

Features

SOAS

Interview with an Alum: George Lane

The SOAS alumni column seeks to track down what the alumni are doing after they graduated from SOAS and tries to elicit crucial advice on how to survive in the “real world”. This issue we interview Dr George Lane, a SOAS graduate at every level, who continues to work at SOAS, teaching academic English and lecturing in the history department, as well as conducting research.

Adam Rodgers Johns, Social Anthropology and African Studies

What did you do before you started studying at SOAS?

I went to Afghanistan after I finished my A levels, and I never came back, essentially. I travelled around Afghanistan, Pakistan, Thailand, Lebanon and Iran for 20 odd years and I supported myself by teaching English. I qualified as an English language teacher whilst working for the British council in Lebanon. It wasn't that I'd intended to be away for so long, things just happened – got a job teaching English in Afghanistan, and the next thing I knew I'd signed a contract for two years. Then in Iran I got involved with the revolution that was going on there at the time.

So how did you begin studying at SOAS?

I heard about SOAS while I was travelling around the Middle East and it had that air about it, so I decided that if I was going to go to university, I wanted to go to SOAS. I began a BA in History and Persian, and I also got a job in the English unit teaching English to foreign students. It was a strange situation, because there were some students who I was in class with during the day, and then I was teaching them English in the evening.

I wrote an essay during my BA which was transformed into my dissertation. The same essay then

became an MA dissertation of 10,000 words, and that became a PhD dissertation of 100,000 words, all on the same subject! This also became the subject of my first book, “Early Mongol Rule in 13th century Iran”. I have worked at SOAS ever since, teaching the summer courses that foreign students take in academic English. I am also a senior teaching fellow in the history of the Middle East and Central Asia.

Now this is your sabbatical year, what are your plans?

What I'm doing is, I'm catching up. I've got various projects on the run, so I've two trips to China planned, one trip to Jerusalem, one to Turkey, and possibly one to Central Asia. What I've been working on is to show the closeness between medieval China and medieval Iran. I've discovered about 20 tombstones in Hangzhou in China and they're all written in Persian, dating from about the 14th century. They were dug up in the 1920s, and have been stored in a mosque since then.

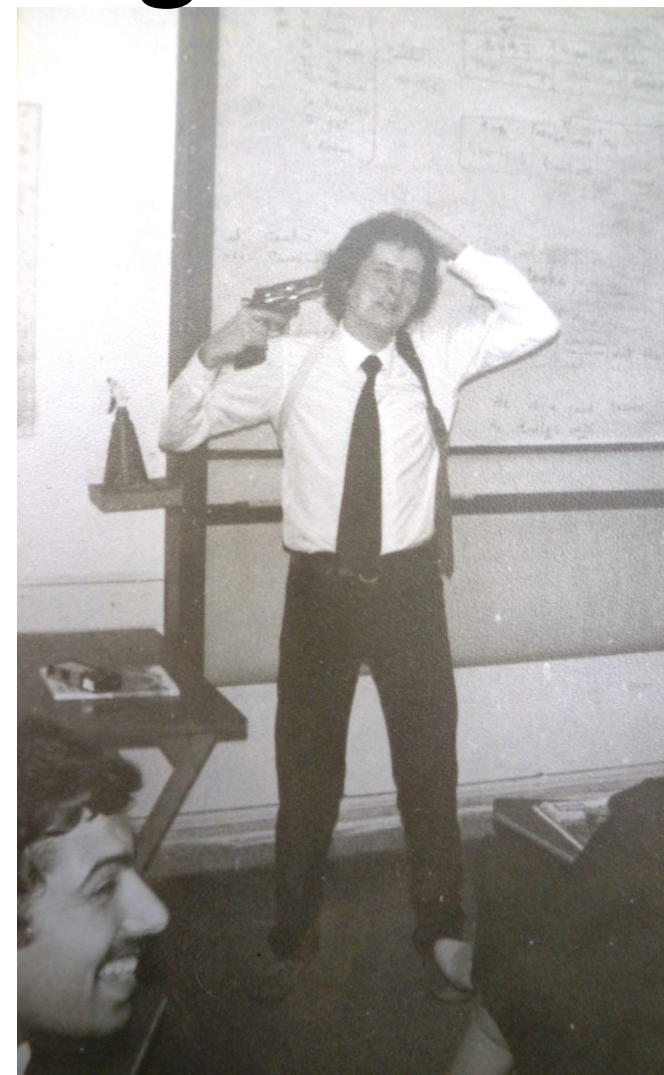
Originally the Imam of the mosque wouldn't allow me to see them, but I persisted and persisted and eventually I was able to get in, but he still wouldn't allow me to photograph them. So I had a cunning plan, and I went back during Friday prayers and took a photo of the Imam in his office. I then got the photos printed on A3, laminated

and glossed them,

and gave them to him as a gift. He was so chuffed, that he let me in, and I was the first person to properly take a photo of these tombstones. I was then given the job, by the communist party of Hangzhou of all people, to write up a book with the translation of these tombstones, and that's the work I'm going to finish off this year.

How has SOAS influenced your work?

I didn't know I was interested in history until I started my BA, and I'd never thought about the Mongols before – it was one of my



Dr Lane working with the British Council and teaching English in Beirut.

Image: Dr. Lane

teachers, David Morgan, who inspired me. For the last few years I've been working to dispel some of the bad press that the Mongols get – Hulagu Khan, the so-called butcher of Baghdad, that's just rubbish! In fact it was the opposite, he civilised the place. And at SOAS you're given a bit of credibility. It's quite dramatic, because a lot of people don't like what I'm saying, and as far as they're concerned he's the devil incarnate. But the fact you're from SOAS lends weight to anything you say.

SOAS is great because it's internationally famous – the contacts I've made are amazing, people know

you. Any book that comes out, I write to the publisher and ask to do a review, and when I say I'm from SOAS they send me a free copy. It's very useful being at SOAS because it opens doors, it's not quite Oxford and Cambridge but it's getting there. Also the library's one of the best in the world!

Finally, how do you hope your research will affect your teaching when you return?

The point about research is that the more you look into things, the more you realise you don't yet know. In the class, you transmit your passion. You're interested and the students feel that. ♦



Dr Lane working with the British Council and teaching English in Beirut.

Image: Dr. Lane