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22 Sep 16, 10:04

By Anna McKie

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My winning proposal: A different approach to India's history

Martin Bayly is an international relations scholar at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He tells Anna McKie how he put together the interdisciplinary proposal that secured him a British Academy postdoctoral fellowship.

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Martin Bayly works at the Centre for International Studies at LSE. He has secured a British Academy postdoctoral fellowship to pursue his latest research project: an interdisciplinary project combining international relations and history to study the origins of modern international thought in South Asia.

British Academy postdoctoral fellowships last for three years and cover fellows' salaries, small-scale research expenses up to £6,000, costs towards the time of a mentor, and the host institution's estates and indirect costs. The next deadline for applications is 5 October.

What stage in your career were you at when you applied for the fellowship?

I had been at LSE for two years as a postdoc. I did my PhD at King's College London, as well as one year as a teaching assistant there. This worked out well because the British Academy wants you to carry out the research at a different university to the one where you did your PhD. As I had already moved on to LSE, I was able to apply for funding at an institution I was already familiar with.

What is your research background?

My background is in international relations but I wanted to bring history into the discipline in a much more developed way. My previous research was on Anglo-Afghan relations; how the British built up their understanding of Afghanistan in the 19th century and how those views determined how they interacted with that country. I am also interested in the discussion within international relations on non-Western international relations. There hasn't been much work on the history of non-Western international relations that looks at the dialogue between the different cultures. The focus has either been on the European or North American theory imposing on the rest of the world, the diffusionist model, or a very de-colonial approach that only talked about indigenous knowledge. I was interested in how these two forms of knowledge might come together and interact.

What is your latest research about?

For the fellowship I am working on a cultural, institutional and intellectual history of modern South Asian international thought. I'm specifically interested in the origins of international thought in India and the number of learned societies in colonial India. These were societies for colonial elites, where they accumulated what was described as "useful knowledge". They were the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, the United Services Institute (a professional body for the military in India), and the Indian Council of World Affairs. The latter's purpose was about reacting to and resisting European knowledge. Each of these institutes contributed to a concept of international thought in colonial India. I'm particularly interested in how the knowledge propounded by those European elites interacted with that of the non-European elites. Indigenous experts played an increasingly important role in these institutes towards the latter half of the 19th century and into the 20th century.

It is interdisciplinary work?

Yes. I want to take history seriously within the discipline, something international relations scholars in the past have been accused of not doing. It's getting better but I think it's helpful for international relations researchers to develop their own ideas on history. There is a need to engage in an interdisciplinary dialogue between history and international relations, through some serious archival work.

Why did you apply for this fellowship?

It's well regarded and also can lead to a lot of other opportunities within the academy. As an organisation, it takes care of its fellows and nurtures them. The academy also has a reputation for funding work that has a disciplinary relevance within the humanities or social sciences, which appealed to me. It funds a lot of historians, but didn't seem to fund a lot of international relations research, so I thought there was an opportunity there.

How did you tackle the application?

The most important step was engaging with the research division at LSE; its staff are great and really efficient. The lead for international relations in the research division was extremely helpful, particularly on the more technical side of the application, such as costs, which I didn't know much about. I also identified a mentor early on, who was encouraging and gave me constructive ideas.

How did you find the application process?

The application process is rigorous but not overbearing—with some others you may need a year off to prepare the application. The fellowship application is in two stages. The first is more focused on the quality of the research itself, and the second is more about the institutional fit and what the money will go towards. It's helpful to have that in your mind when going through the process.

What did you find most challenging?

Distilling the idea to make it accessible. The academic approach is often to try to impress the reader, which leads to the use of jargon. A colleague advised me to make the outline proposal almost like a story, to explain it effectively without trying to be too technical with language. The British Academy asks for a relatively short proposal, about three pages, so being succinct while making sure you capture everything you want to convey is important.

Did you approach it differently because you were incorporating history into international relations?

This project will involve a lot of archival research, so I used previous archival work I had done to demonstrate I was capable of embarking on it. Crucially, I had done archival research in India, which required a certain amount of planning. On the one hand, it was important to play to my previous strengths of doing historical work, but on the other there is only so much anyone would know at this stage. I plan to learn as much as possible about this particular field of South Asian history but I haven't yet done the research, so we don't know what I'll find. That's what's interesting for me.

Where in India are you doing the archival research?

Delhi and Calcutta. I had been to Delhi before, for my PhD research.

Is it hard to set up archival research in countries like India?

India isn't too difficult. There are still bureaucratic hurdles you have to jump through and the biggest challenge is getting the research visa. This requires an institutional affiliation, so I've had to do some networking and reach out to contacts from my past trip to India. In my proposal, I offered a chance to improve institutional ties between LSE and universities in India.

Do you have any advice for others applying?

It's not an arduous task as it could be, and if you've got a good idea, then don't be put off by the prestigious reputation of these fellowships. For me, it was crucial to engage with someone at the research division who understood the application process and could guide me through it. Also, one must make the application enjoyable to read. It makes sense that if something is readable then it will be easy to understand and more likely to get funded.

Why do you think you were funded?

I'd like to think that it's a good idea and that the interdisciplinary angle helped as well; it's certainly something that I'm excited about. I had a few publications out already: two journal articles and a book that came out this year. I was told that a strong publication record could really help. Also I had a good institutional fit and a strong mentor. I spent a lot of time thinking very carefully about the costs and making them realistic. I also did the same with the outputs expected from the project.

What are the outputs?

I have proposed three journal articles and a short monograph over the three years of the project, which I believe is a realistic goal; and I want the nature of these outputs to be interdisciplinary.

CV: Martin Bayly**2016** British Academy postdoctoral fellow**2016** *Taming the Imperial Imagination: Colonial knowledge, 1808-1878*
published by Cambridge University Press**2014-2016** Fellow in contemporary international relations theory,
London School of Economics and Political Science**2013-2014** Teaching fellow and assistant director, King's College London**2009-2013** PhD in international relations, King's College London**2007-2009** MPhil in international relations, University of Oxford**2003-2006** BA in politics, Newcastle University**Comments****Sign in to add a comment****Comments****Sign in to add a comment**