

Philip D. Curtin

President

American Historical Association

1983



Philip D. Curtin, president of the American Historical Association, is the Herbert Baxter Adams Professor of History at Johns Hopkins University. Born in Philadelphia in 1922, Professor Curtin spent the majority of his younger years in West Virginia, returning to Pennsylvania to finish secondary school, and to enter Swarthmore College in 1941. Interrupting his undergraduate work for three years' service in the United States Merchant Marines, Professor Curtin completed the BA, Phi Beta Kappa, in 1948. Upon receipt of this degree he undertook graduate studies at Harvard University, gaining the MA and the PhD in 1949 and 1953 respectively. Professor Curtin's dissertation "Revolution and Decline in Jamaica, 1830-1865" marked the beginning of an outstanding scholarly career addressing the social and economic influences shaping African and Caribbean history.

Dr. Curtin's teaching experience is extensive. Beginning in 1950 with a teaching fellowship at Harvard University, he transferred in 1953 to Swarthmore College, rising from instructor to assistant professor of history before moving on to a nineteen-year engagement at the University of Wisconsin, Madison in 1956. While teaching at Wisconsin he founded and intermittently chaired both the Comparative World History and African Study programs, as well as the Department of African Languages and Literature (the first program of its kind in the United States); in 1970 he was appointed the Melville J. Herskovits Professor of History. In 1975, Dr. Curtin returned East to teach at Johns Hopkins University where he chaired the Program of Atlantic Studies in History and Culture from 1976-79, and in 1982 was appointed the Herbert Baxter Adams Professor of History, a position he currently holds.

Professor Curtin's expertise in teaching and academic administration is complemented by a strong interest in foreign study. Travel and research in countries of his speciality have consistently highlighted his career, often resulting in published works. In 1951, for example, an independently financed trip to Jamaica allowed for research resulting in his first major publication, Two Jamaicas (1955). Participation in a Ford Foundation Africa Area Training Fellowship Program (1958-59) provided an introduction to West Africa and led to his writing The Image of Africa (1964), winner of the American Historical Association's Schuyler Prize, awarded every five years for the best work on British history by an American scholar. In 1962, acceptance of a United States-South Africa Leader Exchange Program Fellowship sent Professor Curtin on a tour of South African Universities, lecturing on the history of tropical Africa; while a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1961, combined with a senior fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1968, permitted travel and research in Senegal and Gambia and resulted in the two-volume work Economic Change in Precolonial Africa: Senegambia in the Era of the Slave Trade (1975). Most recently, receipt of a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1980 abetted research and travel for a forthcoming book concerning the world history of cross-cultural trade up to the nineteenth century (to be published in 1984).

The association's current president is both a well respected and prolific writer. Over and above authoring four books, two pamphlets, and forty-plus articles on Africa and the Caribbean, he has found time to coauthor three books, has been contributing editor of two texts and editor of another, has written book reviews for twenty

publications, and has served on the editorial boards of nine scholarly journals, including the American Historical Review. Currently Dr. Curtin is working on his eighth book, "Cross-Cultural Trade in World History" and is on the editorial board of Journal of African Studies, African Economic History, Social Science History, History in Africa, and Plantation Society.

Throughout his career Professor Curtin has been an active member of several scholarly associations and councils. Among the more prominent positions he has held are: member, Africa Selection Committee of the Foreign Area Fellowships Program, 1961-62; president, the African Studies Association, 1970-71; member, Executive Committee, 1970-71, and Problems and Policies Committee, 1971-74, the Social Science Research Council; chair, the SSRC-ACLS Joint Committee on African Studies, 1971-73; vice-president representing the United States, the International Congress of Africanists, 1969-73; member, International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa, UNESCO, 1975-; and member, Council of Scholars, Library of Congress, 1980-83. Professor Curtin was a member of the Council of the American Historical Association, 1967-71, before he was elected president-elect in 1982 and became president in 1983.

In recognition of his dedication to historical scholarship Professor Curtin has received two distinctive awards. In 1975 he was elected to the National Academy of Arts and Sciences, and in 1983 he was one of twenty Americans to receive the highly regarded MacArthur Prize, a fellowship granted to individuals displaying exceptional talent and creativity in their field of expertise.

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