

George Lyndon Hicks Fellowship for Southeast Asia Collections

Curious about the George Lyndon Hicks Fellowship? Find out what our fellow, Prof Peter Borschberg, has to say about the fellowship.

NL: What is the one thing, as a historian, that you look forward to every day?

Peter: I look forward to a new challenge and a new adventure every day. Sometimes that comes from my research — sifting through documents, reading and re-reading materials, or being inspired by the published research of others. Sometimes it comes from my teaching and supervision: the challenge of having to make a complicated story accessible and understandable to my students; and for supervisees, engaging them in dialogue.

NL: You started your academic research on Dutch humanist Hugo Grotius, which led you to find out more about Johor and then, Singapore. What are the driving factors of your research interest in early Singapore's history and the Straits region?

Peter: Curiosity in research and teaching, and also settling here in the region were certainly factors. Little had been previously researched and published about Singapore and the region between 1500 and 1800 so it offered a serious intellectual challenge, a unique opportunity to make a real difference and real contribution. And then there is the growing realization that — contrary to initial expectation — far more materials can be retrieved than one had originally anticipated. When I started to dig into the archives, I started to find all sorts of things. That having been said, taking on this period — and the sources — is definitely not for the faint hearted! You need lots of patience, lots of mental stamina, and a solid pool of experts and friends to draw on when you need help. That help is essential, because you cannot possibly take on something of this magnitude and complexity on your own. You need a clear focus and resolve to overcome doubts that not only regularly surface from within yourself, but are also hurled against you by critics. Let me just say that for every small bit of praise that comes my way I am also at the receiving end of incomprehension, anger, insults and the occasional vulgarity. What keeps me going? I draw much of my energy and determination from a small group of well-wishers in Singapore and elsewhere who cheer me on in the stands.

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NL: Could you share with us the languages you speak, and how being multilingual has helped you in your academic research of early Singapore and SEA?

Peter: Having gone to school in Switzerland, I've had languages drummed into me at an early age. So that means German, French, Italian and English right there. In my day, Latin and Ancient Greek were still taught, and I also opted at school to take Spanish rather than Russian. At university I learnt how to read Dutch and Low German, and later I also picked up Portuguese. My Malay could be better than it is. In addition to knowing the modern languages, one also needs to gain experience with the pre-modern variants of the languages. Those can be tough, because often a vernacular was infused with local terminology and slang. There were only minimal rules of spelling or grammar, and the people who wrote the documents were often only minimally educated. Suddenly the Latin texts written by a scholar of the 17th century begin to look easy by comparison!

To me, languages are one of two essential keys to succeeding in this business of researching history of the early modern period. The other key is palaeography, or the science of deciphering old handwriting. Handwriting could vary from region to region, and needs getting used to with each new text. A given document may look very nice and neat on the surface but can prove very difficult to decipher when you begin to have a closer look at it. I studied palaeography during my postgraduate studies at the University of Cambridge and I remember only too well the tears I used to shed in my study when I sat down to examine some almost illegible scrawl that looked like it had been written at the back of a moving cart on a dirt road. I would ask myself: How on earth did I get myself into this? More often than not the really interesting documents are the ones that are not written in a neat scribal hand. Without skills in languages or palaeography, one cannot really do any ground-breaking research in the history of the 16th, 17th and, to an extent, the 18th centuries. Printed works from this period are a great deal easier to navigate. The typeface may be unfamiliar at first, but depending on the language in question, the ligands and abbreviations usually offer the most serious challenges to the contemporary researcher.

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In short you have to be something of a Jack of all trades to succeed as an historian of the early modern period. Languages and palaeography are prerequisites. There are few people who are properly equipped and qualified to trawl the published and unpublished materials from the 15th to 18th centuries. This is most certainly not because there is no or only marginal interest in this period, but rather because there is such a long, arduous and rigorous background training needed. And the number of qualified researchers is ever shrinking, not growing.

NL: What is your impression of the pre-1800 materials you have seen at the National Library of Singapore (NL), and how have you helped the library enrich its collection?

Peter: I have been working with the printed works and the cartographic specimens, starting with the latter. We have reviewed the JV Mills Collection of maps, which are largely photos or photomechanical reprints — as was the state of technology in Mill's own era. Some of these maps are very interesting and very important for the study of the pre-1800 history of the region. Some of them are printed maps that are now available in an original in the Parry Collection, but a good number of the Mills maps are images of unique, hand-drawn maps. The plan now is to commission modern digitised, high-resolution reproductions of those unique pieces, starting with the British Library in London and gradually extending the reproductions to other key libraries across Europe, the Americas and elsewhere. This is a project that will take some time to complete.

As for the printed books, I will be reviewing those in the second half of my fellowship later this year. In the past the library placed an emphasis on English language materials. I see it as imperative to expand that collection to include other European languages such as notably Portuguese, Dutch, Spanish, Italian, German and Latin titles.

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NL: How have our librarians helped you in your review of NL's rare collections?

Peter: They have been very helpful, very prompt in taking action, they have promptly fulfilled all my requests, and they generally work faster than I can!

NL: What tips can you give to other fellow experts applying for the George Lyndon Hicks Fellowship?

Peter: As this is a recently established fellowship, I would advise prospective applicants to think about taking a helicopter view of the Southeast Asia collections. In helping build up the NLB's collections for use by researchers and as a research library, priority should be given at this stage to identifying and flagging significant thematic or subject gaps in the collections that need to be addressed or strengthened. This would, of course, also include placing Southeast Asia within a larger geographic context, say, of personal, cultural, or trading networks with other regions in Asia and beyond.

NL: Will you recommend this fellowship to your peers, and why?

Peter: Yes I would. I am a full-time faculty member rather than a librarian, and I have found that it is most beneficial to sit down and have another close look at the big picture. Doing this has nudged me to reflect on what is important for understanding the field today by identifying strengths and gaps in the collections. It has also helped me identify areas where there might be potential for further research — issues and questions that I can either take on and address myself, or have some research students investigate and write about. Also academics like myself rely heavily on libraries and archives to do our research. The fellowship helps bring library staff and academics together and through our routine discussions it helps us understand each other a bit better, by exchanging ideas on needs, limitations, and expectations.

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NL: What kind of impact do you hope your fellowship undertaking will have?

Peter: For the printed books collection I hope to help the NLB make its first major steps into diversifying its pre-1800 materials collections into other European language materials. For cartography, I now see my task in helping the NLB to identify and reproduce manuscript maps of the pre-1800 period that build on and supplement the Parry Collection. Some form of long-term synergy is needed, and it can only help to strengthen the NLB's role and status as an important one-stop destination for researchers from across the region — and indeed beyond.