

Interview with Nancy Mitchell
By Michael Fischer

Q: What pushed you to study what you do study?

A: I wanted to study Carter when I first wanted to do a PhD. I lived in Egypt in 1976, and so I was in Egypt for his whole campaign. I was aware as someone who grew up during the Vietnam War and Watergate, that Carter seemed to articulate American values that I had been taught, but those that had not been followed recently. I was interested in Carter, but then moved back to Ireland before returning to the states to do a master's degree. I loved it, so I decided to stay on and do a PhD. In order to do that, I had to talk to the person who would be my advisor. He had a reputation for being difficult and particularly difficult for women. The first thing he said to me was "Well Ms. Mitchell, what makes you think a woman can understand the realities of power?" All of the PhD students at this institution were male. I talked about Thatcher. The next thing he asked me was who I wanted to do my dissertation on, and I said Carter. He told me that I could not do it on somebody who is alive because I had no credibility as a young historian, so I switched to Wilson, to another person who was considered an idealist. When I finished that, I moved onto the second book, which is when I returned to working on Carter.

Q: This book challenges some of the dominant popular narratives with respect to Carter. How early in the research process did it become apparent that there was more to Jimmy Carter than meets the eye?

A: That's a very interesting question that nobody has ever asked me before. Research takes a really long time, and the evolution of thought is extremely difficult to pin down. From the beginning, I think, I had a question about the role of Jimmy Carter. So much of the press at that time was about [Secretary of State Cyrus] Vance and [National Security Advisor Zbigniew] Brzezinski. My question was "did Jimmy Carter have anything to do with this?" So from a very early stage I had that question. Another one of the myths came much later, and that was the realization was that Jimmy Carter was a cold warrior. I approached the topic, like most people, with the idea that he gave more attention to human rights than he did. I think the realization came out that he was really a cold warrior. He was fighting the Cold War in a different way, but he was still fighting it. That came about through looking at the war in the Horn. The war in the Horn really defies the myths about Jimmy Carter.

Q: One of the most compelling aspects of the book was the use of interviews. How were you able to gain access to Carter and the other subjects?

A: That was really fun! The Carter interview was, I think, truly a fluke. He doesn't give many interviews to historians. He appears to have almost no interest in spinning the story of his presidency. I wrote to him before I was ready with the idea that I would need to keep pestering him. I wrote in 2002, when I was just beginning. A bit later, I was standing in my kitchen and I get a call from his research assistant saying that the President would like to talk with me. We set up a time for about an hour, and I would talk only about Africa. The next week I went to Atlanta and I met Jimmy Carter. It turns out, the reason I got the interview was that I had written a review of Carter's memoir *An Hour Before Daylight*. I used to be an occasional reviewer for a local newspaper. I really liked that book, I think it is his best. My insight on it was that it was really an ode to his father, which is not obvious at all. It turned out that I was right, and Carter put the blurb on the paperback edition. That's how I got the interview. Then I was able to build a network from that. It was incredibly lucky, and that really opened a lot of doors. The one that was the hardest was the Zambian President. That was hard because he's old and millions of people want to interview him. I got friendly with the ambassador from Nigeria who knew him. People have been incredibly generous to me. Andrew Young was also really fun. He was a great interview. He talks and talks and talks and sings. I thought the interview would last an hour or two and it ended up being five hours. He was wonderful.

Q [From Brandon Kinney]: Can you talk about the process of the interview, bringing documents and showing them to the interviewee?

A: That can be really helpful. When you're writing to someone and you enclose a couple of key documents, that gets their interest. Usually people are very interested in reading documents related to them. It not only jogs their memory but it gets their ego too.

Q: Outside of the interviews, what were some of the more enjoyable moments or some of the challenges while writing the book?

A: I started out writing a short book on Carter's foreign policy in general. After a couple of years, I realized it was not working. Then I thought I would write a slim little book about Africa. Even that wouldn't work. I just had to focus on the two main crises. It was really fun in the beginning and then it was great after I submitted it to the publisher. The last two before submission were really hard. People told me nobody would publish it because it was too long. I had this panic, that I would never finish it. I remember sitting outside a café with my niece, talking about a chapter, saying "I'm going to die writing this chapter." The last two years were a lot of pressure. With the exception of that time though, I had an absolute blast. I loved it and thought it was great, up until the end. I didn't want to be one of the people who never finishes.

Q: What's next?

A: That's a good question. I'm working now, and it's still in early stages, on one of the things that interested me in the early stages of this book. The crisis in the horn is really a crisis of US-Saudi relations. It made me really curious about how the US government adjusted to the 1973 war, the OPEC War, and the shift in power to Saudi Arabia and Iran. You can't look to US foreign relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran without looking to the Gulf States, the peace process, to Pakistan, Turkey, and things like that. I will look at this in the context of the Carter Administration and a bit of the Nixon Administration. I'm going to try to write it in a bit of narrative style, a bit less deeply researched.