

PETER REEVES

1935–2015



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Like the Little Elephant in the Rudyard Kipling story, Peter Reeves had an insatiable curiosity. It led him as a teenager into history courses about Asia, unusual offerings at the University of Tasmania in the 1950s. By the time of his death, Reeves' curiosity had led him to become an outstanding scholar of modern Asia, a superb teacher, a gifted administrator, an indefatigable aspirant-linguist, an accomplished event organiser, an inspired cook and caterer, an avid book collector, a student of fish and fisheries, a grower of grapes, a maker of wine, and an incomparable reader and constructive critic of his students' and friends' works-in-progress.

Born in Sydney and brought up in Devonport in Tasmania, Reeves graduated from the University of Tasmania with first-class honours and the university prize in English in 1955. He took a diploma of education the following year. In 1956, the Master of Arts was a research degree, and Reeves went to India for ten months of research in the archives of Delhi and Uttar Pradesh in 1958. The result was a 330-page MA thesis (1961), 'Agrarian legislation and rural society in Uttar Pradesh, India. A historical study with especial reference to the

period 1921–58.' Scholarly research about modern India was just beginning in the USA and the UK, and Reeves was probably the first Australian to do archival work of this kind in India.

Reeves arrived at the Australian National University (ANU) in 1960 as a PhD scholar. Anthony Low (1927–2015) had been recruited from Africa as an imperial historian by Keith Hancock and brought to the Research School of Pacific Studies in Canberra to pursue the study of India. The story, fondly told, was that on his arrival in Canberra, Reeves was greeted by Low who announced that they must go to the railway station to collect another new graduate student, John Broomfield, arriving from New Zealand. This trio was joined later by Ravinder Kumar (1933–2001), and ANU's remarkable commitment to the study of India and South Asia was established. From the 1960s to the twenty-first century, the foursome made remarkable contributions to the scholarship of the region – Low at the ANU, Sussex and Cambridge, Broomfield at the University of Michigan, Kumar at the ANU, the University of New South Wales and then as legendary director of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in New Delhi, and Reeves at Sussex, the University of Western Australia (UWA), Curtin University and the National University of Singapore (NUS).

Reeves and his young family (he and Noelene were married in December 1956) lived in India for six-month periods in 1960–61 and 1961–62. The result was a groundbreaking PhD thesis, 'The landlords' response to political change in the United Provinces of Agra & Oudh, India, 1921–1937,' awarded in 1964. This was a time when archival research into modern Indian social and political history was being pioneered in the West by scholars like the legendary Bernard S. Cohn (1928–2003) at the University of Chicago. Had Reeves' thesis been published in the mid-1960s, it would have been widely celebrated. This was the experience of Kumar's *Western India in the Nineteenth Century: A Study in the Social History of Maharashtra*, Broomfield's *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth-Century Bengal*, and Low's edited volume, *Soundings in Modern South Asian History*, all published in 1968. Reeves published three seminal essays (one of them in *Soundings*) during this time, but *Landlords and Governments in Uttar Pradesh: A Study of Their Relations until Zamindari Abolition* appeared only in 1991. By that time, the archival

paths that scholars like Reeves had opened had been trodden by many scholars. The book did not get the attention it deserved.

Reeves' insatiable curiosity was one reason why the book was delayed. There were always a few more sources that needed to be found and digested. And was it really proper, he would muse, to publish on such topics until one had a decent knowledge of Urdu and Hindi languages? To study the languages, he enrolled at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London in 1970–71 during his study leave. In the 1980s, he did formal courses in Arabic.

The second reason for delay in publication of *Landlords and Governments* was captured by one of Reeves' old students who wrote in June 2015: 'He was really selfless in so many ways: and I am thinking of [his] putting the writing of the "Landlords" aside while he looked after his students' interests.' Reeves took on projects that others would not. A classic example occurred after Hugh Owen, a fine scholar of South Asia, died prematurely in 1987. Owen had not published the book that his copious research was building towards. Reeves, assisted by Joan Wardrop, collected Owen's essays, prepared them for publication, and *The Indian Nationalist Movement, c. 1912–22: Leadership, Organisation, and Philosophy: The Writings of Hugh Owen* was published in 1990. This was classic Reeves.

By the 1980s, Reeves had accumulated a formidable list of experiences and responsibilities. His first job was as a lecturer in History at UWA in 1963. Thereafter, he went as a visitor to the University of Michigan and to Sussex University in 1966, where Anthony Low had become the foundation dean of the School of African and Asian Studies (AFRAS). AFRAS looked like a South Asian First XI: F. G. Bailey and D. F. Pocock in Anthropology, B. D. Graham in Politics, P. K. Chaudhuri in Economics and Ranajit Guha in History, along with Low and Reeves.

During his time at Sussex, Reeves meticulously edited and introduced *Sleeman in Oudh: an abridgement of W. H. Sleeman's Journey through the Kingdom of Oude, 1849–50* (1971). He also organised a mammoth European conference on South Asia, just before returning to Australia in 1974 to take up a chair in History at UWA. Through these years, Reeves established a reputation as an outstanding teacher. His undergraduate courses sparkled with originality as he looked for ways to entice fledgling students into the excitement of inquiry and analysis.

As a PhD supervisor, Reeves was unsurpassed. 'No one read work like Peter,' one of his former students said.

He continued:

Peter had an eye for structure and coherence. If he thought something was no good, he told you – and *always* suggested ways to make it better. 'I don't think it's very good,' Peter would sometimes say, and, as the recipient's face fell, 'but if you made the final paragraph the introduction, dropped Section 3 altogether and expanded your research on X and Y and introduced that as a new Section 3, then I think you would have something quite good indeed.'

Another admirer wrote:

He gently steered me away from a truly nutty idea for the central theme of my thesis ... He replaced it with what became the core organising idea. I wish that I had made such a basic contribution to doctoral students of my own.

Reeves' generosity as a supervisor shone through. He took timid beginners to the India Office Library to introduce them, made emergency house-calls to give urgent career advice and in at least one case offered to take a salary cut to keep an able post-doctoral fellow on the payroll. His love of cooking made it seem as if his greatest happiness was to prepare a multi-dish Indian meal for a room full of friends and associates. (He became a vegetarian, but made delicious meat dishes for carnivorous friends.)

From 1974 to 1999, Reeves was a tireless worker in public life in Perth. He was a key organiser of the Indian Ocean Arts Festival in 1979 and 1984, chairman of the Library Board of Western Australia from 1986–90 and president of the UWA Academic Staff Association for five years. Internationally, he was a corresponding member of the Indian Historical Records Commission from 1981–91 and a member of the Australian National Commission for UNESCO from 1981–6.

In 1985, he moved to the Western Australian Institute of Technology (WAIT) as an associate director, and when WAIT became Curtin University, he became a Deputy Vice-Chancellor. With the late John McGuire, he founded the South Asia Research Unit, which won grants, ran conferences and published books. Fish, fisher people and fisheries became a key interest, growing out of Perth's location and research on the Indian Ocean. Reeves, McGuire and Bob Pokrant published a number of papers on fisheries in the Indian Ocean, the last of which appeared in 2014 as 'Changing Practice in the Madras Marine Fisheries: Legacies of the Fish Curing Yards', in *Historical Perspectives of Fisheries Exploitation in the Indo-Pacific*, ed. Joseph Christensen and Malcolm Tull.

After retirement from Curtin University, Reeves was invited to the NUS in 1999 to set up a South Asian Studies Programme. His talents as a teacher, administrator and exemplar were never more evident. He was asked to take on an additional task and became foundation director of the Centre for Language Studies where he created a remarkable sense of pride and purpose. While at NUS, he was executive editor and driving force of *The Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora* (2006), a project which also produced an edited volume, *The South Asian Diaspora: Transnational Networks and Changing Identities* in 2009.

After he and Noelene returned to Australia and a winery and cafe on the outskirts of Perth, Reeves cooked, made wine, helped to run the cafe and added to his fine library. Even when Parkinson's disease began to wear him down, he was able with Noelene's help to be a constructive consulting editor for *The Encyclopedia of the Sri Lankan Diaspora*, published in 2013. It was a mark of the affection and respect in which he was held that his name alone appears as the editor of that volume, though generous and talented hands in Singapore had done much of the work. The generosity was fitting. Reeves was insatiably curious, unfailingly constructive – and always generous.

ROBIN JEFFREY FAHA