



The history of AIMA: a personal perspective by Ted (E.J.T.) Collins

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NOTE: Ted shared a draft with AIMA Executive Committee members during the July 2015 meeting at the Museum of English Rural Life, Reading, England.

I first heard mention of AIMA in 1967, from Prof Gunter Franz, Head of the Department of Agricultural History at the University of Hohenheim, a large terrifying figure, expert on the history of the German peasantry. As he spoke very little English and I just a smattering of German, we communicated through an interpreter. The upshot was that I was duly enrolled as a collaborator, and the Museum of English Rural Life as a potential institutional member of the Association.

I attended altogether some 11 Congresses, the first at Hohenheim in 1969, the last at Poznan in 1998, initially as a MERL delegate, then a member of the Praesidium, then in the 1990s as joint-organiser of academic sessions, and co-editor of the Conference Report. Being now in my 80th year, my recall is not to be relied upon, and as many as the older members have retired or are dead, it is difficult to check facts or make good omissions. I duly acknowledge help from former MERL colleagues, Roy Brigden and John Creasy, but particularly Edward Hawes, whose personal recollections, correspondence with members of the Praesidium, and not least, fluency in German, proved invaluable.

My great privilege was to have been young enough to have met through Congresses many leading rural and agricultural historians and museologists. The list – by no means exhaustive – included Axel Steensberg, Sven Nielsen, Gritt Lerche (Denmark); Ivan Balassa, Imre Wellman, Peter Gunst (Hungary); Gunther Franz, Wolfgang Jacobeit, Hans Haas, Klaus Hermann, K R Schultz-Klinken, R W Henning (Germany); Roberto Togni, Gaetano Forni (Italy); Henrick Novacki (Poland); Madame Mariel J.-Brunhes Delamarre, Francois Sigaut (France); John Schlebecker, Edward Hawes (U.S.A.), Jean-Jacques Van Mol (Belgium); Sune Zachrisson (Sweden), Hisashi Horio (Japan). Experts in their fields and in most cases multi-lingual, embarrassingly so (hence the joke question: what do you call a person who speaks three languages? answer: trilingual; and just one language? A. English), followed by French and English were the official languages of the Congress, and while many Eastern Bloc attendees had a knowledge of Russian, I never once heard it spoken.

The Congresses were memorable affairs, warm and hospitable, and much looked forward to, where new friendships were made and old ones renewed. I soon learnt that conference themes meant very little in such a wide ranging subject as ours, that the papers were not all of equal interest, or startlingly new. The majority of papers dealt with familiar themes in 19th and early 20th-century agricultural and rural history, centring mainly on crops, livestock and farming techniques, and individual museum collections. The related associated disciplines – ecology, historical geography, ethnology, folk-life – were less well represented, likewise as was practical museum work – storage, conservation, collections management, presentation, documentation, information retrieval systems, and public inter-face.

Plenary sessions were very much rubber-stamping affairs, and consisted of reports, resolutions, amendments to statutes and standing orders, future venues etc. In the main there was little controversy nor interventions from the floor. Meetings of the Presidium, on the other hand, could on occasion be more heated, the disagreements being mainly about changes to the statutes, interpretations of rules and procedures, and the perennial issue of membership fees. It was here rather than at open meetings, and then rarely, that differences arose between the two Blocs, the Eastern being more hard-line and authoritative, while the Western were of the view that decision-making should be more transparent and involve the wider membership. Disagreements, though, never soured personal relationships, which remained cordial throughout. The evenings were spent in friendly discussion, and as the beer and wine began to flow, in music-making, dancing, and singing. As I remember, Dr. Vontorcik from Slovakia possessed a fine tenor voice. Memorable too was the fuss made when at the Lindlar Congress, our hosts discovered that Ed Hawes and I not only shared a birthday, which fell during the Congress, but were born on exactly the same day, in 1936! Gifts were instantly produced, and many toasts drunk.

I was made aware too of the diverse nature of 'agricultural museums', some national, some university, but the majority funded by local and regional government, farmers' associations, or voluntary organisations. Most attendees worked in museums or universities. The academic disciplines represented ranged from agriculture and agricultural history, to engineering, ecology, animal and botanical sciences, and ethnology, which made for a most useful exchange of ideas and information.

It was only much later, on reading Zdernik Tempir's excellent retrospective in the final issue of the *Acta (Acta Museorum Agriculturae*, vol. 22, 1989¹), that I learnt something of AIMA's origins. The inter-war years, a surge of enthusiasm for creating international organisations partly to promote world peace, and most notably the League of Nations, a movement in which the newly independent countries of Eastern and Central Europe were prime instigators. A plan to create an International Agricultural Bureau to disseminate technical, economic and policy information was probably modelled on the Institute of Agriculture founded in Rome just before the war to collect agricultural statistics. Thus inspired, the Hungarian and Czechoslovak national agricultural museums tried to promote the establishment of an international association of agricultural museums, which failed due to agricultural depression, a worsening international situation, then the Second World War, followed by the Cold War, and in 1956, by the Hungarian Crisis and Russian Invasion. Discussions between the two museums were broken off in 1956, and resumed only in 1962. Four years later, an International Congress was held at Lidice Castle in Czechoslovakia. The principle elements of the proposed international new association – an elected Presidium, permanent secretariat, triennial Congresses, and a published Proceedings – were agreed in principle at Lidice, and confirmed at the Hohenheim Congress in 1969, testimony to the vision and perseverance of its two initiators.

The aim of the new body was to provide an international platform for scholars where agricultural history and other related disciplines could meet to exchange ideas, promote research, and mutually cooperate. The sub-text was that it provided the Eastern Bloc, otherwise isolated, with a gateway and point of contact with the West. Younger readers may not realise the constraints under which Eastern European colleagues laboured in the post-war period. Travel to the West, while not debarred, was tightly regulated. Permission to travel abroad was difficult, and foreign currency hard to acquire. Conference papers were vetted in advance for ideological transgressions, while some delegations included a secret informer. I clearly recollect at Stuttgart- Hohenheim in 1969, a year after the Prague Spring, Eastern

¹ See the AIMA website for a full Index and table of contents <https://agriculturalmuseums.org/publications/>

Bloc colleagues having to meet secretly, behind closed doors, to exchange news. Russian delegations to the West, I'm told, had to submit to group photographs so as to monitor their movements and discourage defectors. A curious fact, difficult to explain, was that although invited, very few Russians attended the Congresses, despite the USSR's large numbers of ethnological museums. Nor, disappointingly since I taught the subject, did socialist agriculture or farm collectivisation, much feature in either academic papers or in private discussion. Equally baffling, nor was it much in evidence at any of the Eastern Bloc museums which we visited as part of Congress programmes. That said, it came as no surprise to learn that following the break-up of the Soviet Bloc in 1990, the main ambition of the so-called Visegrad group of countries – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, the backbone of AIMA, named after a meeting in a Hungarian castle in 1335 – was to join the European Union at the first opportunity. Which they duly did, thereby providing my household with a succession of excellent Slovakian home-helps, and the city of Reading with hundreds of Polish waiters and building workers.

The political upheavals of the early '90s were not quite the watershed in the Association's history as might be thought. The Congresses continued uninterrupted, with the differences, first, that where previously they had been held in Eastern and Western Bloc countries more or less alternately, after 1990 all but one was held in a former Communist country. And secondly, that for financial reasons, from 1989 the Czechoslovak Museum was no longer able to host the Secretariat, nor, after 22 issues, to publish *Acta Museorum Agriculturae*.

While colleagues from the former Eastern Bloc could travel freely, the constraint was now one of affordability. I remember at one Congress a 'whip round' having to be made to pay the return fares of several of the members from one Eastern European country. The parlous state of Eastern Bloc museums following the fall of Communism was cause for concern. The *raison d'être* of museums, cultural main-planks of the old regime, began to be questioned, and as government and party structures were dismantled, so many museums were closed down. Following German Re-unification, Klaus Hermann, Director of the German Agricultural Museum at Hohenheim, was commissioned to report on agricultural museums in the former GDR, to assess their relevance and search out any residual political bias. One of his duties, he told me, was to draw up a new concept plan for the Mecklenburg Museum near Leipzig, entitled "45 Years of Socialist Agriculture in Germany – an Experiment". A number of museums were adversely affected by the return of properties sequestered in the Socialist era to their original owners. The Museum at Nitra, for example, had to return its premises, to the Catholic Church, re-locate to an agro-exhibition site outside the town, at the same time merging with another organisation and undergoing a radical change of purpose.

It became clear that AIMA needed to undergo a major change in organisation and objectives not only to meet but to respond to the changes taking place in both the rural economy and society at large. In the 1960s, most museums regarded themselves and were regarded as 'knowledge-based institutions', responsible for conserving and interpreting the past, admittedly with limited popular appeal (all those glass cases), but catering for mainly rural audiences or individuals with a scholarly interest in rural history. In the larger museums at any rate, in addition to their routine duties, senior staff were obliged to engage in research and to publish. In the establishment, a clear division existed between academic (scientific), technical, and clerical/administrative staff, with scholarly achievement ranking more highly than practical or administrative ability.

The most serious problem facing agricultural museums today, often over-looked, is the declining importance of farming in national life. The challenge is how to appeal to a

predominantly urban population entirely, with little or no knowledge of farming or the countryside.

In a paper presented at the Nitra Congress in 1995, I raised the question of how far agricultural museums needed to adapt to meet these changes, given that most were still rooted in the horse and early machine age. In the 1970s even, few museums in the advanced countries, had acknowledged, still less come to terms with, the transformation. In the late 19th century, 50-80 percent of the active population of southern and Eastern Europe worked on the land, and in the industrial countries of northern and western Europe, still 30-50 percent, Britain alone standing out, with less than 10 percent. Furthermore, over much of Europe, only 20-30 percent of people lived in towns, while in southern Europe and the Balkans, rural populations reached their historic peak only after 1950. By the mid-1960s, in western Europe, with the 'rural exodus' in full swing, the traditional peasant economies were being replaced by more market-oriented systems of production and employment. Yet, many townspeople still had farming connections. At MERL, Andrew Jewell, my first boss, was reluctant to label items in the permanent exhibitions, because he said most visitors were country folk and so could readily identify them. I doubted that.

By the year 2000, the post-war transition was effectively complete, with barely any European country, excepting Rumania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Poland, Greece, and Portugal, with more than 15 percent of its workforce employed on the land, and in the higher income countries, fewer than 5 percent, and in Britain, Germany, Belgium and Switzerland about 1 percent. Only a small minority of English villages have as many as 10 percent working on the land. The overwhelming majority of villagers, many of whom were in-migrants from towns, work away from the village, commuting daily. Often un-noticed, is the growing isolation of farmers within the village community, as their economic importance and social position weakens. The self-sufficient village, in so far as it ever existed, is a rarity, most of the old village crafts and industries now long gone, followed by the village shops. The agricultural sub-structure too has changed – inputs such as fertilisers, machinery, chemicals, fuel, advice – being supplied from within the wider economy. Cultural convergence together with rising incomes has meant that consumption patterns and living standards in rural areas tend to be little different from those nationally, or at any rate, the gap is much narrower, and closing.

These changes have important implications for the scale and composition of museum audiences, and visitor expectations. Few people nowadays, apart from the very old and the widely-travelled, have seen a horse or ox drawing a plough, corn being cut with a scythe or reaping-machine, or wood-men making hay-rakes or sheep-hurdles. More worrying, visiting agricultural museums is very much a seasonal occupation. Many of them struggle with static or falling attendances, or have closed down. Shut from October to April, they are marooned in the countryside until spring.

How then do agricultural museums flourish in a world in which agriculture has lost its primacy and where most people live in towns? Current attitudes are nicely summarised by two comments attributed to the late President Kennedy. The first, in his first meeting with his chief agricultural advisor and eminent economist, John Kenneth Galbraith: "I only want to hear about agriculture from you Kenneth, and I don't want to hear it from you either". As for cows, he remembered as a boy being taken by bus to see them milked.

In England at any rate, the 1970s and 1980s were something of a watershed, with museums under increasing pressure to broaden their appeal, and to entertain as well as inform the wider public. By the 1990s, museums had become noticeably less 'stuffy,' more utilitarian, more outward-looking, and socially more inclusive. Success was now measured less by academic reputation, or even quality of the collections, as by visitor numbers. In England, university museums, including MERL, were thrown into confusion. On the one

hand, the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) ruled that the main purpose of the annual revenue grant was to support research and teaching in the higher education sector. On the other, the criteria applied by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, a government agency, and the Heritage Lottery Fund, an independent body, were 'inclusiveness' and public benefit. As the priority shifted, museums required fewer highly qualified researchers and curators, and more managers, designers, fund-raisers, and experts in communication.

These problems were seldom discussed at AIMA meetings, at least not officially. In the early 1990s, Edward Hawes was raising them privately with members of the Presidium. The immediate priority, he said, was to find a new home for the Secretariat and publisher for the Proceedings. The second was to define, solidify and expand the membership. The Membership List, so-called, consisted of the names of those persons who had attended previous Congresses. An analysis of the list by Sune Zachrisson revealed that many of those featuring were no longer involved with the subject, had retired or died, and that apart from a hard-core, attendance at Congresses was irregular, mostly just once or twice, and in the case of leading museums, seldom if ever. Moreover, no one in the management team was specifically responsible for membership and maintaining regular contact with it between Congresses. At the 1995 Congress, Hawes proposed (1) that a 'formal membership' be instituted, consisting of two classes, institutional and non-attached; (2) that an annual subscription be raised to cover administrative costs and to fund initiatives; (3) that an 'organiser' be appointed for each country / region / continent; and (4) that the Presidium should consist of museum directors or their nominees, and a small number of individual members. After a lengthy, inconclusive discussion, it was decided not to proceed with the proposal, as many smaller museums in Eastern Europe were not currently able to afford the subscription payable in euros or US dollars. But as our Scottish member reminded: "there must be some source of income that will support even a modest commissariat to administer the organisation and keep the membership in touch." I gather the matter is still undecided. At this stage, the papers from the Danish and Italian Congresses were still unpublished.

The other priority was to re-define AIMA's aims and objectives so as to be able to communicate a clear idea of what AIMA was about, and the tangible benefits of membership. How much, Hawes asked, should it be concerned with the past and how much with the present? How much with developed and how much with developing countries? How much with agriculture and how much with wider contexts? My Nitra paper listed a range of issues, some deliberately controversial, which might be addressed, such as the post-war decline of the peasantry, the rise and fall of socialist agriculture, food security, health and nutrition, food processing, the human food chain, agricultural sustainability, alternative agricultures, organic farming, GM crops... Themes such as art and agriculture, the countryside in the popular imagination, alternative uses of the land, rural in-migration and the rise of the commuter village, might appeal to a wider audience.

The creation of AIMA was a bold and successful experiment. Some think it overly conservative, and slow to adapt to the changing needs of agricultural museums and contexts. Its governance, based on an outmoded Middle-European model, was thought by many of the younger members to be undemocratic and lacking transparency. Some thought its programme too narrowly historical and academic, with more attention needing to be paid to practical issues, more broadly in tune with the winds of change blowing through the museum world since the 1970s.

After my retirement in 2001, my interests shifted. It was with some surprise, and considerable pleasure, when in 2014, I was invited to talk about my personal recollections of AIMA to a meeting of the 'Executive Committee', to be held at MERL. I discovered a new spirit abroad, and a younger generation of members at the helm, keen to reform and re-launch

the association after its near collapse in the preceding decade. The Constitution had been largely re-written, and the aims in the process of being re-formulated, with a sharper focus on museum practice, targeted at museum professionals. For me, the most welcome surprise was that so many of the key positions are now occupied by female members, in marked contrast to earlier times when it was very male-dominated. A weakness in the past, was the reluctance – partly due to the advancing years of the founding members, and partly its cost, affecting particularly museums in the former Eastern Bloc – to embrace IT. This appears to have been largely remedied.

The future looks hopeful. I hope that future generations will acknowledge the enormous debt owed to AIMA's original founders, the Czech and Hungarian agricultural museums, and their achievement at the height of the Cold War in building an academic bridge between the two Europes. 78 persons attended the 1966 Congress, all Europeans, almost entirely male, 73 from the Soviet Bloc, 5 from Western Europe, and as yet none from other continents. By the mid-1980s, the geographical balance had noticeably altered, to include delegates from a dozen or more western European countries, and others from North America and as far afield as Egypt, Japan, India, and Mexico. Likewise the gender balance, there being now a small but growing female presence, a portent of things to come. The meetings, 22 in all, had a serious purpose – professionally and intellectually, but also socially, the striking-up of friendships, and genuine camaraderie. Looking back, I am proud to have been part of what historians of the post-war period will show to have been a unique contribution to international understanding. Dare it be said, sometimes I wish that the Wall had never come down.

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