's life. I think it was the kind of war that the Vietnam War was not. Then I stayed on in Italy for more than a year, to serve my allotted time. I never learned Italian, which was silly of me. I spent most of my time in Naples, but our battalion was carried up as far as the Po Valley. And I came home in September of '46.

COHEN: And so you continued and finished at Harvard?

FAY: Yes. I just took my freshman and sophomore year credit—these universities, with the flood of servicemen coming back, gave you as much credit as they could for training you had done in the service, by the way—so I came back as a senior, not a junior, as a history major. I don't remember when, but it must have been quite early that senior year, '46-'47, and I was wondering what to do next. And somebody suggested—maybe one of the faculty—that I try out for the Rhodes. I had done very well for most of my Harvard career. I eventually got a summa cum laude out of Harvard, which was rather nice to have. I didn't have it yet, but I was on the

road to that. I tried out for the Rhodes and I passed the Massachusetts interview, and then I passed the New England states review, with interviews in Boston, and was chosen. I think there were two people who came out of that New England group. This was the first Rhodes class after the war, and it was deliberately larger than normal. I'm quite sure that one reason I got it was that, in the interview, all the other young men—women weren't taken then, of course—arrived in sober suits, while I wore gray flannel trousers and a sports jacket. My guess is that they could remember me and not the others because I was the only person dressed differently. So I got a Rhodes scholarship. I went over and spent two marvelous years from 1947 to 1949 at Balliol College in Oxford. Then I came back to Harvard and spent one year in graduate school again at Harvard. I was a proctor in one of the houses, because they had asked me to be. They let me take my Generals, as they were called then, at the end of one year of seminars because I had another BA from Oxford. It wasn't a very good BA. It was a second, not a first, and you never get anywhere in academic life in English universities if you don't get a first. I kick myself, because I didn't work all that hard. I traveled a lot. Or maybe I wasn't that good, although nobody else got a first in Balliol that year. But it didn't matter. I got married at the end of that first year of graduate school. The marriage was a mistake. We got divorced five years later when I was at Williams College. I won't go into that.

COHEN: That's all right.

FAY: But anyway, I went back to England in 1950 with my first wife and spent a third year on the Rhodes Scholarship at Oxford, doing the research on my PhD thesis on the rural constabulary—the successors of the Peelers (members of the Irish constabulary), the bobbies. Nobody had done a book on this. I never made a book out of it, by the way. I got bored with it later. The GI Bill was very helpful. I essentially took no money from my parents—not that this is any great honor—starting from the time I went into the army in '43, because the army paid for me during the war and the GI Bill took care of the rest.

COHEN: The GI Bill was wonderful. Many of us know that.

FAY: It certainly was. So I came back from Oxford in 1951 with my wife straight to a job—I forget how I got it, probably by correspondence—at Williams College.

COHEN: Is that where you met Alan Sweezy?

FAY: No, Alan had left Williams for Caltech by then. It was through Alan Sweezy and another Williams historian whose office I shared—a marvelous man whose name was Richard Newhall—that I met Hallett Smith. This was in 1955, and the Humanities Division here was just in Hallett's pocket. He was the chairman then. Did you know him?

COHEN: I knew who he was.

FAY: Well, Caltech needed another historian. At that time, Alan [Sweezy] was here.

COHEN: So that's how you got to Caltech?

FAY: Hallett must have phoned Newhall at Williams and said, "Have you got any historians, Dick?" And Newhall knew me very well and thought very well of me.

COHEN: So you were an assistant professor at Williams?

FAY: I was just an instructor. I got my PhD in '54, in the third year while I was there. I was teaching full-time. I don't know how I did it all.

COHEN: You worked many hours, I'm sure.

FAY: I worked quite hard and got the dissertation done. And then in my fourth year Williams had to decide whether to keep me or not. And they decided not to. It was one of these in or out places. I think it was foolish of them not to keep me, of course.

COHEN: Their mistake.

FAY: I think one reason they didn't keep me had to do with the divorce, which was coming up. But in a way it was lucky, because I wanted to get out of there. I didn't want to be anywhere near New England because of the divorce, although I left a daughter behind, which has been very tough on her. Anyway, Hallett must have talked to Alan Sweezy and Newhall, and I got an invitation to come, and I came out here. I was flown out here, first class, in a turboprop—we flew over the Grand Canyon, I remember. And there was a competitor—I discovered later—from Yale. I knew there would be a competitor. I was asked to sit in on a couple of classes and comment, and I met the other faculty. I never gave a seminar. The normal hiring procedure now is you come out and you give a seminar. And you send ahead your published material. I had published nothing, but I had gotten the PhD, which is better than often occurs here, and I had it for a year. But there was no question of giving a seminar, because the point was that I would be hired to teach. My interest had been in teaching in a liberal arts college. And I knew I wanted to write something, but I didn't know quite what. The [PhD] thesis material bored me. I had also wanted to move on in other ways. If you're young and you get divorced you're looking for a lot of things other than just a career.

COHEN: Had you been to California before?

FAY: No. I had never been west of—

COHEN: Oklahoma?

FAY: Oklahoma. Yes. In fact, until I went into the army, I had never been west of the Hudson River. As far as I was concerned, Syracuse was the Midwest.

COHEN: What year brought you to Caltech?

FAY: I came in September of 1955. I went to Carson City and did the six-weeks residence and got the divorce. That's the way people still did it then. Otherwise it would have taken a year or more back east.

COHEN: That's in Nevada?

FAY: Nevada, yes. You went to Reno for the actual court hearing, but I lived in Carson City and worked in a trailer park as a day laborer until my six weeks was up, and went with the landlady of the house in which I rented a room—a very nice person—and got the divorce and then drove on further and arrived here in Pasadena.

COHEN: Caltech was a very small place then.

FAY: Yes, it was. Do you want me to talk about the way Caltech was then?

COHEN: Yes, I would like very much for you to talk about that.

FAY: Well, it was in some respects quite different. It was a lot smaller. And the Humanities Division—that's what it was called—was smaller by a good bit than the humanities faculty in H&SS [Humanities and Social Sciences] now is. But there was also no "SS" [Social Sciences] faculty to speak of. There were one or two—a political scientist, a macroeconomist, and probably one or two other people. The requirements that an undergraduate had to meet were, in total units, the same as they are now. But some of these requirements had to be met in specific humanities courses; none had to be in social sciences. The teaching load was a good deal heavier than it now is. But it didn't bother me, except that I didn't do very much in the way of research—I had abandoned my PhD thesis subject, as I said. I had a notion for a book, and I worked on it. It eventually became a book, *The Opium War: 1840-1842*. But to say that I felt the kind of pressure to do research that is now common—well, it isn't so.

COHEN: One gets the feeling now that it doesn't matter about the teaching. They just want to know about the research.

FAY: Well, it matters some. It doesn't matter much. I got promoted to associate professor in '60, long before the book was out.

COHEN: So, what was your feeling when you came here and saw Caltech?

FAY: Well, I liked Caltech. I met, instantly through Hallett and Alan—whom I got to know quite well—older faculty. I played tennis with them. It was a smaller community and I was an eligible bachelor, I suppose. I had my own little apartment. I had shipped out the grand piano and had it with me. And I had quite a nice time, except I was lonely. And I met Mariette who, as you know, is the daughter of H. P. [Howard P.] Robertson and his wife Angela. Actually I met them at a party in 1956 while Mariette was still in Europe studying and traveling. But I was introduced to her in the early autumn of '57 and we got married just before Christmas.

COHEN: It went very quickly.

FAY: Yes, it did. And we lived happily ever after. Looking back, the thing that strikes me about Caltech as being on the whole much improved since then is precisely the increased interest in research that we now have. I think Alan Sweezy is a good example, in a way, of the perils of not doing research. He was a superb teacher. And he was very much au courant with things going on in the macroeconomics field. This was the kind of thing many students wanted to have and don't have nearly enough of now, I may say. Sweezy became, as you perhaps know, very active in population control. He introduced the economist, John Kenneth Galbraith, to Caltech. Galbraith came out here and gave a talk before he wrote his famous *The Affluent Society*. Sweezy's brother, Paul, was a very well-known Marxist economist. But I think that Alan missed something by not writing himself. He would have found himself more interesting and his teaching even more interesting had he written the kind of books he could have written. And as for some of the other people, most of my colleagues were doing research. Some of them were doing it sooner than I ever did. But there were always a few who never did any at all. And I think that they were dull.

COHEN: Of course, Alan was never dull, because he had this huge interest in the international scene.

FAY: No, he was never dull as a person. But I think that he would have been even more exciting to his students and to himself and to Sue and to his children had he also done research—I don't know why he didn't.

COHEN: So, did you have much to do with the rest of the faculty? You must have if you went to a party with the Robertsons.

FAY: Yes, I did. I met a number of scientists and engineers—it wasn't very difficult to. Caltech was a small place then. Most of the scientists I met through Mariette; she knew them because she had met them through her parents after they left Princeton and came back to Caltech in 1947. The contacts I had through Mariette I keep still. I go and sit at the round tables. I just came from one, for example. I'm one of the few people in the Humanities Division who will go and mix in the Athenaeum.

COHEN: Now, what kind of students did you have early on?

FAY: Let me read you a list from my grade book, because I thought of this beforehand. I had three sections of European history. In those days, incoming freshmen took English literature, from some point—a bit prior to Shakespeare, I think—up to the present day and took modern European history. (Well, it went back to the Middle Ages, but only superficially then.) And the combined unit count for the two courses, I think, was nine, as it now is. The students met with the English faculty three times a week and with the history faculty twice a week, which left just four hours of the nine for reading and writing papers. The syllabi [for the history courses] linked the English to the history—we often exchanged papers. And the setting of the history syllabus was done by the senior people. David Elliot laid down, in effect, what we taught. Even, to a large extent, I think, the books we used. I liked David Elliot very much, but I got to resent that kind of tutelage, because David Elliot was somebody who didn't do research either. He was always doing something, but I don't think he ever published much of anything at all. He's not as interesting—this is all private—he's not as interesting intellectually as Alan was. He's a very nice fellow. So the freshmen had these two [English and European history] courses they had to take. They had to take maybe one or two terms, maybe a whole year, of Shakespeare. They had to take some American history. And they had, on top of that—but it was a good idea—a public affairs course called H5 [Humanities 5]. All seniors took this current events course. They were provided with copies of the *New York Times*, and had a little examination of sorts, I think. But they had this weekly lecture for which some outside lecturers were brought in. And I think,

although it would be impossible now, the course gave graduating Caltech seniors some sense of what was going on in the world, which some of them now don't have.

COHEN: That's interesting. Who pushed that course?

FAY: I don't know. It was here when I came. My guess is that it may have been [Clinton] Judy way back, or it may always have been offered. My sense is that the humanities faculty was hired to supply a kind of general education which was narrow because it was North Atlantic-focused, as it largely still is, alas—America and Europe. But broad in the sense that there were prescribed courses taught by people who had been hired to teach them with some vigor—otherwise there was a mistake made in hiring—who were not preoccupied with research, who were more approachable in an environment where there were really no outside lecturers. It was a much smaller group. There were possibly some lecturers, but very few. The languages were given by tenure-track people. It was a smaller, more general, more liberal arts college kind of group. But the drawback was its relative deadness due to lack of research, and this prescription of course syllabi.

COHEN: What you *had* to do.

FAY: It was what you had to do. Another difference between now and then—there are some others—was the almost total absence of social sciences then. We have a much more vital, committed, nationally—in some areas—eminent group here now than was possible, or that Hallett would ever have tried to develop.

COHEN: How so?

FAY: Well, Hallett was a difficult fellow. When efforts were made eventually in the late sixties and early seventies to bring in social science, he was not amenable. I don't know how it was eventually done, but it wasn't done by Hallett.

COHEN: Was [Robert] Huttenback here by then?

FAY: Well, Huttenback was one of the engines for this. But the person who really had the plan for this was Burton Klein. Then, Lance Davis played a major role in putting the program together. This made Huttenback and Alan Sweezy and also, to some extent, me and other people enemies of Hallett. Towards the end of Hallett's life I asked Sue [Sweezy] if I should perhaps go visit him. And Sue said—this was about six or seven years ago when she and Alan still lived here in Pasadena and I would go visit her—"I wouldn't go, Peter. I think you would find that he doesn't really want to see you." She put it politely, but I think that he knew that I had been among those who thought that he ought to step down as chairman. And this was at the time that the habit of having "chairmen-of-divisions-for-life" was being abandoned. Chairmen now come in with terms—five or ten years, or something like that. But Hallett didn't at all like the notion of being obliged, which eventually he was, to resign.

COHEN: How did Huttenback come to the Division?

FAY: Well, Huttenback came—he was a man of many talents—first to coach soccer.

COHEN: Right. I've done an interview with him.

FAY: Well then, you know about him.

COHEN: Yes.

FAY: He didn't begin this movement toward the social sciences. But it was with his encouragement. By this time he was master of student houses and teaching and publishing—he was a live wire. And, in fact—he would not have told you this—he was already handling, in some respects, the Division, of which he shortly became chairman. He was the next division chairman after Hallett. He was a free wheeler in some respects. He tended to hire, and he certainly tended to move money around, providing research money to some people and not others in a way which I was vaguely aware of and which made other people furious. He won't tell you this. But the trouble he got into in Santa Barbara is, in part, due to the free wheeling.

COHEN: Well, let's go back to the students.

FAY: Well, the students were very homogeneous. I want to read this list to you, because it's interesting.

COHEN: Okay. Now, what year are we talking about?

FAY: 1955. It's the earliest grade book I've got. Section B, Section J, and Section G: I had them all in the fall of '55. Each section had twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two students. Now, that's all I taught, but that's a lot of students. That means I had seventy students. Let me read a list of people: Allbritten, Bass, Carroll, Conover, Dinwiddie, Eberhardt, Graham, Harmon, Hughes, Hutson, Jenkins, Jones, Kendall, Kuli, Lewyn, Malofsky, Mihm, Nelson, Reiterman, Rosenthal, Teigen, Cleveland, Smith. Then for Fall '58: Boe, Casseres, Crow, Despain, Flatté, Green, Hammond, Hughes, Johnson, Kabakow, Lawler, Lorden, Marcroft, Marvin, Metcalf, Noll, Taylor, Thorne, Waters, Williams, Cheng. Only one Chinese name.

COHEN: One Asian.

FAY: One Asian. And certainly there were no black students at all. It's all—again, it's Oppenheim, Vogt, Wood—

COHEN: Middle America?

FAY: Yes. Quigley. Waspish—but Chernow, Ely Chernow, was Jewish, a marvelous man who went to law school and became a judge. So, you know, it was somewhat mixed. [Tape Ends]

Begin Tape 1, Side 2

COHEN: So, now, things have changed a great deal?

FAY: Yes.

COHEN: How long did having to teach so much go on?

FAY: It went on into the early seventies. Then what happened was that we abandoned the practice of having all incoming freshmen take certain prescribed courses and take nothing else. And among these prescribed courses were freshmen English and European history. I remember the first few years here. At the beginning of the term my section would turn up, brought to the classroom by a section leader. The Dean's office, a much simpler office then, thought that the simplest way to get the freshmen to go to whatever classroom they needed to go to was to get a hold of somebody who knew where the room was and say, "Now you're the section leader. Collect your people and walk to the classroom or the lab with them. You can show them where it is." And after they had done that for a week, the students would know where to go. [Laughter] It was like a military school in that sense.

COHEN: And you were all in the old Dabney Hall of the Humanities?

FAY: Yes. The old system broke up in the seventies because there were those of us who felt—the younger faculty and some others—I certainly felt and said so—that the best teaching is the kind of teaching that you are enthusiastic about and that the students are enthusiastic about. And if you must have a compulsory freshman course, give them some choice. Let it be one among several history or let it be one among several English courses. A lot of my colleagues outside our division don't know this, but in Freshman Humanities—the Frosh Hums, two of which incoming freshmen must take and pass—there is a whole smorgasbord, ten or so, and students choose in the summer on the basis of such vague descriptions in the catalog that they don't know what they're getting. The actual discipline is not indicated. And they may not get the one they choose anyway, because the faculty may not be available in sufficient numbers to meet the demand to do it. And the disorganization in this respect has, I think, gone almost too far.

COHEN: So, you've gone from one extreme to the other.

FAY: Yes. In the spring the executive officer will ask each of us, "What would you like to teach next year?"

COHEN: So there's no kind of set curriculum?

FAY: No. Not as you would find at a traditional college—no set curriculum from top to bottom.

COHEN: Well, that's not so good either.

FAY: No, it isn't. Although, I don't know how you can make it set, given that we are not traditional; we're really a science/engineering seminary, to which students come to do things other than the humanities. For example, if you decide that it would be nice to have a course in French history as an upper class course, and if you feel that the students who take it ought to have had some general European history, then you have to have a European Frosh Hums course. And you would say to the incoming frosh, "If you want to take French history later on, be sure to take this prerequisite."

COHEN: They don't know yet what they want to take.

FAY: Of course they don't know, but even if they did, you can't promise that they'll get it. If the upper level courses are confined to prerequisite ladders you're in real trouble. Somebody who hasn't taken European history but took English literature and now wants to take a course in French history can't take it. And I think that's insurmountable. So what I think, at least, is that we have to go on teaching upper class courses in the humanities without prerequisites. Social science is different, because it uses mathematics and physics, and skipping prerequisites would obviously be impossible. But I think you can teach what I would call "adult education," to people who do not have normal prerequisites, if you as the teacher are aware of that.

COHEN: That's not what's going on now?

FAY: Oh, it is going on right now. That's what I do. I'm teaching a course now called "Europe and Asia" to people who, among other things, do not know—I didn't about ten years ago—that Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are all connected. You have to know this. And I teach it in the Frosh Hum "Introduction to Asia" course. There are very few courses in anything on the humanities side outside of this North Atlantic community—in that sense we are still the way we always were. But we have much more freedom now, and the students, therefore, have much more freedom. A lot of people feel—particularly David Goodstein feels, I'm quite sure—that

they ought to have the same kind of stuff that he got in Brooklyn College. And you may too. I can see the arguments for it, but I think that the particular circumstances of this place make it very difficult to do—possibly impossible. And it might be worse than what we now have.

COHEN: So finally Hallett Smith stepped down.

FAY: He stepped down.

COHEN: In the early seventies—something like that. [Ed. At the end of 1970-71.]

FAY: Yes.

COHEN: And the student body stayed about the same?

FAY: It began to shift a bit later than that, but I don't know when. Again, that's something that the registrar should be able to tell you—then tell me. But it's certainly been this way for the last ten or twelve years. And growing perhaps more so, particularly with respect to East Asian students—the Chinese students. And I think that's just great, because, so far as I can see, they mix pretty well on the campus. One of my students—a young man from Colorado, who was a marvelous student—married a Chinese girl here. And I see that. If you look around the campus you'll see lots of mixing.

COHEN: So, Peter, you always kept your hand in research?

FAY: Well, yes and no. I had been teaching at Williams by compulsion—I didn't mind it, particularly—from a textbook called *Problems in European History* created by somebody at Yale—I forget who. It was a year's Western Civilization course that all freshmen took with a lecture once a week and two meetings, I think, in small groups. And I took my share of the lectures, which was fun. By the way, one of the things that I miss here is that, essentially, you don't lecture in a lecture hall. So I've lost the art of doing it, which I liked.

COHEN: You always meet with small groups of students?

FAY: Small groups, yes. Anyway, back to the *Problems* textbook. The book contained, in translation of course, archival material: documents and things that were used by historians and assembled by specialists in each field. They would illuminate and explain the storming of the Bastille, for example, and things of that sort. There was some running text. And then there was also a textbook in European history which would have a section on the French Revolution. The idea was that you'd get students to do their own history by working out of the archives. There were two flaws with this approach. One is that the person teaching the material—not the person who drew it up—is unlikely to be an expert in the French Revolution. So he or she is confronted with the same foreign stuff that the student is. What's even more deadly is that they're put together in such a way as to entice, or even force, the student to arrive at a particular interpretation of history. That's why they're put together that way. It's a selection of things which will lead people to arrive at some probably common-denominator explanation of things. Well, students see through this, and the poor faculty teaching it who don't happen to know the subject have to know this. I think the book probably came with an instructor's guide, but I never saw it. But I thought, you know, that's deadly dull, because it's artificial.

COHEN: So, who decided you had to use this book?

FAY: The senior man who was running the course. We used it. They didn't want just a textbook. But I have to add to this my personal conviction that history is a story, it's a narrative. Barbara Tuchman, who is not an academic person but who I think is a marvelous historian and has written a number of books about history, is absolutely right about it: that it is a story, in part because cause and effect are chronological but also because it has to do with just the kinds of things or people, I should say, that stories have to do with. And we all love a story.

COHEN: Yes.

FAY: If you meet somebody and you fall into conversation with them and you want to know more about them, what you are trying to get them to do is what you're doing to me. If I had never met you I would try and find out where you came from, what you had done. I wouldn't say, "Are you a Democrat?" I wouldn't say, "Do you like fried eggs?" I would want to know

about your life. That's how you get to know people. And that's the way history should be taught.

COHEN: Yes.

FAY: History is narrative. So, I decided that I wouldn't do anything more with the rural constabulary and that I would make a collection of narrative episodes in European history, each about the same length. And I thought the first one I would do, because I knew something about the Opium War—I had heard of it—would be an example in imperialism. So I read some stuff about it—not archival—and I wrote up a little piece about the Opium War and I sent it to Houghton-Mifflin while I was here. And Houghton-Mifflin wrote back a very nice letter and said, “This is really quite interesting. Your style is quite facile.” I wasn't sure what facile meant. It sounded sort of derogatory, so I looked it up. It's quite complimentary. So I was satisfied. They said, “Why don't you do a book?” So I started doing a book. Well, I was very slow about it. I've been slow about these sorts of things all my life.

COHEN: Well, you were teaching.

FAY: Well, that's not why. No, it's partly me. Well, I did some work on it. I knew I had to go to England, not India. China was out of the question, you couldn't go to China. But I didn't know Chinese in any case. But the Chinese historians don't have that kind of archive. They don't have that kind of sense of history. They don't report things in the same way. If you pick up a book, translated in my case, about the Opium War or anything around it that a Chinese has written, you'll discover they're using largely European sources, which meant going back to London. I used French sources for the missionaries and English ones for the war and American missionaries and whatnot. I knew I had to go, and Hallett got me the money. He was very good about this. I didn't know how to get a grant.

COHEN: So he did have some vision?

FAY: Oh, yes. He did. What was good about Hallett was that he was a very good judge of people. The people he hired, despite what I've said about what some of them became, were really first rate.

COHEN: He had a good sense.

FAY: He had a good sense of people. And he would help them. He was a little hard on people in English literature. They were too close to him. I think they were not at all happy. But history had Rod Paul, by the way, who was sort of on an equal level with Hallett. And some of the others he was very good with. And he got me the money and I went over in the spring of 1963, leaving Mariette alone, and was in England when our third child was born. The baby was not premature, but Mariette didn't know when it was going to come and I was away. Mariette's certainly forgiven me, but it was really tough on her, although her mother was around to help. I didn't know about the birth until I got a letter. But I spent some months there in London and Paris and did enough research and came back. During the following winter I was asked to go to India as part of this India in America program. Bob Huttenback was involved in this already and suggested me, and I've been ever grateful to Bob for doing so, because we went at first for a year in 1964, with the children, but that year turned into two. I did a little work on this Opium War thing on that trip, but I mostly worked at the institute [Indian Institute of Technology, at Kanpur] and enjoyed myself. We had a car. We traveled a lot, and we stayed for two years. Almost everybody else went for one year and came back, because they couldn't get away from their labs.

COHEN: Well, that's good.

FAY: Well, I've been doing this all my life, and it's been good for the children. We had two years in India, from '64 to '66. When I came back I pulled myself together and I got the book on the Opium War out in '75. It was a very good book. At Hallett Smith's suggestion I had sent it to W. W. Norton, not as a monograph upon which for the most part only other historians would feed, but as a trade book that the public at large would enjoy. In the form of a story, delivered narrative fashion, complete in itself, of which it could *not* be said that it contributed a brick or

two to an edifice awaiting further research and study (though some of its reviewers said so anyway). The story of *The Opium War 1840-1842*, which forced China's doors ajar.

It stood by itself, as a serious book should. To this day it remains not only the first full account of the British naval and military engagements along the Chinese coast, but the first to reach back into the opium trade from the point of production in India to the point of consumption in China. And the first to hitch to that trade what traders, missionaries, and British officers both civil and military were thinking and doing in the several decades preceding hostilities. A big, long book, the research for which filled my shelves with detailed information—for example, a binder devoted entirely to vessels commercial and naval, their names painstakingly jotted down whenever encountered, so that when at last I began to write, out of the scores accumulated I was able to pick a dozen that had turned up often across a spread of years; and these, abandoning the rest, I slipped into the narrative where they became players, instructive players, on a par with all the others.

So I had hopes. For a time Norton made encouraging noises; it moved well, it was a good read. But in the end, with some reluctance, they turned it down. A bit *too* detailed, they said, and too long; it would have to be priced high; that would scare away readers. So they passed it on to the University of North Carolina Press with the understanding that if North Carolina published it, Norton would buy the rights and bring out a paperback edition for its Norton Library series—which in 1976 it did, and over time sold some 2,000 copies, many for use in college courses. Meanwhile the History Book Club adopted it as an alternate selection, and sold over 5,000 hard cover. North Carolina sold over 3,000. The Commonwealth Club of San Francisco gave it a silver medal, one of three awarded in the “at large” category to California authors in 1975. Two years later the American Historical Society's Pacific Coast Branch named it, to my surprise, the best first monograph by an author in the branch's bailiwick that year. When North Carolina in 1983, Norton a few years later, let the book go out of print, it had sold over 10,000 copies. In the winter of 1997 North Carolina decided to bring it back, in paperback, with a new preface. It is selling modestly today.

Meanwhile in the 1960s in India we had met two people—very active in the independence movement—and I conceived the notion of doing their lives and told them that before we came back to America, but I didn't do anything about it until I had finished the Opium War book. In '74 we decided to go back to India to be with them, because I wanted to do just

what you're doing. But my family couldn't get residence visas. This was at the time of the Bangladesh war. We kept thinking the visas would come, and we booked passage on a Dutch freighter. But the visas didn't come, so we went to England instead, and we spent a lovely two-thirds of the year in England and France. Meanwhile the visas came through and finally I went to India by myself. I spent six or seven invaluable weeks with them and that is how the book, *The Forgotten Army*, began. But I was slow in getting going on this, and I wanted to do something else as well—which never came to fruition, I must say—and it took me far too long. We went back to India quite a few times. I had a lot of trouble with the sources and whatnot. That second book didn't come out until '93. I think it is a very good book. But it doesn't have general appeal and, for various reasons, has been panned in England particularly. Although an Indian edition came out, it was not widely sold there, again, for political reasons, I think.

We had gone to India, to Kanpur to be exact, because I was part of the Kanpur Indo-American Program or "KIAP," teaching and otherwise helping in the humanities department at the quite recently founded Indian Institute of Technology a few miles outside the city. Kanpur is on the Ganges 250 miles southeast of Delhi. There with our small children we spent the period September 1964 to June 1966, and this is where we met, among the small group of Indians we came into close contact with in part of the city where the Program had found us a house, two remarkable people. And came to know them very well—Prem Sahgal; Lakshmi Sahgal, born Swaminadham. She had an obstetrical practice. He managed a mill.

Now at the time we knew nothing about how in 1947 India had obtained her independence, nothing beyond the seemingly obvious: no fighting, at least no fighting with the British, and no need for any. But in the course of those two years we learned a good deal about what these two had done before they married and came to Kanpur. She was a South India woman; he came from the Punjab, to Delhi's north. Circumstance had thrown them together in Singapore early in 1942. He had been a captain in an Indian Army (call it, if you wish, a *British Indian Army*) infantry battalion stationed in Malaya. She had been practicing medicine there. On the 12th of December, 1941, the Japanese landed on Malaya several hundred miles north of Singapore, fought the British the full length of the peninsula, in mid-February of 1942 forced the surrender of the British forces there (Indian units were the largest), and took Prem Sahgal prisoner.

That should have been that, I suppose. But there existed, in embryo several months before the surrender, a purely Indian “army.” An army composed of Indian soldiers who were captured or deserted as the Japanese worked down the peninsula. An army the Japanese actively encouraged, an Indian *National Army* or INA, its purpose to join the Japanese and with their support break into India from the Burmese side (the Japanese would soon conquer Burma) and raise all India against the British government there, against the Raj. And in a few months Prem joined the INA, which by that time had burgeoned—eventually it numbered some 40,000 men, many recruited from Indian civilians in Malaya. He met Lakshmi. She was if anything more determined than he to seize the opportunity, if opportunity it truly was, to throw the British out. A charismatic, well-known Indian political figure, Subhas Chandra Bose, slipped into Malaya and put himself at the head of this army, took it to Burma, attempted the break in. Lakshmi went with it, commanding a small but quite extraordinary “regiment” of Indian women, and at the same time a member (the only woman member) of Bose’s provisional cabinet. The attempt failed. The British re-conquered Burma, sweeping up not simply the Japanese (whose number and equipment far surpassed anything the INA possessed) but these Indian “traitors.” Prem was put on trial for treason in Delhi. Lakshmi languished under house arrest in Rangoon. But the Indian public, which had known nothing about the INA’s existence, now learned all about it. The excitement was enormous. Congress Party, Nehru at its head, became its champion. Prem and others were cashiered but released. Lakshmi was allowed to come home and promptly began popularizing the INA effort. They married, came to Kanpur, and it was *this* that Mariette and I became aware of simply through the accident of meeting them as we had.

The Forgotten Army: India’s Armed Struggle for Independence 1942-1945 (University of Michigan Press, 1993) is the result. I’m not an Indologist, to coin a word. Not a proper Sinologist either—don’t need to be. Bose himself (he was killed in an air crash a few days after Japan’s surrender) did almost all his written work in English; Prem’s English, Lakshmi’s English, are as good as yours and mine. But their personal stories (there’s much more to them) fascinated us. Why not with their help and consent “do” their lives? Why not take a deep breath and try to understand why they adopted and pursued a political course that, particularly at the time of Britain’s peril, would have seemed to us not simply misguided but downright despicable. I was a young field artillery officer on the front above Florence when Prem was cornered and

caught on the banks of the distant Irrawaddy, and if I had known who he was and what he was doing, I, who was brought up on Kipling, would have been shocked and appalled.

When *The Opium War* was done, I wrote them and asked, could I do their story. They wrote back, by all means. We went several times to India, sometimes with the children, to be with them and other friends and to find out more. Gradually I decided that their story was so much a part of the larger story, of the INA and of Subhas Chandra Bose, its leader, that the book had to be the much larger and wider book it has become. Bose from secondary sources was a problem only in that I had to radically condense his career prior to 1941. The INA was a problem of another sort: defeated, renegade armies leave few records, and if they do, the victor (here the British) will make no effort to preserve any. But I got what I could, interviewed some of the survivors, and managed, I think, to produce a narrative account that—with respect to the INA forming, in action, and in defeat—no one else Indian or otherwise has yet adequately managed. Nor will anyone else bother, I suspect. This is it.

And its importance, quite aside from the INA detail (what units went where and did what)?

By looking carefully at the political situation in India from the summer of 1945 (war over, censorship lifted) right through December and the big elections then—a process I could follow by combing the Indian English-language press, and by using the magnificent multi-volume archival treasure *India: The Transfer of Power*—I came gradually to the conclusion that the INA in defeat on the field became the INA triumphant when brought home (as the numerous survivors had to be). Triumphant because their presence, and the enormous popular excitement their presence produced, shook the morale of the *British* Indian Army to the point where its British command could no longer count upon it to police and quell a rising at the level of the Quit India rebellion of 1942. Command so informed London. London listened and took first a soft, then a hasty path towards the grant of complete independence. August of 1947 came, for better or worse, a good deal sooner than had been expected. And the INA was a part, perhaps a crucial part, of that denouement.

But the British, to judge from the reviews there, don't believe it. Indians on the whole see it differently. Michigan sent an Indian publishing house, Rupa, the rights there; and with some delay Rupa has published a paperback edition of the book that is finding readers.

There is no connection between the two books, except that they are both based on British sources. I mean, one's about China and the other's about India. I'm not an Indian expert, and the Indian field knows that. I'm not a Chinese expert. At the time, one Chinese person whom I knew personally from childhood told me, "If you go ahead with this book, you'll get your knuckles rapped." Well, I didn't get my knuckles rapped, but I was not recognized nor should I have been as a Sinologist. But I could do it here. I could teach what I pleased and I could write. I got full professorship. I don't know that I would have gotten it the way things go now. I got it actually before the Opium War book had been published, which you couldn't possibly do now. So being here has been a great advantage to me and, therefore, since my teaching is of great advantage to Caltech, I would argue it's been a good relationship. But it can't be done any longer that way.

COHEN: So have you had very much to do with committees on the problems of the Humanities Division? Do you meet with other people?

FAY: Not much. There weren't any, as far as I know. But I was on the faculty Admissions Committee for years and years in the days when we went out interviewing. In those days, the Admissions Committee consisted of the Director of Admissions and faculty members. The faculty members—a dozen or so—traveled maybe up to two weeks interviewing the promising candidates. A few such were considered geographically out of reach. I had some influence there, I suppose, and I have some now—I've been on it again. That was my favorite committee. I don't think that I've had any other influence on Caltech, except to the extent that I'm known as being interested in India. And I've tried to push, within the Division, for non-North Atlantic courses. For a while I was successful. For a while we got the "Introduction to Asia" course I invented—it was the only course offered top to bottom on anything Asian. I introduced it in about 1972 or 1973. It was one of the Freshman Humanities.

COHEN: Do you find that our Asian students take that course?

FAY: Many do. Some are disappointed because they don't get in; there isn't room. The great majority of them come from East Asia and the course attempts to cover all of Asia, including the

Middle East. And they don't even think of that as Asia. Moreover, the one other faculty member who is teaching this course, James Lee, is a Sinologist through and through. So when he takes the second term, he does only China and Japan. For this reason, I do less with China than with the rest of Asia.

In the beginning, the course was so successful that, when I and my family went off to Europe and India in '78 or '79 my colleagues said, "Well, look. Get somebody as a temporary replacement so that we can continue to give the course." So there was a mini-search, and we brought in from Chicago [Nicholas] Dirks. Do you remember Dirks at all?

COHEN: Sure.

FAY: Nick Dirks—who I thought was a very good man. He was half historian and half anthropologist. He came with a wife—they eventually broke up—and a small child. I had a large hand in choosing him sight unseen. I knew a good deal about him from my brother-in-law, McKim Marriott, who is a very well-known anthropologist at Chicago. Nick Dirks was a student of his. He came and he did very well. And when I came back, we agreed to keep him here. So there were two of us. And Nick went tenure track. He ceased to be just a one-year appointment. And he continued tenure track and he wrote a book which was a great success. He was under great stress at the time, because of the kind of anthropology he did: half anthropology, half history. Now, here's the kind of thing that took so much of my time. When I came back, I guess he was going to be hired for one more year. I may get this a little bit mixed up chronologically. It doesn't really matter. But some of us, particularly me, wanted a permanent person in addition to myself, because I teach European history, as it is, more than I do Asian.

COHEN: You wanted someone to do the Asian history?

FAY: Yes. To do India. Nick spoke Tamil—he's a real India man. So I wrote up a little memo making the argument that anthropology and history was a good combination and that, above all, we have to get out of Western Europe and North America. And there was a general feeling in the humanities faculty by then that it was a good idea. But Eleanor Searle—I don't quite know

why—said, “Well, I really want to know a lot more about this. This proposal has got to be really fleshed out.” So I spent one summer, the summer of 1979—it was sort of fun, and I overdid it—researching the field of anthropology and history, writing to everybody I could hear about—mostly in this country, some in England—for their opinion on the matter. And I became sort of an authority. And I produced, by the end of the summer, a really quite marvelous document. Nick eventually saw it. I’ve got it somewhere now. And I snowed even Eleanor. And so the faculty voted to go tenure track and Nick was here. Then there was the touchy business of seriously looking at other possibilities. We had to advertise it and all the rest. We did that. I was privately hoping, and I’m sure everybody knew it, that Nick would get it, because I thought so well of Nick. He did get it. But, at the same time, I went to one of these meetings, as some other people did, and met all the various candidates. And we met a number of other people, including James Lee, who was the second of the two choices. Two other people came and gave seminars. And then the committee, of which I perhaps was the chair decided that Nick would be first and that, if he didn’t take it, James would be second. Well, [Marvin] Goldberger, the President, said, “Look, we’ll do both.” And the tale, which you may have heard and I think is true, is that Murph [Marvin Goldberger] knew James’s father very well.

COHEN: Of course. He’s a physicist.

FAY: A very well-known physicist. He still is. He’s still alive, although his wife died recently, alas. So we got James as well as Nick. And so, for a while we had Nick and James and me, part-time. And then, by that time, we were getting visitors. And Nick brought Gyan Prakash—he’s now at Princeton—as a one- or two-year visitor. We had a lot of these visitors. We had a postdoc. So we had four people in Asian studies. This was in the early 1980s.

COHEN: That’s a lot for here.

FAY: But Nick was lured away. Nick had been under great pressure from some people in the division—John Benton was actually the chief—who thought very poorly of Nick’s kind of anthropology and told him so. Nick wasn’t sure he’d get tenure, and he wanted it by that time

very much, because the book had been accepted for publication. If you don't get tenure and your book is out, it's not easy to get a job any place else.

COHEN: Sure.

FAY: And so he got it. But Nick also, besides having found this place in some respects unpleasant, is the kind of man who wants to be in the university. He wants to have colleagues. He wants to have graduate students. So he went away to Michigan, and there was no question of replacing him, because all the steam had gone out of this thing. We have James Lee, and James occasionally when he would go off to China would get a China visitor. I was still interested in Asia and I'd like to have somebody I can get information about it from, let's say, India. But I never worked with a colleague like that. Except that one time—with Nick. But now we're right back to James Lee and me. That's all we have, and I think that's too bad.

Apropos of what you were asking way back: Have I had any influence outside [the Humanities Division]? Perhaps only on people within the division, and some people outside—I've said this to Steve Koonin and Tom Everhart actually, and to others previously—that we really ought not to be so ethnocentric. Given the kind of students we have, we really ought to teach them their background, because they'd like to know what it is.

COHEN: So here you are, coming toward the end of your teaching career. Has it been good being here?

FAY: Oh, yes. I've liked it. What's more, I wanted an arrangement whereby I could go on teaching part-time. There's no official provision for this. But colleagues and [John] Ledyard have kindly said, "Look, if you'd like to teach some more, we'd very much like to have you do so." And I've said okay. Mariette's a bit upset, because I do want to do another book. I find that, as I get older, it's harder to find the time with also teaching. But I said yes. So I'm going to teach freshmen in the autumn and be paid for it. Nothing grand, but I'll be paid. I won't teach if I'm not paid. And I probably will teach off and on as long as there is some real perceptible student or colleague demand for it. And that, I think, Shirley, will die away. It ought to die

away. In a few years I will not be asked, nor would I want to be, nor should I be. Because I will cease to be, sort of, known this way. So I will be teaching a little bit for now, which is fun.

COHEN: Has it been a good life here?

FAY: Oh, yes. I like Caltech very much. And Mariette likes it, although she wishes I had been more entrepreneurial and says, in effect, “Why didn’t you do more?” I should have done more and gotten known elsewhere, and then there might be an offer now. But when I say, “Where would you like to go?” she’s a little bit hard-pressed to say.

COHEN: She likes it here too?

FAY: We know a lot of people now. She grew up in Princeton. She’d like to be in a place that has a climate change, I think. But we have children here now and everything.

COHEN: Let me ask one more question. Tell me something about the students.

FAY: I think the students are bright in the IQ sense. There’s no question about that. And on the Admissions Committee I take probably as much pains to be sure that we get bright people with good scores as anybody else. But what has evidently attracted them to science, engineering, and so forth is problem solving—something that I never could bear. I think they have a genuine interest as students in problems of the sort that I remember vaguely and loathed. And that is, if you have a bucket of water and you’re filling it at a certain rate and some of it’s leaking and so forth, how long will it take to fill it? And I just always thought, you know, if I have to fill a bucket I’ll fill it, but I don’t want to have to learn the mathematics to figure it out on paper. But they love it. And problem solving—although I’m aware that the further they get into science and engineering the less there will be simple, concrete solutions to things—begins with a kind of interest and a kind of necessary training and, therefore, probably a kind of mind bent or set, which people in human affairs just don’t have. And it makes it difficult for the science and engineering students to do something with history. They don’t understand why there isn’t simpler language, although often the kind of language they write is more complicated than it need be, with the idea that a word with four syllables is much better than one with three or two.

It takes a kind of feel, I think, for language and a training in what I call humanities to produce good writing. And good writing is indispensable, even more to humanities than it is to sciences, because there's no mathematics to rely on. They don't see that. And so I always find my students somewhat disappointing—even by comparison with the Williams students whom I distantly remember. And that's just the way it is.

COHEN: So you don't even see this glow of recognition?

FAY: No. Occasionally I have students who write very well and who I think really understand and like the kind of history I'm teaching, or history in general. And we also have a few, particularly in the freshman year for obvious reasons, who discover that they don't want to stay at Caltech. And it's partly because they've been in my class. Or at least they come to me and ask for recommendations. I have one this year. I had one last year. They'd like to transfer to Harvard or Berkeley or Stanford or whatnot.

COHEN: For a bigger window.

FAY: A bigger window and a window which includes the kind of thing I'm doing far more substantially than what they can do here.

COHEN: Well, this is a special place.

FAY: I think it is a special place. And I don't think we should try to change it. And so I would say the only concrete thing I think we should be doing is what I said before.

COHEN: What is that?

FAY: Caltech says that we're small and so we can only do a few things in any area and we ought to do them very well. What that encourages in the social science side of the H&SS division is perceptible. Our social sciences are a good deal narrower—"more focused" is a more popular term—than ordinary economics and political science departments, because those fields are analytical. They work on micro, not macro, stuff. They use mathematics of a very sophisticated

sort and they come up with, for example, game theory. Some of our social scientists have developed experimental laboratories—Charlie Plott has been the first. It's appropriate for Caltech, because the students come in having the mathematics. And they have a PhD program, which is a good PhD program precisely because it is focused. But the humanities can't do this and shouldn't try. There's no way. We cover many more disciplines than they do. And we couldn't possibly give first-rate PhDs. We don't have a library. We don't have the faculty. We would be second- or third-rate. We shouldn't try it.

COHEN: So you should just be the service group.

FAY: We should be a service group. But all the other divisions are service groups, in one sense or other. The physicists provide a service course in the core program. Most of them aren't doing it at any one time, and some of them never do, but they provide that. And, of course, if you have graduate students, you've got to place them. But back to the business of focus. Caltech has always been unusually focused. It works in all the other divisions, including the social science part of our division. What my humanities colleagues now have discovered is that they should do the same and can. They want to clone each other. You have people in literature, for example, but it turns out to be only English literature. We had, for a while, some tenure-track people in other languages, but the English people have crowded it out. They argue that in an ordinary university there is an English department and a Russian department and a French department and a Chinese department and they don't mix. They argue further, therefore, that the kind of technique that they are developing in English literature the Russian literature people would know nothing about, nor they about theirs. I think that's just crap. I'm sure that they could communicate with each other. I've argued with them, and I get nowhere. But what they've done is hire people in English literature, and the visitors are all in English literature. Some Japanese is now taught. Some Spanish is now taught. French has been. And German has been. And they are taught by lecturers. Now, lecturers are good people. They often have PhDs. But, you know, they come and go. You can never find them. They're not here. They're not one of us. And I'm afraid that that's happening in the Humanities Division more and more. We may see the day when Freshman Humanities are taught by lecturers. Meanwhile we have these little clusters and they are exclusively in what I am calling the North Atlantic community, particularly in English

language, which complements the social scientists who all work in the English language. And I argue that it's quite impossible to come here in the Humanities Division as a loner anymore. Dan Kevles was, and so am I, but I'm not a very good example of it, perhaps. Ted [Thayer] Scudder is.

COHEN: I was just going to say that Ted does his own thing.

FAY: You can do it. But it's almost impossible to get colleagues, who are the decisive people when there's a possible vacancy, to agree to hunt for a loner. They are all—the younger ones—they want to build a group. They want to add to the group. They want to bring someone in who has got some connection with the group. And our chairman, whom I think very well of, is not a dictator. Chairmen have to listen to what people want and say. And so, in the absence of pressure from the outside—that is, outside the Division or even outside the Institute—I can't see the Humanities Division group widening, which means cutting back some of the clusters, the way I think it ought to.

COHEN: And that's how it is.

FAY: Yes.

COHEN: Well, good.