Another Point of View

Lisa Jardine

Drawings by Nick Wadley

Published by Preface

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Published by Preface 2009

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Copyright © Lisa Jardine 2009
Drawings © Nick Wadley 2009

Lisa Jardine has asserted her right to be identified as the author of this work under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

Nick Wadley has asserted his right to be identified as the illustrator of this work under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition, including this condition, being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

First published in Great Britain in 2009 by Preface Publishing
1 Queen Anne's Gate
London SW1H 9BT

An imprint of The Random House Group Limited

www.rbooks.co.uk
www.prefacepublishing.co.uk

Addresses for companies within The Random House Group Limited can be found at www.randomhouse.co.uk

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 84809 099 6

The Random House Group Limited supports The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the leading international forest certification organisation. All our titles that are printed on Greenpeace-approved FSC-certified paper carry the FSC logo. Our paper procurement policy can be found at www.rbooks.co.uk/environment

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Grangemouth, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Bookmarque, Croydon, CR0 4TD

Introduction

Since my first published collection of *A Point of View* talks on BBC Radio 4 appeared in 2008, the Sunday morning slot these broadcasts occupy, and which was previously the home of Alistair Cooke's *Letter from America*, has established itself yet more securely in the weekly broadcasting schedule. It has become the place where a number of highly-regarded, independent-minded and thoughtful individuals give spirited expression to their considered personal views on almost any subject you can think of. I particularly enjoy sharing the slot with veteran writer and broadcaster Clive James, whose engaging essays are always guaranteed to make me think and smile at the same time. Our contributions could not, I think, be more different. In fact, the title of this book — *Another Point of View* – captures

something of that distinctiveness. Yet we both evidence a passionate desire to share our thoughts on whatever issue has taken our attention, and triggered our excitement, with a wider audience.

I still wish that, like Alistair Cooke, we were allowed to begin the Friday transmission of our talks with a courteous ‘good evening’, to be replaced on Sunday morning with an equally warm ‘good morning’. These broadcasts feel very much like a conversation with the gratifyingly many listeners, and I treasure their intimacy. Equally, it would be nice to be able to sign off with something as comfortingly familiar as his regular: ‘goodnight’. But times, I suppose, have changed, and broadcasters are no longer expected to observe such courtesies.

Each talk is supposed to take as its starting point something that has happened in the preceding week which has caught one’s attention, and triggered a particular train of thought. This means that when preparing my Points of View I find myself more than usually sensitive to what is going on in the world around me. The period covered by these essays has been an especially turbulent one. Climate change and the behaviour of banks and stock markets have been consistent themes, and generated regular news stories. In spite of the apparent modernity of both these ‘crises’, I have tried in my reflections upon them to do justice to the very considerable amount of history (and thus valuable experience) that lies behind them. As always, I am committed to the view that the more we understand about comparable events in the past, the better we are likely to

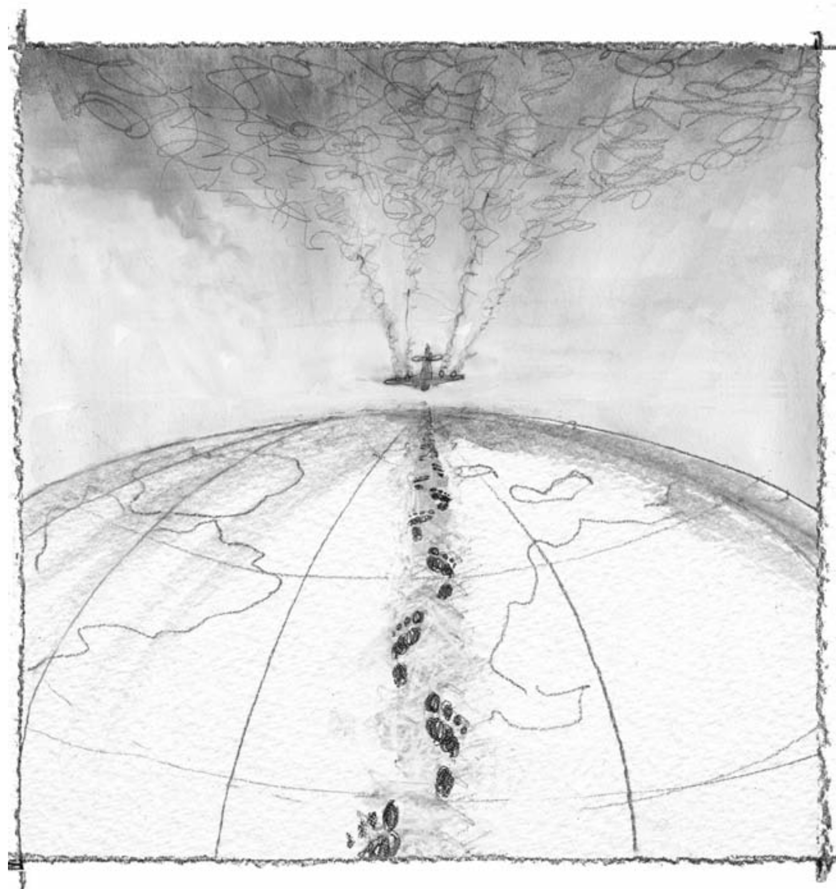
be able to understand the present, and the more reliably and purposefully plan for the future.

So the texts of these talks are offered in the spirit of openness and collaboration, to encourage anyone who cares to read them to continue the thought-processes begun here. Many of you have already done so, in letters, emails and posts on the BBC website, composed immediately after the first transmission of a particular programme. My friends and colleagues have waylaid me in corridors and at dinner tables to challenge me on specific points Much of what you have all had to say has fascinated me, and often led me to return to a subject with which I thought I had finished, to take it up again and to take its argument further.

I single out one person who has added significantly to the impact of my radio talks as they have moved from voice to print. Nick Wadley has provided his own comment in the form of an often wry illustration, adding to the impact of each piece with his keen eye and sharp wit. I think I knew the very first time that I spotted an illustration of his, and asked if he would be prepared to be my illustrator, that ours would be a fruitful and enjoyable partnership.

To all of those, then, who have participated in this shared endeavour – whether supportively or critically – I offer my thanks. I look forward to many more sharp encounters with the listening public in the future.

Lisa Jardine
December 2008



One

In September 2007, satellite images revealed that the Northwest Passage – the fabled, long sought-for northern sea-route connecting the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans, and thus Europe to Asia – was free of ice for the first time since records began. I wondered whether we should greet this news with delight, in the name of the fearless early navigators who lost their lives in those Arctic wastes, or whether this should be treated as one more grave warning of the damage we are doing to our planet.

Amid the arguments to and fro about the true extent of global warming, and the degree to which responsible people ought to be alarmed, I find one recent piece of news of the consequences of climate change particularly arresting.

Warming temperatures are melting the Arctic sea ice, making hitherto inaccessible stretches of the Arctic Ocean fully navigable. This September, satellite images showed the Northwest Passage to be ice free for the first time since records began, allowing shipping to travel comparatively unhindered from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean.

For more than five hundred years, since Columbus first encountered the continent of America, European mariners have dreamed of finding and navigating a Northwest Passage – a direct shipping route from Europe to Asia across the Arctic Ocean. It ought surely to be possible, they argued, to sail from European ports northwards along the coast of Greenland, then westwards along an Arctic parallel, round Baffin Island off the northern coast of Canada, entering the Pacific between Alaska and Russia?

The search, in the sixteenth century, for a corridor between the frozen northern wastes and the treacherous ice floes was driven by intense international competition and commercial pressures. Indeed, without the promise of financial gain riding on the outcome of these costly expeditions there would have been no financial backers. The existing sea-route eastwards round the Cape of Good Hope, to India, China and the Spice Islands with their rich resources of pepper, cinnamon and nutmeg, was long and dangerous. If a way could be found from the Atlantic Ocean into the Pacific which stayed close to the North Pole, the new class of entrepreneurial merchants would be able to undercut their rivals by having their sea-captains bring their exotic cargoes home faster and more economically.

In 1566, in his *Discourse of a Discoverie for a new Passage to Cataia [China],* the English mariner Sir Humphrey Gilbert urged Queen Elizabeth I to support the search for the Northwest Passage in terms which still resonate today:

'It were the only way for our princes to possess the wealth of all the east parts (as they term them) of the world, which is infinite . . . For, through the shortness of the voyage, we should be able to sell all manner of merchandise brought from thence far better cheap than either the Portuguese or Spaniard doth or may do.'

Eye-witness accounts survive of several of the early failed attempts to find a navigable way round (or through) the new continent. The sailors who limped home on their battered and broken ships, convey with shocking vividness the punishing effects of the extreme cold and the treacherously mobile ice floes, the relentlessly destructive effects of hunger and exhaustion. Whole expeditions perished, some of their bodies discovered many years later, frozen and intact in the hulls of their ships.

These early explorers never succeeded in finding their shortcut. But in the process of failing to reach their El Dorado, they stumbled upon other, hitherto unknown territories, which turned out to be of equivalent, if not greater importance for success in a newly global economy.

The English mariner Henry Hudson made four attempts at finding a passage through Arctic waters between 1607 and 1611. His determination to prove that such a route existed bordered on the obsessive. On the final attempt, both he and his son John perished, set adrift in an open

boat by their mutinous crew, who balked at the prospect of another prolonged period of fruitlessly negotiating the never-ending frozen wastes in the region subsequently named Hudson Bay.

For his first two attempts, Hudson sailed due north from England, then turned eastwards to try to skirt the northern coast of Russia. Almost locked in to a frozen sea off the island of Nova Zembla, he was forced to turn back, and his backers abandoned him. Undeterred, Hudson found a new investor in the form of the Dutch East India Company, and set off again in the summer of 1609 on his ship the *Half Moon*.

It was this third voyage that accidentally proved his most successful. Hudson had determined views on routes and agendas. Although his Dutch contract committed him to pursuing the eastwards route around the Pole he had attempted before, faced once more with extreme cold and floating ice, Hudson impetuously decided to abandon this shortly after embarkation. Instead he headed westwards towards North America, to take up a suggestion of Captain John Smith's (the first Governor of Virginia) that a northerly navigable river might lead across the continent, and out the other side to the Spice Islands.

On 12 September 1609, the *Half Moon* entered the mouth of what is now called the Hudson River – 'as fine a river as can be found, wide and deep, with good anchoring ground on both sides', 'a very good harbour for all winds', according to a contemporary account. The land around was 'very pleasant and high'.

They were in the outer reaches of what today is New York harbour, riding along the coast of Staten Island. Fish swam around them in shoals. When they anchored and went ashore, they found 'friendly and polite people, who had an abundance of provisions, skins, and furs, of martens and foxes, and many other commodities, as birds and fruit, even white and red grapes, and they traded amicably with the people.' But sailing up the broad river as far as what is today Albany, the water became 'sweet' (not salty) and too shallow for a seagoing ship to pass. So this was not the route Hudson was looking for.

But on Hudson's return, his Dutch backers quickly recognised that the area of the New World Hudson had explored was worth further exploration and exploitation. The history of the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam on Manhattan Island (famously acquired in 1626 from the Indian tribe that lived there for goods to the value of 60 guilders) is a rich one in its own right. Had that pivotal North American colony not been seized by the British 38 years later, the entire western world might today be speaking Dutch.

The search for the Northwest Passage continued down to the nineteenth century. In 1845, Sir John Franklin with two ships and a crew of more than 120 men disappeared without trace in the Arctic wastes. By that time the commercial world was beginning to direct its efforts to improve long distance trade routes elsewhere, leading eventually to the building of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the Panama Canal in 1914.

Today our relentless search for essential natural resources, given added urgency by our profligate consumption of gas and oil, has reopened international interest in accessing that elusive Northwest Passage. For now the research scientists exploring the region – the last areas on earth to be fully explored – insist that their endeavours are concentrated on understanding climate change and global warming for the good of humankind.

But already governments have their eye on long-term possibilities for control of our ever-depleting stocks of oil and gas. In the Arctic, Canada and the United States are at loggerheads over who controls the freezing waters of the Northwest Passage, while Russia claims to be entitled to exploit the natural resources underneath the North Pole.

Meanwhile, in the southern hemisphere, the tenacious hold Britain has maintained on the islands of South Georgia and the Falklands, which resulted twenty years ago in our going to war with Argentina over the sovereignty of those two remote and windswept pieces of land, finally begins to make sense to me. The pursuit of British polar interests in the twenty-first century may owe more to Margaret Thatcher than we realise.

That sovereignty supports Britain's claim to territorial rights over a sweeping arc of the Antarctic Ocean under which may lie those priceless natural resources – resources also claimed vociferously by Argentina and Chile. Twelve other nations, including Australia, New Zealand, Russia, and by historical adventure, Norway and Japan, make more

measured claims, through peaceful cooperation, enshrined in the 1961 Antarctic Treaty.

Is it too late to find a way to preserve the altruistic tone of scientific collaboration that these inhospitable and remote regions have up to now enjoyed? Might we indeed go further – could the nations of the world combine in their battle against global warming and succeed in reversing its tide, so that the Northwest Passage may once again become frozen and impassable?