A Passion for the Sea: Kenneth McPherson and the Indian Ocean Center

The well-known Indian Ocean Centre of Curtin University, Australia, finds a new home at the South Asia Institute: Its founder, historian Kenneth McPherson, joins the Department of Political Science as Mercator Professor. He will be collaborating with the SAI’s Peter Lehr, the first director of the Indian Ocean Center Heidelberg.

What was once a unique research institution is reopening at the South Asia Institute. The Indian Ocean Center Heidelberg (IOCH) will be inaugurated at an upcoming conference on the history, economy and security of the Indian Ocean, to be held at the IWH (Internationales Wissenschaftsforum Heidelberg) in July 2004. Funded through the DFG’s Mercator program, Professor McPherson is collaborating with the Department of Political Science’s Peter Lehr in what will be the beginning of an ambitious project to establish multidisciplinary Indian Ocean research in Germany. Part of McPherson’s new job at the SAI will be to give a seminar on the history of the Indian Ocean region.

With more than 30 littoral states, the Indian Ocean stretches from South Africa to Australia and extends northwards to the Middle East and South Asia. Although not commonly referred to as a region, the Indian Ocean region is defined by ancient trade routes linking its various parts for more than 3000 years, making it the oldest area of international maritime trade, and according to McPherson, one with a much older coherence than the Mediterranean, Atlantic or Pacific. Ample opportunity for academic study, one would think.

Certainly some historians from the 1960s onward began to write about an Indian Ocean region, yet wider multidisciplinary interest in the oldest maritime trading region in the world evolved only with the establishment of the Indian Ocean Centre, at Curtin University of Technology in Western Australia, in 1981. The first of its kind, this institution focused on historic research of early trade routes, colonial settlement, maritime security and a broad range of other subjects, particularly in the area of strategic studies. Driven by an almost missionary zeal, as McPherson recalls his early enthusiasm, the Centre soon became known throughout Australia and internationally. The Indian Ocean was no longer a forgotten region, as McPherson puts it. From the early 1970s, students flocked to courses on regional studies offered by McPherson. Successful campaigning reaped enough support to establish the first Indian Ocean Center in 1981, over a hundred research projects in the following years and two major conferences in the 1970s and 1980s engaging academics and NGOs from many countries. The Center’s journal, The Indian Ocean Review, was the leading scientific quarterly in this area of research. His interdisciplinary approach to the Indian Ocean was in part inspired by McPherson’s visit to Heidelberg as a Humboldt Fellow with Professor Dietmar Rothermund at the Department of History during the early 1970s.

Back in Perth, he realized he was exploring a new type of history as yet ignored by most other academics focusing on the world outside Europe. The Center teamed up with the University of Western Australia in 1990 to form the Indian Ocean Centre for Peace Studies, sponsored by the Ministry of Education to promote teaching and research. The perspective was still largely academic but was soon to become more policy-oriented. But in 1995 the Centre became a separate institution once again with funding from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the state government of Western Australia.

Once a warehouse for the industrialized countries that was long entirely dominated by Western Europeans, as McPherson points out, the Indian Ocean, in the 1990s, gained rising attention among policymakers in the state of Western Australia, the continent’s “Cinderella state” (McPherson), which was about to become the largest exporter to Australia’s Asian neighbours. Improved economic relations and a heightened awareness of security - which resulted in the built-up of a defensive naval presence in the Indian Ocean by Australia in a move to become independent of U.S. protection - combined to sharpen Australia’s sense of being part of the Indian Ocean region.

Kenneth McPherson was involved in much of this development in his position as adviser on the Indian Ocean to the state government of Western Australia and the federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. He was a member of Australia’s delegation at the pioneering Indian Ocean summit meetings that led to the formation of the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Co-operation (IOR-ARC) in 1997.

Following a change in government priorities and a shift in public attention after the so-called Asian financial crisis in 1997, research support was directed away from the Indian Ocean which meant that, in 2000, the Indian Ocean Centre at Curtin University had to be closed. It was in the course of a research project on Indian Ocean maritime security by the Department of Political Science at the SAI when the project’s co-ordinator, Peter Lehr, visited McPherson. Soon a plan was drafted to re-establish the Center by “exporting” it to Heidelberg.

After three years of hibernation, the Center is back and awaits a promising future. McPherson is confident the upcoming inaugural conference will revitalise the spirit that accompanied the original Center. Its successor, the Indian Ocean Center Heidelberg (IOCH), seeks to attract corporate as well as academic stakeholders of the Indian Ocean. Says Peter Lehr, IOCH director: “The Indian Ocean is usually depicted as a region of conflict. The fact that it holds a great economic potential still tends to be overlooked. The IOCH will look at both sides of the medal, thus trying to enhance the awareness of this neglected region in Europe and especially in Germany.”

Additional Information:
The new IOCH offers an internet-based archive holding editions of the original Review that will be augmented by upcoming volumes of this unique journal. Visit our websites (http://ioch.org) for news on the IOCH and the conference.

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1 http://ioch.org
2 http://ioch.de