



Q&A

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What area of research do you focus on and why?

I'm an early modernist, so I work roughly in the period 1550-1750. There's no consensus about the chronological frame of early modernity, nor should there be, not least because 'early modern' would have meant nothing to people alive at the time. Political historians might use regnal dates - for example, 1485-1714, or 1588-1689 - but social and cultural historians like me are more likely to round things up. We just need to remember that the period was a transitional bridge between medieval and modern, which for me is its key appeal. I'm a modernist at heart, but always interested how modern mentalities, identities and institutions first came into being.

What book in your field should everyone read?

A tricky question because there are so many. I still think Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971) is one of the most inspiring works of early modern history, first because it offers a broad, sweeping explanation of change in English religious life, and secondly because it is crammed with fascinating nuggets of social history, many of them extremely strange.

Which book inspired you to study History?

See above! Among other works that made a deep impression on me as student are E. P. Thompson's *Customs in Common* and Peter Linebaugh's *The London Hanged*, both powerful pieces of Marxist-inspired social history about the suffering and resistance of the poor, focusing on the eighteenth century. Another couple of extraordinary books are: *Mystical Bedlam* by Michael MacDonald, a moving social history of insanity in seventeenth-century England; and C. L. Ewen's *Witch-Hunting and Witch-Trials*, a handy compendium of indictments trawled from the archives in the 1930s. I was also very taken with Keith Wrightson's *English Society, 1580-1680*, which stresses continuities as well as change. Keith became my doctoral supervisor, a bit of good fortune that changed my life.

What book are you currently reading?

Hilary Mantel's *The Mirror and the Light*, the massive, engrossing third instalment in her trilogy of novels about the life of Thomas Cromwell. Mantel possesses almost unbelievable imaginative insight and a genius for organizing ideas and information, with the lightest touch, across an impossibly vast narrative structure. The books are not big in timespan, but in depth and detail they are enormous.

Which historian has had the greatest influence on you?

I guess the answer lies mostly in my book recommendations. In my time as an early modern social historian, it has to be my supervisor and mentor, Keith Wrightson, now Professor of History at Yale. But when I was at school, and only studying the modern era, it was A. J. P. Taylor, who these days is not forgotten but is doubtless unfashionable. He wrote with clarity, humour, and an unerring ability to fix a point to the page using a well-chosen, vivid image or anecdote. His *English History, 1914-45* was a game-changer for me, a work that explained so much, so confidently and elegantly, with charm and without condescension.

We look forward to welcoming Prof. Malcolm Gaskill to CamVC soon!



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