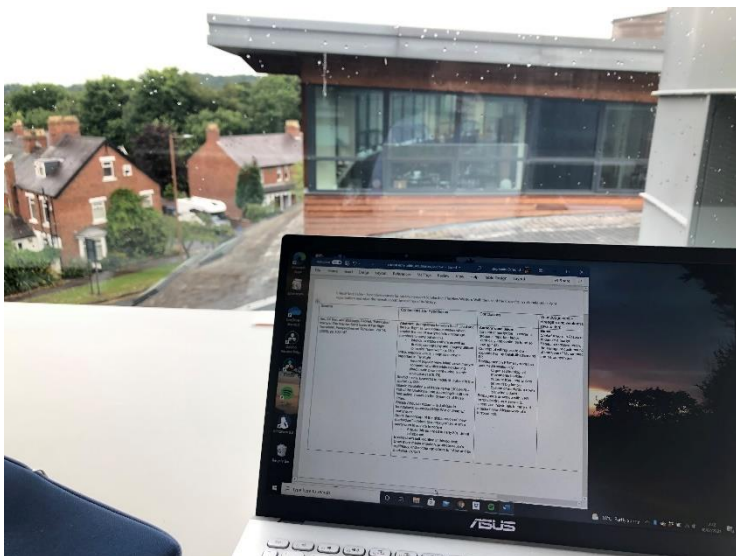


## Laidlaw Research and Leadership Scholarship – Personal Impact Report

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Durham University



**The start of Summer 1:** noting my first piece of historiography in Durham on a rainy day inside the Bill Bryson Library – July 2021 (**left**)

**The start of Summer 2:** group photo with the fellow Laidlaw Scholars participating on the ThinkPacific LiA Youth and Community project besides the South Pacific Sea – July 2022.  
Credits: Rebecca Court (**right**)

## Introduction

When I initially came across news of the Laidlaw Research and Leadership Scholarship advertised in a history department email during my first year which now seems like aeons ago, I felt that I should immediately investigate it more thoroughly. As someone who hoped to pursue postgraduate studies in history, I was fascinated by the thought of doing something so academically rigorous as an undergraduate. So, the research component sounded like a great chance to gather crucial relevant experience. However, the fact the scholarship was also targeted to those who were willing to learn about good leadership and not only for “natural leaders” piqued my interest.

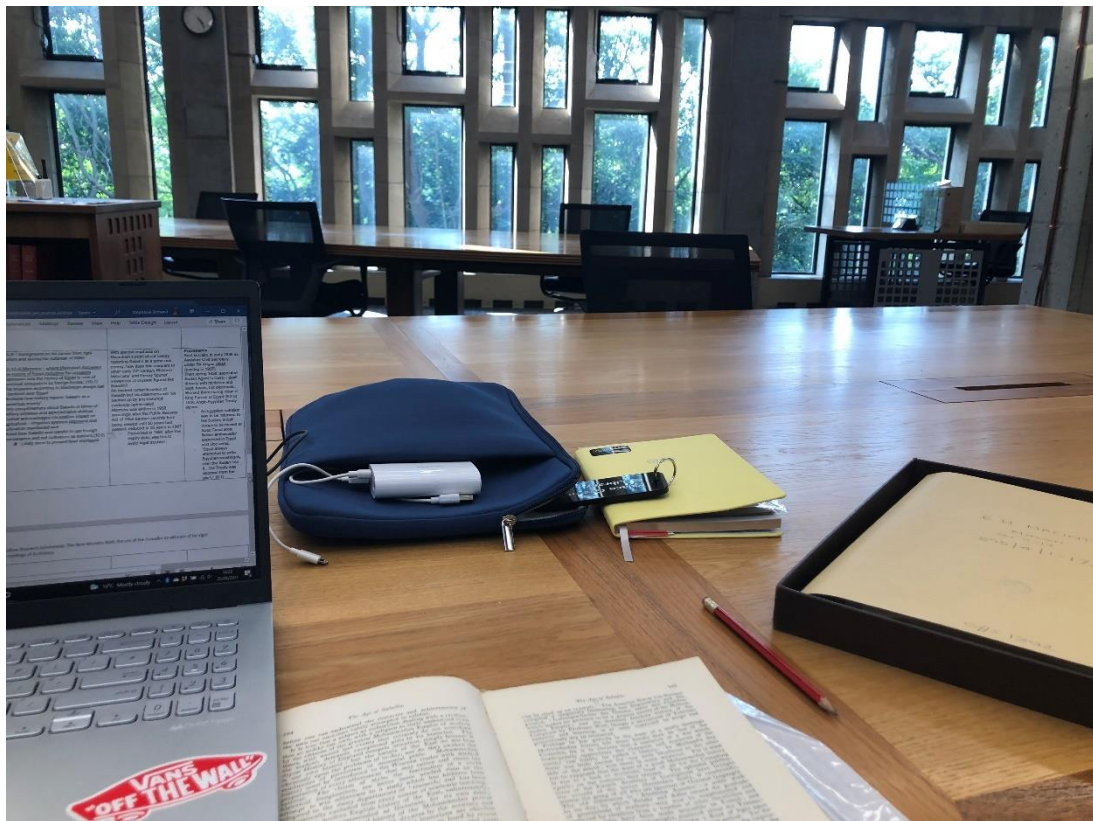
Despite having leadership positions at school, when I left, I realised I had never felt that I truly belonged in them, frustrated with even then still failing to connect with and understand people around me, especially those I was meant to help. Being scorned for daring to apply to universities like Durham and told that I should “know my place” along with more unfortunately descriptive verbal assaults were frequent. The feelings which arose from these incidents I later found at university had a name: imposter syndrome. Not only was this a relief, but a revelation. The chance to learn throughout your time as a scholar in a more flexible and positive environment about the importance of understanding leadership as a sustainable, ethical, and inclusive practice seemed like a brilliant opportunity to break away from what I knew and feared about leadership before. So, I submitted my application in late December and in March 2021, I received an offer to be awarded a Laidlaw Scholarship. Even now, I still remember my jaw physically dropping at the sight of the email and yelling loudly, prompting my hallway neighbour to knock on my door and ask if I was alright.

But enough about the backstory, Step the people want to know the answer to a rather important question – **what did I learn from my experiences as a Laidlaw Scholar?**

## Summer One – Research

During my first summer as a scholar, I remained in Durham to undertake a research project titled ‘The New Western Wall: the use of the Crusades in the rationale of far-right organisations and what this reveals about the readings of its history.’ To summarise the 6 weeks, I discovered two main findings. Firstly, there were key parallels in the manipulation of historical narratives by both Christian and Islamic extremist groups as shown in their respective rhetoric in propaganda, from manifestos to group symbolism. Secondly, the susceptibility of crusade history being utilised by said groups is exceptionally high due to its conception as a historical war between the “Christian West” and “Islamic East” which has been peddled by both political actors and commentators more prominently since 9/11. In turn, as articulated in my research conclusions video (available on the Scholars’ Network), I suggested in light of my findings that to help prevent radicalisation by such groups who are increasingly using mainstream social media platforms, historians are invited to collaborate with intelligence specialists and content moderators on social media platforms to improve their algorithms in detecting extremist material online. Whilst embers of this are beginning to spread with collaborative efforts happening between governmental organisations and institutes like The Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right (CARR), these working relationships ought to be expanded to emphasise the importance of historians’ work in deconstructing textual references and symbolism.

Not only did completing my research project reaffirm my goal to apply for postgraduate studies but there were also lessons learnt beyond the paper I submitted. Research and project management skills were things I often found difficult with time management being one of my biggest challenges and sometimes still is. So, the six-week structure of the research component and the opportunity to work closely with my supervisor challenged me to acutely focus on the key ideas I wished to investigate instead of getting lost and distracted by fleeting moments of intrusive curiosity. Since the project was of my design, having a sense of direction for my research through intricate (re-)planning, regular review meetings, and weekly email correspondence was fundamental in building a strong working relationship with my supervisor and in learning to lead myself – something that I had once shied away from. One highlight from this was the chance to analyse original documents from the *Sudan Archives* at Durham University's Barker Research Library where I examined the writings of 20th century British "Sudan Agent" Edward Hyde MacIntosh (1895-1949) who wrote a short history of the endeavours of the sultan, Saladin, during the Third Crusade.



**Figure 1.** Picture taken in the Barker Research Library, August 2021. The writings of E.H. MacIntosh (1916-49) are in the brown folder <sup>1</sup>

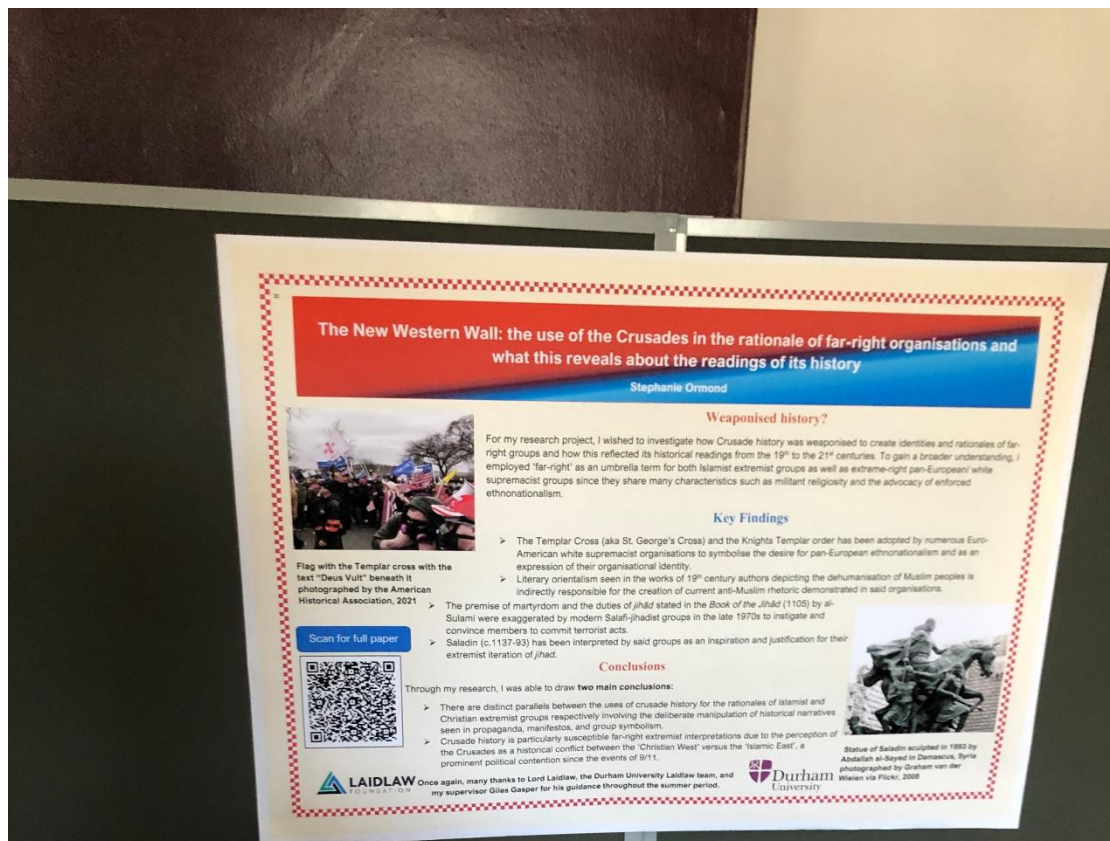
Of course, the challenges and lessons did not stop there. I had previously studied the Crusades during A-level history but arguably with more emphasis on breadth rather than depth as is usually the case with A-level modules. When I began my research, I not only had to reconsider what I knew about the field but also how I understood research itself. Indeed, I had acquired some grasp of undergraduate-level research methods by the time I had

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, I was told that sunlight and flash would damage the document which explains the lack of photographing the actual extracts.

completed my first year of university, but throughout reading and formulating arguments for my essay, it became evident there was much more to digest.

Because of the nature of my subject and its frequent politicisation, I had to think about what I could draw out from my sources and how some of my findings relate to current events. There were some challenges to this, especially when investigating Islamic extremism due to international multiple-government efforts to remove and censor materials relating to the subject. Unlike, typical historical topics I could not just utilise online archival libraries such as JSTOR; in the early stages of constructing my methodology, I encountered FBI notices announcing the censorship of some academic archives. Instead of concluding this to be representative of the access to relevant sources, I altered my approach to investigate the findings of political think tanks and research institutes and anti-radicalisation groups and charities, as well as the perspectives of historians. Also, I had to be careful with constructing my arguments, as I discovered, some scholarship on the matter was actively inflammatory and discriminatory towards religious and ethnic groups. Therefore, it became a priority to consider the implications of the wording of my research to avoid directly conveying such sentiments in my project.



**Figure 2.** Summer One research poster displayed at the Durham University Laidlaw Welcome and Celebration Event, June 2022.

### **Summer Two – Leadership in Action (LiA)**

My LiA was very different from my research project. This summer, I was fortunate enough to be one of the seventeen scholars undertaking the Youth and Community project ran by the

organisation *ThinkPacific* which spanned 6 weeks in Fiji. After 23 hours of travelling and a few days of the briefing, we finally arrived in Toga village, located beside the Sigatoka River in Nadroga Navosa province and were warmly welcomed into the village with a *sevusevu*, a traditional Fijian ceremony. Eventually, we were united with our host families and settled in for the evening before embarking on the main endeavours we sought to complete.

Firstly, in partnership with the Fijian Ministry of Health and Medical Services and assisted by local youth apprentices and a qualified site manager, we were tasked with building a much-needed health centre in the village as part of the Ministry's 20-year development plan. Secondly, we were to assist in facilitating discussions and activities with the grassroots youth group Alliance for Future Generations (AFG) on climate change and its links to various subjects ranging from human rights to gender equality to supplement education on the topic and raise awareness to local youth. This was also vital since Toga is a riverside farming community which heavily relies on natural resources and as we were informed, had already encountered the devastating effects of climate change in their community.



**Figure 3.** The group photo taken at the end of our AFG x ThinkPacific youth empowerment and education sessions on climate change and corresponding issues showcasing our climate change awareness posters for AFG's social media campaign - [@afgfiji](https://www.instagram.com/afgfiji).

The transition into village life was undoubtedly helped by the preparatory workshops and zoom lessons conducted by ThinkPacific on Fijian culture, language, customs, and history which were vital for being culturally knowledgeable and self-aware of the villagers' situation and the impact of numerous factors such as climate change, colonialism, and how isolation from major international forums such as COP26 further harmed marginalised communities. As a history student, the lessons on the history of Fiji were particularly interesting to me. Furthermore, as someone of dual Vincentian (Caribbean) and Irish heritage, learning about how Fiji developed considering British colonialism and exploring some of the indigenous

traditions that have managed to be retained by the villagers in Toga during our cultural education and skills sessions was deeply insightful. Still, sharing in traditions did not stop once the working day ended, and participating in village life with our homestay family helping make *lovo* (underground oven) for a Sunday lunch and attending weekly church services, something that my parents back in the UK were particularly fond of hearing about, were great experiences to get stuck into Fijian family life.

As I have mentioned previously, exploring leadership was something that I had often shied away from doing, but having contained the knowledge acquired from the tailored leadership workshops which ran throughout the academic year along with the experiences of my research project, I felt as if I had packed these skills into a backpack of their own to take with me. I was confident in applying these during my LiA and hoped to delve into more key attributes central to my development as a leader that I hadn't had the chance to the previous summer.



**Figure 4.** *Korohila* family activity helping to prepare and cook casava and fish in the *lovo* after going to Sunday service with our *tou* (father). Credits: William of *Korohila*

My general leadership abilities had already vastly improved since the start of my first summer, and a distinct instance of applying them was in a youth empowerment workshop on Pollution. The session's task instructed us to split into groups to present ways to adopt effective recycling practices and products to use instead of those containing pollutants such as plastic. One of the key objectives that we had to include was a poster on this subject to present to the room. Being well acquainted with performance anxiety, I was determined for

everyone to contribute to this task in a way they felt comfortable having noticed a few of the younger members being reluctant to talk. So, after we drew up a basic poster structure that would be simple to follow, I asked everyone on the team what they would prefer to do and if they wanted to contribute in a specific way that was personal to them. We were able to quickly gather our ideas and utilise some of our personal belongings and anecdotes to give an engaging presentation which was briefly featured on AFG's Instagram story.

Another one of these attributes that I wished to explore more intensively was collaboration and teamwork. Collaborating with and working with a large team of people was fundamental to the progress of our LiA. From helping saw a piece of wood on the building site to finding the right colour crayon for the climate change awareness posters, without teamwork and maintaining relationships with those around you, getting the outcomes you hope for alone was not a viable option. Sometimes being in a team is also about learning to listen and observe especially when it came to my lessons in the Nandro dialect by my namesake the eight-year-old Jima (*tch-ee-ma*). Plus, leadership and teamwork do not always need to be for serious situations. For example, making the younger children of our host family tire themselves out so much so they can go to bed and be ready for school in the morning with a dance my homestay roommate Diyar and me invented springs to mind.

Moreover, testing and figuring out my strengths and weaknesses and communicating these with the rest of the team was something that I learnt to adopt throughout my LiA especially when it came to the building project. Previously, I was more inclined to just slot myself into a familiar role and remain there without challenging myself or asking for help even when I needed it. For instance, initially, I was not the best with carrying out work higher up the building such as roofing and instead suggested that I would be more useful in using a handsaw, painting wood, and nailing in beams that were low to the ground. Despite this and despite being comfortable with these tasks, towards the end of the build along with words of encouragement from my leadership supervisor and the group, I decided to properly attempt to face my fear and managed to help with painting part of the upper part of the health centre whilst on a scaffold where my height was, funnily enough, an advantage for crouching under the roof.

Undertaking building work in intense tropical heat, constantly remembering to stay hydrated safely, and battling bouts of illness were perhaps the most notable physical challenges I experienced during the LiA and times when resilience was crucial to maintain. Nonetheless, my discomforts did not detract from the importance of our task at hand. By completing the building to the required specifications, the village was able to finally be acknowledged as ready to receive a doctor, as per ministerial guidelines. In turn helping to provide the people of Toga with their journey to getting better access to healthcare and medicine compared to solely relying on the public hospital which on a day with good weather, was over an hour's drive away if you could not cross the river.



**Figure 5.** Myself nervously clinging to the wooden skeleton of the health centre, I quickly climbed down shortly after this photo was taken. Picture credits: Corey Jones, University of Leeds.

## **Conclusion**

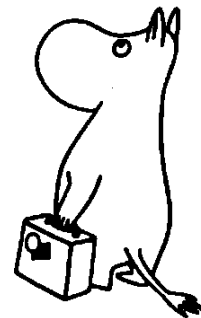
Overall, during the past two years, I have learnt invaluable skills about approaching and conducting research, the importance of making a positive impact, and how to be an ethical and sustainable leader during a time where it seems more important than ever before. Throughout my time at Durham University and whilst in Fiji, I have met some brilliant like-minded people and have been challenged in ways that I once never thought would be possible for someone like myself. Undoubtedly, I will cherish these experiences for the rest of my academic, professional, and personal life and will carry them with me as I apply for a postgraduate history degree to specialise in post-emancipation Caribbean history for my thesis.

Additionally, I would like to say an array of thank yous. To Lord Laidlaw for facilitating this brilliant opportunity, my summer research supervisor Dr Giles Gasper, the Durham Laidlaw Society, the Durham Laidlaw Foundation scholarships co-ordinators who have seen our cohort at Durham through – Lucy, Matteo, Laura, Chantelle, and Kelci, my second summer leadership mentor and now dissertation supervisor Dr Liam Liburd, my ThinkPacific mentor

Becca, and my host family at *Korohila* (the village) who reside in the aqua blue house by the path down to the Sigatoka River whom I will never forget.

Instead of concluding this report with a quotation from Angela Davis or Marie Colvin whom I referenced in my interview and still consider as inspirations of good leadership, I shall leave you, readers, with a quotation from the much-loved *Moomin* franchise that encapsulates my mindset now:

**‘And besides, one gets so tired of everlastingly sitting in the same place.’<sup>2</sup>**



Thank you for reading, and if you have not already, please check out my research paper and conclusions video available on the Scholars' Network and have a good day, night, or anything in between!

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<sup>2</sup> Spoken by the character Moominmama in Tove Jansson, *Finn Family Moomintroll*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (trans.) E. Portch (1950)