On Discovering the Expansion of Europe

Interview with George D. Winius

The now banished editors of *Itinerario* briefly reappear in their familiar roles, this time talking to one another. Leonard Blussé went to see George Winius at his home along the tree-shaded Witte Singel in Leiden, to note down George’s afterthoughts on his career as an expansionist. However, the discussion soon developed into a prospect rather than a retrospect.

*Blussé:* George, we are approaching the year 1992, the year in which the five hundredth anniversary of Columbus’ crossing to the ‘new continent’ will be celebrated. Now in connection with the theme of discovery it is rather ironical that the subject of the history of European Expansion should be discovered over and over again by university teachers on an individual basis. But somehow it turns out to be very difficult to set up a framework in which the study of overseas expansion will get the institutional position it deserves. How come?

*Winius:* My feeling about that is that the core curriculum of all the Western European universities and all the North American universities, and perhaps even beyond, were set sometime between 1890 and 1914, and that the faculty positions in foreign history were distributed in accordance with the national realities of that time, of the then great European powers, England, France, Germany and Russia. Those faculty positions have been continued ever since. A professor, say in French Revolutionary history, becomes a centre of activities in his own field. He builds up the university library in it and attracts students. It becomes an ongoing thing; he is succeeded by somebody else in the same field and by his presence, he excludes other teaching. The result is a kind of curricular inertia brought on by self-perpetuating specialties.

My experience in the U.S. has been that a new university teacher is basically hired to teach one of the structural subjects that I mentioned. Then, the chairman of the department asks: ‘What other course would you like to teach?’ So then he inserts his own interests, and European Expansion...
is of course very close in subject matter to European History because it is European. But to teach the Expansion of Europe in this way makes no inroad on the curriculum. The department accepts the course without comment; if a member teaches it, it is for his own fun. When he retires, such ‘hobby courses’ die. His actual job description was probably as an English or Latin American historian, and he is probably replaced by a specialist in the same national or area fields, who however does not teach the same ‘hobby’ subjects. It is a dead end.

**Blusse:** Indeed the teaching of History of European Expansion in Europe was until the 1950s seen as a brand of colonial history. These few chairs were institutionally bound to the national endeavours overseas. They, of course, were the first chairs to disappear as the decolonisation process took shape. On the other hand, if one looks at the U.S., one witnesses a great interest for regional or ethnic minority studies, but then the research is focussed on the non-Western native culture and peoples, and does not deal with the problems with which European Expansion is concerned: the interaction between the different cultures.

**Winius:** Yes, I had a recent experience in the U.S., suggesting an Expansion course be given in a new Asian studies programme at the college where I did my undergraduate work, Bowdoin College in Maine. I received a very cold and uninterested response. On reflection I realize that this is because the Sinologists and Japanologists wanted to study not Western culture but Oriental culture in its ‘purity’ and they would rather forget the whole messed-up, muddy episode of European Expansion, introducing as they see it, ‘cultural pollution’.

**Blusse:** We have the same among the orientalists in Europe. Once you have mastered the language and gained some understanding of a non-Western culture, it is not that easy to combine these, and synthesize them with Western materials. You need more elasticity.

**Winius:** Yes, that is true, but it does not trouble the Asians a bit. They use Western sources happily and the continuation of my story is that Chandra de Silva of Peradenya University in Ceylon came to Bowdoin as guest professor and the first thing he did was to start a course in European Expansion!

**Blusse:** The people teaching European Expansion in a Western university, often tend to be Asian scholars engaged in non-European history who move to Europe or the U.S. to teach Indian or Chinese history, and end up teaching Expansion studies with it.

**Winius:** Certainly, starting out with their national history, they must go to European archives for it because history is a European concept, and European sources are often the best for studying their past. Once into the colonial past, they realize that they are treating something that is much larger than the history of their own country. It even applies to the Europeans themselves. The Dutch for instance, when they went both east and west, they encountered the Portuguese and the Spanish, who had been overseas
before them. Any colonial historian who gets the Expansion concept, begins to broaden his views and engage himself in the whole study of how Europeans penetrated non-European territories, and then he begins to ask what it all means. The whole point of the European Expansion study is that it provides a European view and not simply a national view of what has been going on. European Expansion gave direction and shape to the whole modern world.

Blussé: Having observed that it is according to the whims of a teacher or a great professor that the subject is taught, one wonders what the ideal setup should look like in order to provide for the right facilities in a middle-size Western university.

Winius: I don’t know about ideal conditions, but I can see something happening in more universities probably within a few years – mostly through the happenstance presence of people with like interests. In a good and energetic department, such as at the University of Minnesota – the expansion can ‘take off’ and become its own course of study. My own interview with Jack Parker shows this; as soon as it gains the place it should have in the curriculum, students understand its importance and flock to study it. They are hardly the problem!

The whole key is the enthusiasm of the faculty plus some kind of minimal outside funding to help with travels, exchanges and congresses and the like. I think Leiden is the model; it presents all the phases that a university must go through. In the first place, Henk Wesseling inaugurated the study through his own vision. For a number of years, perhaps a dozen, he encountered a great deal of opposition, but he held his ground, scraped up some moneys here and there and in the meantime interested the junior faculty members. Expansion studies picked up momentum, and eventually carried the day.

Blussé: One of the reasons why he was so successful is because at the same time he continued his own work on modern France.

Winius: Yes, even here the time has not yet come to hang your name outside your door as specialist of European Expansion and there are still no permanent chairs, even in Leiden. To my knowledge there are no faculty members any more who teach European Expansion exclusively. Perhaps that is a good thing, having a background in a national history or another discipline gives you a better perspective. But that doesn’t mean it isn’t a complete field in itself!

Blussé: Somehow the subject gets drowned in European history, but it is also excluded by the oriental departments, right? What institutional set-up would then be strong enough?

Winius: Not all orientalists are hostile – many use European sources for their own work and appreciate the symbiotic relationship. For any European Expansion graduate studies you need a large university with orientalists and area studies programmes. Then there is always this mysterious factor, the ‘go’ or ‘no go’ proposition, I mean the teaching of European Expansion
on a meaningful scale also depends on like-minded colleagues who create a matrix of coordinated activity and reflect it in the university catalogue. Basically it starts out with a movement among faculty members. The first thing one has to do is to create awareness, and hope others respond.

Blussé: If we agree that it does not make much sense to have a chair in every university, simply because one needs an enormous library for it...

Winius: Not necessarily a chair – but certainly, from an introductory, undergraduate standpoint most universities already have a fair library because they collected the normal colonial history material, works of the Hakluyt Society and the other travel literature on discovery. Lots of good books were published on these topics – and they provide a backbone.

Blussé: What I am afraid of is that in the years to come, several hundreds of books will be produced as a result of several hundreds of congresses due to the impending discovery craze but that after it the whole thing will sag like a pudding.

Winius: That is the danger. The newsmedia tend to focus on a topic and saturate everybody’s consciousness within it, and so then when the next commemoration comes, it drives out the earlier issue. And so people shift from one subject to another.

Blussé: There should be an agenda, a few grand themes in Expansion History, which can direct our studies. What would be the grand theme of Expansion History? Not discovery per se, is it?

Winius: No, the discoveries were only an insertion point for a whole chain of events which transformed the world. There is a tendency to stop with the explorations and see them as something in themselves. The whole point of European Expansion is that it continues as a juggernaut rolling down native cultures in America. In Asia, where this did not happen, it transformed areas into great economic and cultural networks.

Blussé: Do I hear Braudel and Wallerstein?

Winius: Of course every historian I have read has had a large part of the truth but never all of it. Wallerstein is absolutely correct except for the point that he makes about... ‘overwhelming’ and he leaves a good bit of the rest of the picture out completely.

Blussé: Let us now turn to Europe. The European Science Foundation has invited the Leiden Centre to develop a History of European Expansion Network and one of the promising features of this has been that the Portuguese and Spaniards who so far worked almost entirely on their own now have started to cooperate with Dutch, French, English and Scandinavian scholars.

Winius: Europe to Spaniards and Portuguese alike is a new discovery. That is, the idea of being a ‘European’. To the Portuguese this opens a prospect to much larger consciousness and at the same time the opportunity to make European countries aware of Portugal. They have always been very eager to have their achievement recognized, so I think that they will embrace this idea of Expansion wholeheartedly. I am busy at this point trying to
create the infrastructure within Portugal to connect it into the larger picture.

Blusse: What we would need would be host institutions both in Lisbon and in Seville, where one could send one's students, and where they could be taught how to use the archives over there.

Winius: Yes, Portugal should now create the kind of framework for its institutions which would enable them to receive foreign scholars, who can be inserted in Portuguese research activities. And to encourage young Portuguese to study abroad and learn the basis of Dutch, English and French expansion so that they can fit their own history into it.

Blusse: Look how the study of Portuguese expansion has changed. Earlier generations of historians were made up by retired navy officers who had been stationed overseas – or linguists or Catholic priests, but as I see it, Luís Felipe Thomaz, the orientalist, is teaching a new generation of historians, showing them how Portuguese materials can be used to study Asian history. He is gradually creating a school of his own, not basically involved in discovery, roteiros, or Governors-General but trying to find out what the place of the Portuguese in Asia actually was: the Van Leur idea.

Winius: Sure, he is one of the most brilliant of the Portuguese historians. He has three or four very able protégés who now get their training in Macao with Arthur Teodoro de Matos. Matos has gone out on loan to the University of East Asia in Macao and has taken these students into the wider world. These boys were initially depressed when they found out that Macao wasn’t really ‘Portuguese’, but then within a few months they had adapted to the new environment and doing research on the wider context. I am eager for my Portuguese friends to become part of this European Science Foundation Network, and so many of the main principles of how a centre operates have already been established in Leiden. This would be just what they need. One thing that makes me a bit sad is that the Portuguese haven’t understood the nature of university structures in many of the countries where they would like to have chairs. And if they finance chairs which are not in the context of a European Expansion group, these chairs tend to be peripheralized, with students whose fathers were posted to Lisbon or who had Brazilian mothers. They never penetrate the general consciousness.

I am not that familiar with Spain, but a curious difference in their own study of overseas history is that Spain was also a great European land power. For the last forty years all the best Spanish minds have been applied to the history of Spain in Europe; only a few, like Guillermo Céspedes del Castillo, have really devoted their efforts to Spain overseas.

Blusse: Isn’t it because the Spaniards lost their empire a hundred years earlier than the others?

Winius: Certainly that, but another part of it is that almost all Portuguese great endeavours took place outside Europe, while Spaniards who went to the Americas tended to be forgotten at home.
Blussé: We have talked about the European Network. What does the U.S. do about Expansion studies nowadays? As you know when Henk Wesseling and Dharma Kumar met at Princeton they had the brilliant idea to set up the Cambridge-Delhi-Leiden-Yogyakarta project, that provided us with four fantastic conferences in the past. Would our next agenda be in 1992 an even more ambitious programme – to set up a conference where the question would be squarely posed: where should Expansion studies go after 1992?

Winius: This is obviously the time to use the impetus of 1992 and somehow create a structural framework which could lead us to the expansion of European Expansion to American universities. 'Expansionists of the world unite!' It will enable us to organize more congresses and twist people's arms to get positions created in universities. For unless our momentum is raised to a higher degree than so far, the inertia of the pre-1914 structure will halt us.

Blussé: Such centres could also enable Asian students to prepare doctoral theses on subjects like the introduction of Western law systems in Sri Lanka or Indonesia instead of writing a thesis about a purely Western historical subject.

Winius: I find also that the presence of non-Western scholars in the Western midst tends to have a great effect on broadening the vision of the Europeans with whom they come into contact. The studies they write and the problems and viewpoints they present do more to denationalize the one-sided national historian than anything else I know.

Blussé: It of course also works the other way around. They will not that easily create a nationalistic history of their own.

Winius: Indeed – in fact the problem of all national history is that it is unconnected to anyone else’s history and looks so different. Narcissistic. One has only to go through a library and look at books forty or fifty or a hundred years ago and notice how naive and one-sided they are. They only support the egocentric national image.

Blussé: George, we started *Itinerario* together thirteen years ago. This is not the place to discuss whether we have reached our objectives. The great pleasure of working with you – let us forget about my exasperation about your occasional long-windedness – were, what you call, the prejudices you cherish about history writing as such. You started out as a full-time journalist at Time-Life. Everybody who reads your books, recognizes them instantly due to their easy-going style. Tell us about your observations.

Winius: I had a rather unusual opportunity when I started working for Time Incorporated in 1952 to study with the best writers. Time-Life people were not newspaper people, but mostly frustrated novelists. They prized style with clarity and competed in supple prose writing. But only a few of them have produced memorable works of their own outside journalism. I did learn from them to put one sentence after another. My guru was Edward Kern, who had as his last job editor of *Life* magazine just at the time it was
in limbo. As a very good example of my discussions with this practical theoretician: I produced a little piece for my students which has achieved considerable success based on the simple idea of 'tracking', i.e. that writing is like a train. Each sentence must follow the last sentence as if it were on a track and must connect up with it. And then there is the advice: one must write a flowing and continuous and self-explanatory piece. Now if history isn’t read by people, it has no function. I think that a lot of historians forget about this and follow the path of the social scientists who tend to think that if they are to appear truly ‘scientific’ they have to be formidable and extremely technical in their jargon. Very many historians have stepped into the Annales trap. My Ph.D. guide at Columbia, Garrett Mattingly, was certainly one of the masters of historical prose. He swam against the historical current of mechanical writing, and his Armada ran through seventeen printings. Its scholarship was impeccable.

Blusse: You spoke of your guru’s. Have you been emulating them?

Winius: Mattingly, one can be inspired by him, one cannot emulate him. On the other hand, Kern’s no nonsense approach isn’t part of a formula but is an eminently applicable approach. The idea of ‘tracking’ is probably the most important. Keep on the track. Always tell whom you are talking about and why, never confuse the reader, tell him, ‘we have just seen that’ and warn him when you are about to change direction. Like roadsigns along the way to guide. One must check one’s writing over and over again for consequence and consistency. The writing process, Kern said, is the essence of creative thinking, not merely the recording of thoughts already worked out. You can’t write from note or index card sequences. I never worked under Kern. We became friends through mutual friends at the company. In 1967 or ’68 we spent a week together at the University of Florida and he set up shop in my office and solicited pieces from my students and even from faculty members. They were discomfited when he pulled them all apart – dissected them for their consequent thought – and then showed them how, logically, the pieces should be written. And that when they all thought he was simply going to apply a little cosmetic polish to their piece – a neat phrase or two. Mostly their pieces were written by turning index cards. They didn’t ‘track’ – the logic wasn’t apparent, except of course to the writer.

The trouble with a lot of historians like those of the Annales school is that they would rather do research than to write about it. They tend to think that by using the decimal system of ‘1.1’ and ‘2.3’ they can simply heap facts into these packages, which they think gives an easy framework, which it really does not, because the reader often cannot understand how they transit from one idea to the other. They may create factual warehouses to be used by other historians, but no one reads them for enjoyment of Clio’s riches! I think history should tell a story. Most people don’t realize that good writing plays a primary role in historiography. The work really begins when you start writing. You have to develop it, to define, to sharpen
the significance, bring out the main ideas in the course of writing so that they strike the reader in the very beginning and then get developed.

Blusse: Now what about your own engagement? Your paternal grandfather moved from Groningen in the 1880s to the U.S., so you are of Dutch ancestry. How did you get in touch with Portugal?

Winius: Well, in a course at Columbia University I started taking evening courses just for fun in 1956 and thought I wanted to be a medievalist. If you wanted to enter the M.A.-programme there, you could not take just one night course, there had to be two – otherwise you would not get any credit toward a degree. The chairman said: ‘You have to take something more. Take Prof. Mattingly’s European Expansion course!’ From his words I didn’t quite see the meaning. I thought Europe had swollen up or something! The term, though, was already used back in the 1920s. Mattingly inherited the course from a previous teacher named Wilbur Cortez Abbott and Abbott inherited it from William Robert Shepherd who invented the whole modern concept of European Expansion. He was one of those seminal characters who did not write much himself but laid the foundations for others to build upon. He wrote a series of articles in the Political Science Quarterly, the first appearing in 1919 which set forth the idea of the inward and outward movements and the whole concept of European Expansion. He taught the course until his death in 1934 and then Abbott, and then Mattingly and then Graham Irwin, who has recently retired. I am not even sure it is being taught at Columbia at the moment! Columbia’s chairman at the moment is a ‘world historian’, an orientalist, who favours a ‘non-European emphasis’, whatever that amounts to.

Blusse: You were born in Saint Louis in the Mid-West and you ended up in a college in the Northeast?

Winius: Well, that was a kind of custom Saint Louis people had in that time, believing that it broadened youth to get out of their corner of the country and go somewhere else. New York and Boston seemed quite far away. A variation of the grand tour of the Europeans of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I left Saint Louis for always in the 1940s, when I went off to school. I never really returned and every move I made took me farther from home.

Anyway, I heard of Portugal in Mattingly’s course. The history of Portugal is romantic, it is a medieval romance. I am a romantic, so I fell in love with Portugal, an affair that has never ended. I occasionally went to listen to Bailey Diffie at New York University, but I really met him at the Luso-Brasilian Colloquium in 1966 and that is how we got to know each other. And later when I was at the University of Florida, he had a house in Miami, and another house in New Jersey, and still another house in California. And his wife had one in Niteroi, Brazil! Anyway he would travel back and forth through Gainesville on his way somewhere else and that is how we came to collaborate. A wonderful character, 100% Texan and 100% scholar.

Blusse: So you started Portuguese at Columbia?
Winus: I never really studied it. I had taken Spanish at secondary school and I converted this Spanish into Portuguese, but I never got the feel of the language that one would get if it is studied early. After that I did my M.A. thesis and my doctoral dissertation at Columbia on Portuguese topics. I should say that the student of Portuguese expansion tends to end up for his dissertation topic in the seventeenth century simply because there is so much more documentation. For this reason many of us expansionists start with the discoveries, but wind up in Brazil or India. It was only when the Spanish took over Portugal at the end of the sixteenth century that they inaugurated the idea of keeping archives systematically.

Blusse: If I look at the books you have written, it would seem to me that the story is gradually changing.

Winus: It had better.

Blusse: It started out with the Fatal History of Portuguese Ceylon, which is basically on how the Portuguese lost Ceylon, then we got the admirable survey written by Diffie and you and in the third book, a theme emerges. We are introduced into the shady world of the shadow empire by an individual who wrote an exposé about the Indies. His tale gives the reader an insight how things really worked. As I understand it, since then you have withdrawn more and more from the formal imperial history viewpoint and penetrated deeper and deeper in that shadow empire.

Winus: My most recent book, The Merchant Warrior co-authored with Mark Vink is a bit of a digression from my personal work. Father John Correia-Afonso of the Heras Institute at Bombay invited me to write something about the Dutch for the Heras Lectures. I just had given a seminar on the topic, Europeans in India and the Dutch in particular. So I could handle that as a theme. Then one of my students, Mark Vink, who is now in Minneapolis, and I started to discuss the Dutch aspects and realized that nothing had been done on the Dutch as a whole in India. Their presence had only been examined in separate regions. I think it is an important book because it is synthetic. But then, I prefer the ‘shadow empire’ theme. It describes the activities of the Portuguese which have been missed by historians who had Goa and Lisbon as their starting point. It is the story of individuals who more or less ‘leaked’ out of the official empire and set up free-lance settlements and trading patterns. They had adventures which carried the banner of European civilisation into the most unlikely corners of Asia. Their history is even more exciting than the official history. It follows simply out of the concept of European Expansion rather than of colonial history. More than Goa itself, it was the cutting edge or the vanguard of the West in Asia.

Blusse: One wonders whether they are vanguard of the West or rather the henchmen of certain rulers, as chief collectors of taxes, or advisers.

Winus: Sometimes they were all at the same time! One of the things that makes the shadow empire so difficult to write about is that the sources are so scattered. You have to read between the lines. The Portuguese traders
immediately attracted the clergy, because the church used the small settle-
ments as stepping stones into the native communities, while at the same
time they said masses for the traders. Mostly, it is the missionaries who did
the recording. The traders and the henchmen were too busy – hardly
literary types. The fathers only mentioned them in passing. Through refe-
rences in Jesuit and Augustinian accounts and indirect references in official
documents you have to piece the history together. Once in a great while
there is a manuscript like Jacques de Coutre’s Vida which gives many insights
in one source. Well, that is the point Michael Adas makes in his book.6
The European view on non-European civilisations, on Asian society was
still determined by the Christian outlook or ideology and it was only by
the end of the eighteenth century that the yardstick that was being used
no longer was the Christian idea but really the scientific archeological view-
point.

Blusse: Some writers have asserted that it was partly a technological supe-
riority that allowed the Europeans to expand.

Winius: Overall, the technology was not that different, or was even com-
parable if not similar, and oddly enough, if one considers the Turkish
mercenaries and others who entered Asia at various times: it was they who
spread the cannons! Even so, it is not the hardware of the archeology itself
but the organisation that backs them up, for instance the military organisa-
tion is a prime example. Cannon were integrated into a command structure
and served to extend an organisation beyond its previous limits. The guns
themselves may not have been beyond the technological reach of the Asian,
but subtler was the way the Europeans incorporated cannon in their own
societies, that taught the Asians to do it.

Blusse: Well, isn’t it fascinating that the shogunate even forbade Japanese
to build seagoing ships after the maritime prohibitions were issued, and
that the Ch‘ing government in China forbade the construction of ships
with Western hulls because they would be hard to keep up with for the
rest of the Chinese navy! So a natural development is hindered by institutio-
nal considerations. If we agree to focus on the implications of European
Expansion, and if we agree that we don’t want to spend much more time
on the study of discovery, where does the research go from now onwards?
Shouldn’t we, instead of seeing slow processes of gradual Westernisation,
acknowledge that there actually were quite a lot of non-European nations
who by the use of Western technology may actually have been able to
defend themselves against Western encroachment! That is really the point
that somebody like Naipaul makes.

Winius: Humans are paradoxical creatures and one of the things that
never appeals to academics is the quicksilver of the human personality.
Specialists always want to see things in a consistent way and provide explana-
tions for committancy, but nothing is more typical of the human being
than that he does paradoxical things. My feeling is that it does not matter
where you approach something: if your mind is flexible and you are willing
to perceive and follow implications, you will end up in the right place anyway. The transfer of technology is all very well and good providing one does not confine it merely to artifacts and the transfer of artifacts. How were they integrated, or as in the case of the hulls, why were they not integrated? The point is that the ideas themselves are exiting and once people have been introduced to them the subject will carry itself because good minds will engage themselves in this virgin subject. And one of the things that has made for stasis in history is that so many minds have engaged themselves in too limited sets of questions and answers and all they are doing is refining the obvious. Look at the French Revolution or the American Civil War! What European Expansion offers is a wonderful opportunity to develop your swimming style by swimming in the deep.

Our job as pioneers is to bring the elements to a critical point so that they will interact. I like the challenge of starting as it were a chain reaction. In the United States there is a group around a man called Eric Klingelhofer of Mercer State University in Georgia who call themselves 'Proto-Colonial Historians', then the university of Minnesota thanks to the James Ford Bell collection totally embraced the concept of Expansion and they have become the American centre for the study of European Expansion in practice, but they haven’t been connected yet to other groups, nor do they embody their study in any name evocative of the expansion.

Blussé: You took early retirement at Leiden. What interests me is that since you formally stopped working that you have been busily moving around in India, Portugal, the United States. You are now translating the De Coutre manuscript on the basis of Benjamin Teensma’s recent critical text edition.7

Winius: My retirement was to free me to do other things, and one of the things is most particularly to collaborate in the expansion of the Expansion, especially with the Portuguese, by getting them to join the network.

Blussé: The internationalisation of Portugal.

Winius: Well, if you want to put it like that, that is the work to be done, and eventually when a worldwide network is created, then people will move in both directions along it. The Portuguese will finally achieve the recognition they deserve. We have to replicate the Leiden centre as many times as possible in national countries to draw the whole study together.

Blussé: It is no longer very clear whether Winius is withdrawing into the shadow empire, is now advocating the Leiden centre activities or whether he is branching out. . .

Winius: I'm not sure myself. But I do think another logical step is to prompt the Americans to create an institutional framework which can be connected to ours. I’m not sure whether this should be embodied in a Centre for the History of European Expansion and the Reactions to it – like ours in Leiden – or whether a congress organisation and annual meetings – successful in other fields – would best perform the job. But I expect we had better get busy with it before the wind is out of the Columbian sails.
We’ve now had the bicentennial of the American Revolution, the bicentennial of the French Revolution – and let’s hope the academicians don’t follow the public lead and say about the Expansion, ‘didn’t we already do that in ’92?’

Notes

1 See *Itinerario* 14, 2 (1990) 23-34.