Autobiography of an Archive: A Scholar's Passage to India. Nicholas Dirks. Cultures of History. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. Pp. viii, 390.
Reviewed by Darry Dinnell, *McGill University*

Nicholas Dirks has produced a number of seminal works in the field of South Asian Studies, most notably *The Hollow Crown* (1987) and *Castes of Mind* (2001). Blending ethnography and archival history, these investigations treated South Asian polity, caste, and British colonial influence upon each, implicating colonial systems of knowledge in the construction of kingship and caste. With *Autobiography of an Archive*: *A scholar's passage to India,* Dirks draws back upon these and other writings in an arrangement of essays spanning his career, many of them semi-autobiographical.

The contents of this volume are eclectic, including prefaces, addresses, and even paragraphs from works in progress, in addition to previously unpublished and published chapters and papers. Some of the selections are quite familiar. The third chapter, for example, is the preface to the second edition of *the Hollow Crown*, while the fourth and sixth chapters, "Castes of Mind" and "The Policing of Tradition" respectively, represent early versions of portions of *Castes of Mind*. These chapters provide digested forms of those books' larger arguments and may be helpful for those just familiarizing themselves with Dirks' corpus.

The title of the first section, "Autobiography," belies its subject matter at least in part, for while the essays presented therein are seasoned with first-person narratives in which Dirks describes his flustered first visits to colonial archives, they collectively historicize the idea of the archive itself, especially as it calls attention to the relationship between documentation and imperial power (p. 47). Archives can destroy the past as easily as they create it, Dirks explains, and it was this realization that inculcated his "ethnographic imperative"—a commitment to a rich anthropological frame of reference that seeks to address the gaps in colonial knowledge (p. 49). Strategies for the implementation of such an approach are taken up in the second chapter, "Autobiography of an Archive," which recounts Dirks' early forays into reading "native" or "local" texts as history while researching south Indian kingship for *The Hollow Crown* (p. 50). Here Dirks provides a first-hand account of undertaking what his thesis supervisor Bernard Cohn would have called ethnohistory, a methodology that seeks to reconstruct indigenous discourses with an unwavering sensitivity to temporal and cultural context. In doing so, Dirks affords himself an opportunity to express an abiding appreciation for British officer Colin Mackenzie— whose vast archival collection he utilized for several of his studies—and distinguish him as a proto-ethnohistorian, of sorts.

The ethnohistorical approach informs the next section, entitled "History and Anthropology." Most notable here is chapter five, "Ritual and Resistance," in

which Dirks examines everyday manifestations of subversion among ethnographic communities and uses these to interrogate the persistent anthropological presupposition of order (pp. 109–10). This assumption, Dirks submits, has allowed for an overemphasis upon and over-determination of what ritual actually does. “By historicizing the study of ritual[s],” he writes, we see that “they often occasion more conflict than consensus” (p. 116). Drawing from a south Indian festival to the god Aiyanar and its attendant spirit possessions, Dirks argues that ritual dramas are as much *lived* in their on-the-ground context as they are *acted* (as per Victor Turner), and given their very tangible social consequences, they are as much a space for disordering transformations as they are for maintaining order.

The third section, “Empire,” deals with pivotal moments in the political history of the British in India. The primary focus across these essays is statesman Edmund Burke, key figure in Dirks’ *Scandal of Empire* (2006). In particular, Dirks focuses upon how Burke endeavoured to refine British imperialism in regards to a nascent Indian sovereignty while neglecting to critique the notion of empire itself (p. 195). From Burke’s example, Dirks posits that it is crucial for scholars across fields of politics, history and criticism to “write empire back into the history of the West” (p. 198). Dirks attempts to do just this in the previously unpublished reflections that form the eighth and ninth chapters. “Bringing the Company Back In” contemplates the dual identity of the British East India Company as both a corporation and a sovereign state, suggesting that the permeability of monopoly and empire it exemplifies could mark the Company as something of a cautionary tale in present-day debates regarding, for instance, moral responsibility as it relates to states and expanding global markets (p. 210). In “The Idea of Empire,” Dirks concludes that Burke’s ideas on sovereignty still have a critical place in imagining a post-imperial world, possibly even providing models for solving the aforementioned problems of globalization, among others (p. 227).

The fourth section concerns itself with “the Politics of Knowledge.” In a reflective piece entitled “In Near Ruins,” Dirks moves through a panoply of philosophical and literary citations for purposes of situating the documentation of civilization in the examination of its ruined remnants. These ruins signify, in Dirks’ assessment, the subaltern people and places who “resist universalization,” perpetually reminding us of the imperfections of modernity (pp. 246–47). Anthropology, Dirks insists, need not bear the taint of its origin in colonialism and the ruins associated therewith; rather, given the very substance of its study—culture—it can actually play a central role in critiques of the West (p. 247). After a piece honouring Indian sociologist G. S. Ghurye, the section ends with an evaluation of South Asian Studies at present. Dirks traces via a select group of scholars the discipline’s gradual transition away from an early captivation with ancient Indian civilization and languages towards the postcolonial and culturally-based historical

perspectives of the post-1990s. While recent years have seen an assault on the area studies paradigm in general, Dirks remains optimistic for South Asian Studies on account of its burgeoning interdisciplinary potentialities, as well as the increasing number of South Asians entering the field (pp. 286–87).

Nick Dirks is not just an academician but also an administrator, currently serving as chancellor at Berkeley. Accordingly, his closing section, "University," culls together many of the preceding insights in the service of formulating improvements for post-secondary education in America. The first essay provides a retrospective of Columbia anthropologist Franz Boas and praises his commitment to interdisciplinary ventures both for faculty and for student curricula in anthropology and history, among other subjects (p. 295). In the essay to follow, "Scholars and Spies," Dirks extends Boas' century-old lamentations alleging the "prostitution" of scholarly research to government interests, observing in the same vein how American South Asian Studies were largely borne out of U.S. strategic interests following World War II (pp. 304–5). Given the legacies of that historical intertwinement, Dirks concedes that, when encountering a massively globalized world, "neither area studies nor the disciplines we have in place are fully equipped" (p. 318). He proposes the fostering of a new "worldly knowledge" that is as sensitive to the localized contexts out of which knowledge arises as it is to the global setting into which that knowledge is disseminated (p. 319). Dirks completes the volume with some reflections *contra* Allan Bloom's reactionary polemic *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), which bemoaned the disappearance from universities of a core curriculum of uniquely Western cultural texts. Not surprisingly, Dirks refutes Bloom's excoriation of student-sullying relativistic disciplines such as history and anthropology. Dirks can personally attest that engagement with other cultural and temporal contexts—in his case, colonial and contemporary India—was immensely beneficial in terms of "understanding both my own circumstances and the assumptions as well as the habitus of my life" (p. 326). Correspondingly, Dirks argues for the sustained relevance of a liberal arts education, and concludes that a balance needs to be struck between the general education that Bloom would champion and the single-mindedly profession-oriented training that preoccupies many post-secondary institutions and students today (p. 331).

In spite of the occasionally diffuse nature of the subject matter both within and between its sections, *Autobiography of an Archive* tells the story of a scholar unremitting in his attention to context, both for himself as a product of the post-Vietnam politico-cultural milieu and for his discipline as a product of (at least one) empire. As such, Dirks solidifies himself as an exemplary model of a postcolonial scholar. Moreover, the sheer breadth of his avenues of inquiry—each of them deliberated with considerable sophistication and erudition—further establishes

Nicholas Dirks as a veritable intellectual force well beyond the disciplinary boundaries of South Asian Studies.