

Eric Hobsbawm

Born 1917.

Life story interview by Alan Macfarlane.

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The text of this life story is transcribed, with thanks and acknowledgement, from the collection of Filmed Interviews with Leading Thinkers at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. The interview was carried out by Prof. Alan Macfarlane on 13th September 2009, and was transcribed by Sarah Harrison. The video is here; <https://www.sms.cam.ac.uk/media/1121594>

1. My Parents

I was born in Alexandria, Egypt, where I was registered with the British Consulate. My birth certificate contains two errors as they misspelt my name and got the date of my birth one day wrong. The effect has been that I have had to live with what is in my documents, not what I know to be true.

On my father's side my grandparent was probably born around 1838 and died in 1927. He was a Jewish cabinet maker and migrated to England in the early 1870s. He was a widower by then and migrated with a daughter by his first marriage and with one child of his second. All my relatives from that time on were born in England. I think they migrated from Warsaw but have no idea why he came; he died before I knew him, and the rest of the family didn't know much either or didn't want to talk about it. For what it is worth, he arrived before the main migration from Europe started.

They were first registered in the census in 1881; as usual the name was misspelt. If we still lived in an oral society it would have gradually have weathered down to either Hobson or Osborn. My paternal grandmother died long before I was born. On my mother's side, my grandfather was born about 1869. Jews were not allowed to go into Vienna before the 1840s except for a small privileged minority. They originally came from the area where Austria, Czechoslovakia and Hungary meet. By the time that I knew anything about the family they had migrated to Vienna. My paternal grandfather remained a cabinet maker and at least one of his sons carried on in the trade. I think it was a fairly undistinguished family. It had no record of education, learning, business activity or business success.

The English part of the family remained on the very lowest slopes of lower middle class. The sons became post office workers, teachers, that sort of thing. Only one somehow managed to get some kind of secondary education and became a chemist. He eventually emigrated to Chile. I was, I think, the first of the family to go full-time to university. At least one of the others, my cousin, managed to do some part-time higher education and became quite an important statistician in the Ministry of Labour.

During the age of imperialism a number of the family left England; two of the brothers went to Egypt, one to Chile. The basis of the English family was and remained my uncle Harry, who eventually became the first Labour mayor of the Borough of Paddington, a telegraphist all his life.

Mother's family was sort of middle-middle class - business - my grandfather's trade was jewellery. That collapsed after the First World War and my grandfather ended his career as a commercial traveller to Alpine villages. Up to the end of the first war he was doing quite well. It was a much more cultured family; the essence of the culture of my father's family was that they assimilated and became very English. My mother's family shared Central European Hapsburg culture and I got a lot out of that. In neither case were they very successful in material terms.

My father joined my mother after the First World War in Austria. He took some savings in hard currency but proved himself to be totally incapable of earning a living on his own. He was a person who could do well in the British colonial situation, where a young man, very good at sports, with certain social graces, could always find a job. However, plunged into Austria and trying to make his own living as an independent business man, he was a total failure.

It put a lot of stress on the family, at least on my mother. It drove him to desperation and he died during a very bad winter. My mother could not forgive herself for berating him for his failure to provide money. Within a few months of my father's death she got a very bad lung infection and within two years was dead. Fortunately my parents had married each other's sibling, and I and my sister were taken over by my uncle and aunt. We then went to Berlin where I stayed until we came to England.

My mother was literary, in fact she wrote a novel or two. In Vienna she had circulated with other intelligent people. She was not ambitious for herself but I think she had hopes for me. She was an anglophile and as I was interested in things like birds she thought I might later join the Indian Forestry Service. She was a great admirer of Kipling. She died before there was any prospect of that.

I can't recall anything about my father; I did not get on very well with him; he tried to teach me boxing and it didn't work. I think my uncle did have ambitions and wanted to be something other than just a businessman. He would work in music, show-business and culture, and eventually talked himself into the movie business. He was an extremely good chess player through which he got into intelligence during World War I. However in those days it was not a potential career, so there was nothing much he could do with it afterwards. He did realize that I was very bright and did his best to push me, although he had no idea about how to go about it.

2. My Early Life



Ringstrasse, Vienna.

In the relatively short period when my father thought he had some money we lived in a very elaborate villa, which you can still see when you come into Vienna by train from the west. There we were two families; we made friends with the four girls of the other family. Also we had visits from our relatives, so it was very nice. My first really political memory was in 1923 during the French occupation of the Ruhr. German children were evacuated to places like Austria, and one or two were in our class. I took one into our garden and showed him how to climb our favourite tree, and he explained what had happened. I remember the experience, but only in retrospect can I see that it was my first political experience.

My first school was a primary school in the suburbs of Vienna. I remember the school but none of the teachers. It was quite a good foundation for history because there was a lot about the Viennese past, and people used to take us out for walks in the hills and talk about cave men and encourage us to look for fossils. In so far as we heard about history, it wasn't the boring things, but accounts of the Turkish siege of Vienna, and the coffee that they left behind which led to the Viennese coffee houses. It is the sort of thing that registers with children. After that school I went to three secondary schools in Vienna because things got a bit rough after the death of my father. I went to a fourth in Berlin, so I had a somewhat disrupted secondary education. I don't remember any of the Austrian teachers except the last one in the 18th District, because he was at the same time a noted football commentator. I am not certain I developed any degree of personal relationship with any of them, unlike the secondary school teachers in Berlin and later on in London. In Vienna I was two years at a school in the 13th District, one year in the 3rd District, and one year in the 18th District; I spent about eighteen months in Berlin, and was just coming up to sixteen when we moved to England.

3. Family Life



A hawfinch.

I enjoyed watching birds. The last time I saw my mother, who was dying in a sanatorium, I looked out of a window and saw a Haw finch. That is in a sense my last memory of my mother.

I was not much of a sportsman but joined the Boy Scouts. After my father died I was sent to England and there was some hope that I would stay there with a sister of my mother. It didn't work out but I acquired a taste for the Boy Scouts and joined them when I got back to Vienna. I might have stuck with them if there had been any in Germany. After my mother got ill she couldn't look after anybody. My uncle and aunt took my sister to Berlin. I stayed in Vienna for another year or so.

At one time I was supposed to live with some relatives but it didn't last. Somebody arranged to put me into the house of a lady where I was supposed to talk English with her young boy. Her name was Mrs Effenberger, an officer's widow, originally from Bohemia. While there I used to go and visit my mother in hospital every week or so. It was not a very successful year.

Both my parents and step-parents were secularized Jews. I don't think I ever went to a Synagogue except for funerals. As far as I am aware my father's generation was also secularized. I didn't even know until I reached puberty that I had been circumcised. My mother's parents had insisted it was done. I was never bar mitzvared but I got some Jewish instruction because the Jews in school were sent to another school for such.

There is no question of religious practice in my life, but at the same time it was clear to anyone in Central Europe whether you were Jews or not. Jews were regarded as different. I have conducted my life on the principle inculcated by my mother, who told me, when she heard me making an undesirable remark about Jewish behaviour, that in no circumstances should I ever say anything that would suggest I was ashamed of being Jewish.

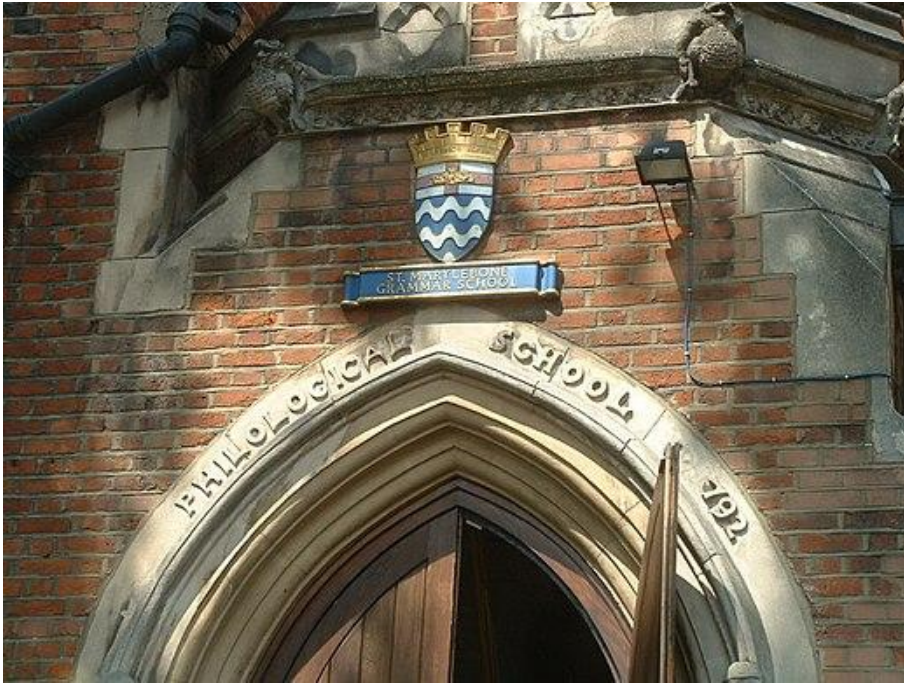
In Austria between the wars it was legally possible on reaching the age of thirteen to declare yourself without religion. I would have done so except for this principle.

Alas it doesn't mean that one wasn't part of the Jewish problem, but not from the point of view of traditional or religious practices

On the whole, while I was engaged in either history or political activities, being Jewish was not a thing that was particularly significant. I sympathize very much with Gombrich's remark that there was no Jewish culture in Vienna, and that he was brought up in the middle class culture of Vienna. Seen from outside it is fairly clear that having lived a life between cultures, being the member of a kin group which was distributed over various areas of the globe, does give you a slightly different angle on nations and nationalism. It does not make you immune to nationalism. I never fell for the Jewish nationalism, possibly because it seemed to me to be too much the opposite number to the German nationalism that surrounded me.

Of course, I am interested in religion. I came across it very much when working on the pre-political movements of social protest. The language in which they spoke was a religious language. I would also say that one would recognise the force of the religious sentiment in some cases. It was very clear, for instance, in so far as I got interested in jazz and black music, gospel and spirituals were genuinely expressions of something that was profoundly important to the people concerned although it wasn't so important for me. I don't reject it, but to me personally religion has no importance.

4. Arriving in England



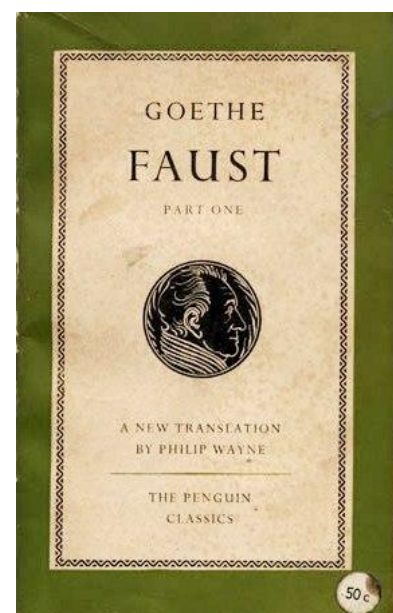
St. Marylebone Grammar School was founded in 1792 as the Philological Society. Its object was to help "the heads of families, who by unexpected misfortune, have been reduced from a station of comfort and respectability."

When I came to England I first stayed with my telegraphist uncle, Harry, and he arranged for me to go to the school where his son had gone - St Marylebone Grammar School, a very good school, a London County Council school though it tried to follow the basic style of public schools, which irritated a number of us.

I can remember the first interview with the head-master, a man called Philip Wayne, who eventually produced a translation of 'Faust' for the Penguin Classics. He apologised to me that they could not teach me Greek as they only taught Latin. He immediately pressed me to look at a volume of Kant and to read Hazlitt.

I think he had thought I looked fairly promising, but at all events these were people who took an interest. I managed to get through the matriculation in about two or three months, never having done any of the things before.

I then went straight into the arts sixth form; I am bound to say that I owe them a great deal. Here was someone who had never been to an English school, never knew much but domestic English, and to manage within a matter of two or three years to get to Cambridge was really quite an achievement for the school. I was also helped by the Marylebone public library; I am sure that for anybody of my age and perhaps later, the public library was an institution which was absolutely central for education.



Fortunately it was near the school so I used to go there for books in the lunch break. The combination of good teaching and the public library was really important for me.

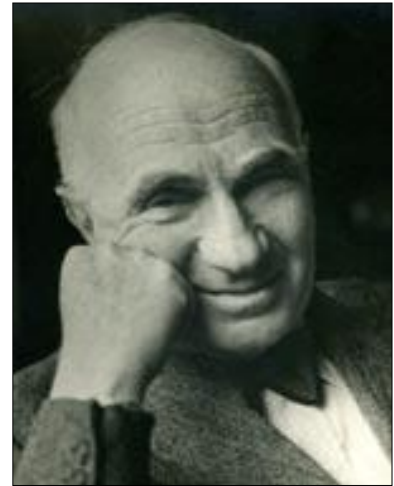
The history teacher, Harold Llewellyn-Smith, was not a particularly good historian, but very well connected. He was the son of a major figure in Edwardian social policy, a man who was then head of the New London Survey at the LSE. He did everything he could for me, including sending my essays to the Webbs to check. He did his best though I did not really learn very much history from him. When I came to Cambridge I discovered that what was being taught was totally different from anything in secondary school, but without him I certainly would not have gone to Cambridge. He knew the ropes, and what to do to get scholarships. In fact I got the most interesting teaching not from him but from the English teachers.

There was a debating club at school and at one stage I won a debating cup. They tried to get me onto sports but as I had never done any cricket it was really too late at sixteen. Curiously enough, in Germany I had been very sporting, particularly rowing. I tried looking for the boat club again in Cambridge and then discovered you were to spend all the afternoon there, and that didn't interest me. I spent a good deal of time cycling and wandering around England, with my cousin and my close friends.

5. King's College Cambridge

I went to King's Cambridge because I won a scholarship; it was the first scholarship exam I took, otherwise I would have tried Oxford. I took the exam in 1935 and I went up in 1936. Morris, Saltmarsh and Balfour were my teachers. Of these, Saltmarsh was a genuine scholar. I didn't learn as much as I could from him but admired him for his sheer learning. Christopher Morris asked what he thought were Socratic questions which is quite good for bright undergraduates, but he didn't actually teach anything.

The only person in Cambridge whose lectures I stayed with was Michael Postan (right). He was fine until I became a graduate, then he was no good. His lectures were the ones that all the bright young historians went to, a marvellous act and a very clever man. One of his fantasies was that he knew everything so there was never a question to which he would say he didn't know the answer, which is very dangerous.



I remember once in Harvard talking to Gerschenkron, who was also a Russian and in some ways of more solid achievement, who didn't hesitate to say that he didn't know the answer. Morgan Forster was not at King's until after the War but I got to know him pretty well then.

King's was enormously tolerant, even of not very good looking people from grammar schools who were not homosexual, but I don't think I was ever part of the Fellow's social scene. I was never invited to join the Ten Club and things like that. On the other hand, as between the various students, King's was particularly good because relationships were very close.

The only other man in King's who had some kind of influence was old Clapham who still presided over a thing called the Political Society, which was a meeting of the history students. It was very good. Frankly, I found that one learned much more from one's own contemporaries and from libraries, particularly from discussions with socialists, Marxists etc. There was an enormous amount of debates and readings.

I was the last election before the War to the Apostles. That was when I discovered there were higher echelons in Cambridge. After that the War almost immediately started and I almost de facto restarted the Apostles in Cambridge after the War because there were very few of us left. The Angels, the older members, were still around and I got to know a lot of them, and very obviously, Morgan Forster.

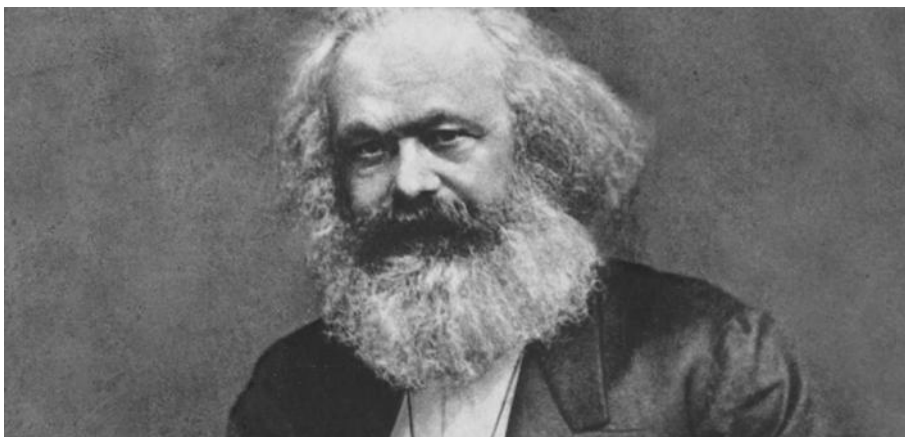
I never met Keynes before the War, being neither an economist nor being in his social group; Morgan was difficult to define, he seemed a hangover from a past generation both in the way in which he behaved and his reactions; he had two really great loyalties, one was essentially to friendship and the other, being homosexual, was enormously important to him. Looking back I can't give him retrospectively a sort of shape. I can see his behaviour, can see him coming to visit me when I was

ill, can see myself taking him in London to the 'Establishment Club' and then back to his flat in Fulham. He was most polite and terribly nice.



E.M.Forster.

6. Marxism and History



Karl Marx.

I thought of myself as a Communist from 1932 when I declared myself as such in my German school. A master said that I clearly did not know what I was talking about and that I should go to the school library. There I found the 'Communist Manifesto' and was converted both to Marxism and history, essentially asking the great evolutionary questions. I joined the Party when I got to Cambridge in 1936.

I found the Marxist approach to history important because of its evolutionary approach. How did human beings form societies and how did these turn us from hunter-gatherers to where we are today? There is no way of understanding history without asking these questions. The other question which at that time preoccupied me much more was the relationship between what Marx would have called base and superstructure. Namely culture and what is it in a particular society which explains the particular formation of cultural events, and how does this relate to the rest.

I rejected the usual Central European things like zeitgeist, but basically that was the one historic question that I first posed to myself. It was the fact that I couldn't think of anything else which offered an equally fertile framework. This not only applied to history but with all manner of other things. I grew up believing that Marxism was something that covers everything. It is not where history theory can be isolated either from natural science on one hand or from other disciplines or other areas of interest. That doesn't mean that I actually pursued this as a systematic project in history. This is a curious situation as almost all the things I have done in history have been occasioned from outside. The thing that has given them unity is a the coherent picture of historical change and historical development which is what I got from Marxism.

My work on social banditry emerged accidentally; I was going around Italy and Spain at the time and was curious about it. At that time the anthropologists in Cambridge and Manchester were interested in problems concerning the Mau Mau. Max Gluckman asked me if there was anything like Mau Mau in earlier history, and could I come and talk to a seminar. He then asked me to give some lectures at Manchester. Norman Cohn was there among others. After the lectures, Gluckman asked whether I would write a book on the subject if he could get a contract from

Manchester University Press, and that is how it happened. Certainly all my books came about in this manner, even my choice of research subjects.

My original research subject would have been the agrarian problem in North Africa because I got a travel grant in 1938 for that and was absolutely fascinated by it. I couldn't do anything very much as I was called up in February 1940. During the course of the War I married and felt I would not be able to go to Algeria afterwards.

I looked around for something else that I could work on before the war ended. I hit upon the Fabian Society, but eventually felt that it wasn't interesting enough. In the course of doing it I had been hunting around the LSE and discovered the Webb collection. They showed how trade unions actually worked. 'Industrial Democracy', the book they wrote about it is in my view the best book ever written on the subject. I realised that it was the angle on labour history that I wanted to take - not the history of events but of the structures at the bottom.

George Weidenfeld thought he might risk 'The Nineteenth Century' trilogy. The first volume worked out quite well and was mostly based on what I was lecturing on. I was then at Birkbeck. I had five years at Cambridge before that but couldn't get a job there. 'The Invention of Tradition' was an idea of my own. I organised a conference for Past and Present where we discussed it. After the conference it was suggested that I collaborate with Terence Ranger on a book. I have had ideas on books but would not normally set about writing on my own.

So, on the one hand my books are accidental and unplanned, on the other hand there is an intuitive element. I think I am to some respect in my choice of interests led by intuition rather than planning which may explain why I have managed with luck to hit on the right moment. At the time of 'Primitive Rebels', lots of people were working around the subject. When it came out, somewhat to my surprise, it had quite a lot of influence in social science in America. Such phrases as "social banditry" were taken up.

Another example is 'The Seventeenth Century Crisis' which began as a problem that I ran into in my European History lectures to Birkbeck students. I felt it needed to be thought about, I got it published, and again it had a surprisingly wide and lasting effect. It isn't dead yet as only two or three issues ago, 'The American Review' had an article on the seventeenth century crisis. The phrase was mine though the idea was implicit in work of Braudel and other French writers. 'Invention of Tradition' is similar - something I had vaguely thought around but at a certain stage people took it up. 'Nationalism' - I was not the only person working on the subject in the 1980s; I gave the Wiles lectures in Belfast and it was an obvious subject to pick. I think my main contribution has been pushing and pioneering ideas, and partly working out syntheses, inspired essentially by Marx.

7. My Working Methods

On work methods - I did a bit of card-indexing but not a lot. I use to work mostly with notebooks which would then be indexed to some extent, but relying on a good memory which is now unfortunately no longer the case. I wrote on a typewriter almost from the start, then for twenty year on a computer. It is not perfect but the trouble is that it is too easy to revise on a computer. Mostly I have been lucky enough that my editors have not interfered too much.

On the other hand with the autobiography I had Stuart Proffitt of Allen Lane, a prince among editors; he read it and was very helpful as I had to cut it down very severely. I enjoy writing if it goes well. Music probably gets in the way of writing; it is a very personal business; my friend Chuck Tilly (right) wrote to persistent, constant music. I couldn't possibly do that as I would stop and listen.



I specifically try to write in a communicable fashion; the basic test that one is doing in a lifetime of teaching, particularly when teaching people who spend most of the day working and are not very lively, is that you have got to keep them awake during an 8 to 9 o'clock lecture at night; the same thing goes for the writing. Having had some journalistic experience is useful though I am not a natural journalist. But ever since I was on 'Granta' in Cambridge, which I edited at one time, I have been writing bits and pieces; the idea of writing to length and deadline, particularly length, has been very useful.

My eureka moments come mostly when I am writing. I sometimes think about what I am going to write when walking. One of the big problems of talking to people is that you want to acknowledge them, but for practical purposes it is not easy. It is easy enough if I acquire some information that I didn't know, say from a student. It is easy enough to say that this point was made to me by X, but it does so much depend on interchanges, possibly in the past, that one is always afraid. One's right to one's own ideas is also important in our trade. I don't think I have been accused of copying too much.

I used to be very good at lecturing, I am not so sure about supervising. I have got a feeling as far as students are concerned they might get a lot from hearing me talk, developing ideas, but I don't think I have been particularly good at actually getting them to do it themselves. When I have supervised PhDs I can sometimes give them ideas, but I find that a lot of the time I have to give them technical advice which is a pedagogic but not intellectual contribution. I enjoy talking.

8. After the War



Eric Hobsbawm.

They would not let me leave England during the War; I suspect that I had an MI5 file although my attempts to get at it have been a total failure. There has certainly been one but the question is when it started. I suspect it was there during the War, but before that I had been a very prominent Communist Party person in Cambridge. I could only have got out of the country by a bureaucratic mix-up, as happened with James Klugmann who was already on the troop ship when MI5 realized and they couldn't get him back.

I came back to Cambridge after the War; in early 1946 having had a really boring and unnecessary war, of which I naturally approved. I was supposed to have been sent to Palestine. I figured it was too complicated to send a Jewish Communist at that stage to Palestine, so I wrote to King's, where I had a studentship, and they got me back.

I started a fellowship dissertation but within a year I got the job at Birkbeck and stayed there, although when my first marriage broke up I moved back to Cambridge for a few years on a Fellowship. Meyer Fortes was there by that time, Jack Gallagher was back at Trinity. My dealings were mostly with the economists because I supervised and examined economic history for the economics tripos. I

didn't get a job, but had more contact then with Nicky Kaldor, Sraffa, Joan Robinson, and Richard Kahn.

It was politics that prevented my getting a job in Cambridge. To the best of my knowledge I have never suffered any discrimination as a Jew; it may even have been local politics because of a curious division within the Cambridge economics faculty. Whatever it is it was lucky for me that I got the job as the cut-off point for Reds during the Cold War was roughly speaking in May 1948, the Berlin airlift. If you had an academic job before then you were OK, though you couldn't expect to get much promotion. If you had no job then you had enormous problems.

To the best of my knowledge hardly any known Communists got academic jobs in those ten years, though you could say Edward Thompson was hired later, but that was in adult education. In Cambridge there were three, possibly four jobs in the economics faculty for which I applied, of which two appointees were clearly inferior. The one who I thought was a reasonable appointment over me was Ken Berrill (right). He was a good friend and after the change he offered to give me the same job within the faculty, but I said it was a bit late. Then I was in for the Chair which David Joslin got. The curious business is that institutionally in England the Cold War was present, but as far as I am aware it hardly impinged on the actual intellectual field of history. Whether people got a reputation both in this country or elsewhere, I don't think was at all affected by the Cold War.



The more important aspect of my life is as a politically committed historian. My actual political activities as such are of no particular moment. My history books have had political echoes, if only symptomatic ones. I have noticed that you can very often test the change in the political atmosphere in a country by the moment at which the people start translating my books.

In Spain this began to happen in the later 1960s as Francoism was wound down, at a time when the great bulk of university people were passionately opposed, and it proved to be possible to publish the works of people who were not actually called Marx or Lenin. In Brazil the real testing point came in the early 1970s when the dictatorship became slightly liberalized. I discovered by sheer chance in Korea in the late 1980s that they had already pirated about five of my titles. It was just about that moment when they were moving from dictatorship. The same thing must have happened in Taiwan but I have never been there. In Turkey it is quite clear that since the 1990s this has been happening. In places like Argentina an enormous amount was pirated so I don't know when it started.

This had two effects, partly through time, as my titles remained in print, but partly also because the people who then became radicalized, the young student generation, would eventually become editors, publishers, ministers. In that way, books like mine had some kind of impact, more in some countries than others, dramatically so

in Brazil which is for some reason my best market. They did so because they were readable.

I think that is the importance of trying to walk the tightrope between being acceptable to one's colleagues within the field, and at the same time being understandable to that ideal type, the educated citizen. My effect within the field of historiography is much harder to assess and I don't think I am the person to make such an assessment.
