

**Report of Proceedings**  
**JOUHS Colloquium 2009**  
**‘Odd Alliances in History’**

by  
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Convening a colloquium entitled ‘Odd Alliances in History’ is almost guaranteed to bring out the eccentric and provocative. In this respect, the 14 March 2009 session organized by the Journal of the Oxford University Historical Society at Balliol College, Oxford did not disappoint. With such a broad subject, however, it was seemingly inevitable that the papers would cover a wide swath of the past. Given the challenge of organizing the day in a coherent way, the convenors, Graciela Iglesias Rogers (Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford) and Heather Ellis (Balliol College, Oxford), did a commendable job of grouping the papers thematically, allowing for relatively seamless integration of topics from the campaigns of Belisarius to the Wilson government’s policy toward the Nigerian Civil War. The presenters engaged creatively with the concept of oddity and effectively drew out the irony in complex relationships between people, causes, nations, and ideas. This was no one-day trip into the amusing and quirky side of history, but a serious discussion about strange bedfellows.

Professor Laurence Brockliss (Magdalen, Oxford) set the tone for the day with a keynote address describing the unusual friendship and mutual respect that grew up in the early nineteenth century between Martin Routh, the aged and Tory President of Magdalen College, and radical politician Sir Francis Burdett. Although separated initially by the idea of reform, Routh and Burdett were united by personal connections, a love of books, and the call of the scholarly life. Their basic philosophical differences could in some way be reconciled: Routh, a great traditionalist and high churchman, shared with Burdett a somewhat enlightened Tory view that what is well governed is good. Indeed Burdett, losing some of his radicalism – or perhaps radicalism growing too radical for his tastes – became by the late 1830s a supporter of the Conservatives under Peel. Even as a radical, Burdett emphasized the freeborn rights of Englishman, a notion that shared much with Routh’s parochialism and traditionalism. In viewing their friendship in this way, Professor Brockliss prompted the conference to dig deeper in questioning how we should engage with the concept of ‘odd’, seeking rationality, as it were, out of the apparently irrational.

The first panel on ‘Religion’ demonstrated that various strands of Christianity could often perform ideological acrobatics in accommodating their views with a range of other philosophical traditions and practices. Katherine Sykes (Harris Manchester, Oxford) described the odd alliances between men and woman, clergy and lay, rich and poor in the monastic order of Sempringham in twelfth-century England. In her analysis of the monastic ‘double house’, Ms Sykes argued that the term ‘double house’ is both appropriate and essential to a discussion of a small group of mixed communities. Her account of the ‘double house’ challenged an existing historiography that emphasizes binary oppositions: male/female and clergy/lay. She particularly repositions gender in the analysis of the order of Sempringham, suggesting that this balance of unity and diversity under one roof offers a significantly different model from other religious orders.

Ostensible philosophical contradictions were at the heart of Sveinbjorn Thordarson’s (University of Iceland and University of Edinburgh) offering on “The Alliance of Christianity and Mechanistic Philosophy in Seventeenth-century England.” Epicurean philosophy, based on a mechanical working of the world governed through the movement of atoms, directed its emphasis toward the achievement of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. In late seventeenth-century England, this atomistic materialism found something of a home amongst the members of the Royal Society. Although largely adhering to Christian ideas, member such as Robert Boyle also saw that Christianity and epicurean ideas could be mutually compatible. Mr Thordarson described a process where mechanistic materialism was adopted to serve the ends of religion.

Few have attracted more attention as oddities than the Millenarians of the Southcottian movement in the early nineteenth century. Rather than some aberration of insane religious fervour, Philip Lockley (New College, Oxford) connected the Southcottians lucidly and convincingly with growing secular radicalism. The story of James Smith, one of Southcott’s followers, helps to bridge the gap between Southcottian Millenarianism and radicals. Scholars have underplayed how much Smith, deeply enmeshed in the secular radical movement, nevertheless continued to espouse religious belief. The millennium was still due to God, but Smith reasoned that he was allying with those best able to bring on the millennium. Although one was left to wonder who was using whom, Lockley usefully reminded us that religious radicals of all descriptions have garnered support and exercised influence in often elusive ways.

The second session on 'Politics, Diplomacy and War' offered examples of alliances created in response to conflict and government policy-making. Christopher Lillington-Martin (The Henley College – Oxfordshire) described the intricate machinations that surrounded Belisarius' campaign in Italy against the Ostrogoths in the 530s AD, highlighted by Belisarius' feigned acceptance of the Goths' offer to make him Emperor of the West. The General's recall made the point that alliances can be odd, even when it is not clear they are alliances. Professor Fernando Dore Costa (Instituto Superior de Ciências do Trabalho e da Empresa, Lisbon) also raised interesting questions about political and strategic choices and motivations in his paper on the post-Napoleonic rule of King Don João of Portugal from the colony of Brazil, the result of the curious relationship between the King and William Beresford, the British soldier and diplomat. For several years, the Don João court in exile's attention was largely focused on activities on the ground in South America. As men and material flowed across the Atlantic to support his aims in Brazil, Don João was content to leave an Englishman as the de facto ruler of the European mother country until 1821, an example of the unusual arrangements that can result from changes in government policy.

In perhaps the most entertaining of the day's offerings, Mathew Plowman (Grand View University in Des Moines, Iowa) detailed an extraordinary case of an arm shipment gone awry during the First World War, exploring how an unwieldy group of German spies, Irish nationalists and Indian revolutionaries, united by a common hatred of the British Empire, found themselves pitted against unusually cooperative British and American governments. Eventually moving to the US legal system, the case against the plotters was largely made by the US attorney using evidence supplied by British agents. With the makings of a spy thriller, Dr Plowman's paper illustrated that history can be better than many novels at the same time that it explored seriously how war can create some very strange alliances indeed.

Typically confused western policy toward Africa in the 1960s formed the background to Lasse Heerten's (University of Oxford/Freie Universität Berlin) paper on the opposition to the Wilson government's response to the Nigerian Civil War. Central to the debate in Britain was the question of what the war was about: Was it a problem of imperialism, or should it be viewed in humanitarian terms? Whilst Wilson supported the Nigerian federal government, various groups on the left and right perceived the conflict first and foremost as a humanitarian crisis. Prompting a degree of unity between conservative and liberal journalists and left wingers who opposed the Wilson government, the war presented

particular difficulties for the New Left, which viewed issues largely from an anti-imperialist perspective. The plight of Biafrans did much to change discourse, cross party lines, introduce a new iconography of hunger, and reformulate attitudes about policy development, although in the end it raised unhappy questions about whether most people in Britain really cared about internal strife in far away West Africa.

The final session returned to themes of imperialism and overseas involvement with three papers on 'Empire and Social Policies'. Tyler Griffith (University of Aberdeen) offered a discursive analysis of the concepts of 'fanaticism' and 'avarice' to describe the New World in the nineteenth-century. Cleverly weaving together Spanish conquest as interpreted by Anglo-American historians, notably William Robertson, Griffith particularly emphasised violence as the critical link between fanaticism and avarice. This linguistic take on the idea of odd alliances provided a provocative if problematic perspective. Although Griffith characterised violence as something strange and deviant, it is the very normative nature of violence suggested by this paper that was perhaps most striking.

Violence in brutal form underpins the institution of slavery discussed by Bronwen Everill (King's College, London). Competing ideologies and organisations found themselves in strange relations in Sierra Leone and Liberia in the first half of the nineteenth century. The key difficulty confronting anti-slavery forces was whether they could accept slavery in some instances, leading to tacit alliances between British anti-slavery advocates and wealthy native slaveholders as a way of moving gradually toward abolition. The American Colonization Society, itself an amalgam of odd alliances, ignored or evaded slave-holding amongst Liberians, whilst employing arguments about the irresponsibility of immediate abolition. As Ms Everill suggested, the slave/master relationship came in a variety of forms, some of which were accommodated even by those seeking slavery's ultimate demise.

One of the founders of the Anti-Slavery Society was Joseph Sturge, whose nephew Edward Sturge dominated the final paper by Chris Sladen (Christ Church, Oxford). Edward, a staunch Birmingham Quaker, cooperated with the Earl of Meath, the imperialist aristocrat responsible for introducing Empire Day, in support of the Wallingford Farm Training Community. Despite their differences of personality and worldview, both men shared a commitment to the sort of Christian social imperialism advocated by William Booth in his *In Darkest Africa*. With a focus on agriculture and emigration as a solution to the problem of poverty for some of England's poor, the Wallingford community represented one of those projects that find support across political and philosophical lines.

It is this combination of flexibility, opportunism and the finding of common ground that characterised many of the odd alliances at the Colloquium and emerged as themes from the papers and subsequent discussions. Speakers challenged attendees to think across historical boundaries, evaluating how concepts from one period might be altered or employed to serve different purposes in another. Many of the papers emphasized interpersonal relations, reinforcing the role of personality, and posed questions about the balance of power in relationships of these sorts. History is after all about people. At the same time, the importance of language emerged as a key topic that informs and structures reality, whether in discussing the meaning of the ‘double house’ in twelfth-century England, the employment of an idea such as violence to define and link other concepts, or in organizing the multiple meanings of odd as the subject of the colloquium. If indeed, these alliances are as odd as all that, can competing ideas actually be reconciled, or are they temporary accommodations? We see in these cases a sort of Hegelian dialectic, offering insights into how widely divergent views may not be so very different after all.

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