

HistGeogUni

A Global Research Network on the Historical Geographies of the University

FLOATING UNIVERSITY

The World Its Campus



OFFICIAL ORGAN OF THE INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY CRUISE

HistGeogUni Lecture 2019

Thursday, 23 May 2019, 16:00 to 17:30

*Welcome address by Professor Nicholas J Clifford,
Dean of the School of Social Sciences*

Dr Tamson Pietsch

University of Technology Sydney

How to Know the World?

The Floating University in the Age of American Empire

Followed by a reception in Geography & Environment

Centre for Research in Communication and Culture
Loughborough University, [Brockington Extension](#), Room U.0.05

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How to Know the World?

The Floating University in the Age of American Empire



Dr Tamson Pietsch

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In September 1926, 500 American university students left New York on the Floating University. The brainchild of New York University's Professor of Psychology, James E. Lough, it was billed as an eight-month 'educational cruise around the world' that would stop at forty-seven ports and pay visits to foreign dignitaries including the King of Siam, the Sultan of Jodhpur, Mussolini and the Pope. The venture promised a 'world education' to students: a 'college year of educational travel and systematic study to develop an interest in foreign affairs, to train students to think in world terms, and to strengthen international understanding and good will.' Professor Lough's 'pedagogical experiment' had strong intellectual foundations in the new psychology and new educational movements pioneered in the United States by William James and John Dewey, and it answered a rapidly growing demand for international student travel.

But what world were the Floating University students learning to know? Despite their differing pedagogical approaches, Professor Lough and his detractors in the United States were entangled in the politics of America's emerging global power, and what the students learnt on the voyage was deeply inflected by its expanding imperial geographies. The Floating University sailed along the contours of American commercial, cultural, and military power in the Pacific, the Philippines, and Belgium. The students rode on the coat tails of older European empires, the governors of which were wary of the young Americans, even as they welcomed them in Algeria, Hong Kong, and Java. But, every now and then, other ways of knowing forced themselves onto the ship. What did rising Japanese industrial power mean? Why did the King of Siam host the students in his palace? Was US rule in the Philippines justified? Why did the Floating University keep losing the sporting competitions with local university teams?

This lecture takes up these questions as part of a wider exploration of American universities' claims to authority over knowledge of the world in the interwar period.