Clip: BRIGGS ASA_ASA BRIGGS WITH JOSE HARRIS OXFOI

Name: BRIGGS ASA_ASA BRIGGS WITH JOSE HARRIS OXFORD _MASTER USE FOR DUPLICATION_BOX1_cust ref_MID19725745

S1 **00:03:09:08**
I'm sitting in the study of the Provost lodging at Worcester College, Oxford, and it's my great pleasure to introduce Asa Briggs. Social Labour economic historian, historian of the BBC, first Vice Chancellor of Sussex University and now provost of this college. And Eisa, may I start by saying that I think you you've had a far more public and entrepreneurial career than most academic historians, and yet I think you're in many ways a rather anonymous figure. And I'd like to begin by probing a little into your personal and intellectual biography and asking you a few questions about your background and where you came from. Now, I know you were born and educated in Keighley, and I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about what went into your your personal upbringing and how it is that you came to be a historian.

S2 **00:04:24:20**
Well, I was born in Keighley, which is a very interesting small town, which is interesting because it's at the point where industry meets wilderness, a smoky industrial town. But the Moors are just behind. And at the school where I was, Keighley Grammar School, there were boys who came from the countryside as well as from the town, from Haworth, for example, where the Brontes lived.

S1 **00:04:50:05**
And yourself lived in the town?

Clip: BRIGGS ASA_ASA BRIGGS WITH JOSE HARRIS OXFO

S2 **00:04:51:15**

I lived in the town. I was born in the heart of the town in a working class district of the town. My father, at when I was a very small boy, was a shopkeeper and very unwillingly. So he got the shop from my mother's father and he was really rather a successful shopkeeper. Uh, my father had been born at Barrow in Furness or in Ulverston and worked in Barrow in Furness at Vickers as an engineer. And during the 1930s when the Depression really hit Keighley very hard. And the shop became a very unprofitable proposition. It was abandoned and my father went back then to work in the local textile engineering plant. I had an interesting childhood. In a working class neighborhood, the fortunes of which I knew intimately. Uh, my mother really had a very different background. Her father, who really originally went to the shop, had been a farmer on the marginal lands of the moors, and there was a considerable difference in attitude and outlook between my father's side of the family and my mother's side of the family. I went to the local elementary school, which was in a few yards of the place where I lived.

S1 **00:06:27:15**

Pause for one moment before you tell me about that. It's the background of Margaret Thatcher and of Robert Roberts, isn't it?

S2 **00:06:35:09**

No, because, in fact, there was by no means any sense of security or prosperity. Uh, my childhood was not characterized by having a great deal of money or being conscious of a great deal of money around. Uh, Keighley and Grantham are very different places. Uh, I was also in a really genuine working class part of Keighley, which was different from the town centre. It wasn't a town centre shop. My father had no role in local public life, nor indeed did my mother's family say that I was not really brought into any contact with even local municipal power.

S1 **00:07:22:03**

Right. What about nonconformity?

Clip: BRIGGS ASA_ASA BRIGGS WITH JOSE HARRIS OXFO

S2 **00:07:24:16**

Nonconformity was interesting because my father was an Anglican and my mother was a Congregationalist and I therefore did learn a great deal about religion as a boy and I was extremely interested in it and I remained interested in religion throughout the whole of my life. I was I was brought up largely as a Congregationalist, but my closest friends in Keighley when I was at school were Methodists, and also I had an Anglican, if you like, background also through my father and I. Then when I went into the Army in 1941, I really lost contact with Non-Conformity in a way as a direct influence on my life. But it was quite a prominent influence on my childhood.

S1 **00:08:15:18**

Yes. Did I mean, did or does religion have any part in your personal philosophy?

S2 **00:08:21:07**

Oh, yes, it still does.

S1 **00:08:22:18**

Right. Could you say in what way?

S2 **00:08:27:04**

I have felt myself at various points of my life that I have been tempted, as it were, to return to certain aspects of my boyhood religion. Uh, since I've been provost of the college, I have probably been more actively involved with the chapel in the college than most heads of colleges are. Uh, and I have always from in, in my own particular kind of way, without any fuss. I've always continued to go to church.

S1 **00:09:00:24**

Yes. Your numerous writings on Victorian history time and again touch upon religion as an activity or as a producer of objects, but they're curiously silent on the issue of the Victorian angst over the existence of God. And I wondered about this and whether it tells us anything about you.

S2 **00:09:30:01**
I think that I was interested in the nature and manifestations of the Victorian angst, partly because of the fact that I had been brought up in the kind of environment that I was brought up in, but I have never myself really shared in that Victorian angst any more than I share in a belief in what are called Victorian values. I'm interested in the angst, but I've never shared it. I should also say, and I think it's very important to make this point clear, that religion has never played the same role in my life or in my writing as it played, for example, in Herbert Butterfield's life. And Butterfield was born in the same place he was. He went to Keighley Grammar School, as I did, but he was born in the countryside on the edge of the moors, literally. And he was a very active Methodist throughout the whole of his life. I never really have lived or wanted to live in that particular way.

S1 **00:10:32:07**
It's a kind of cultural framework.

S2 **00:10:34:12**
Rather it's it's a framework and it gives me still a feeling of continuity between the later stages of my life, in the early stages of my life.

S1 **00:10:43:22**
Yes. Right. I'm very intrigued by this background. And what are political inputs from it? I mean, did you did you grow up with a political perception of the world?

Clip: BRIGGS ASA_ASA BRIGGS WITH JOSE HARRIS OXFO

S2 **00:10:56:20**

I grew up really in a world which was extremely interested in politics. I remember very clearly as a boy, the 1931 election in Keighley. Uh, in the area in which I lived. There were people who were very actively involved in Labor Party politics and I knew these well and talked to them a great deal so that my political consciousness at the age of 13 or 14 was pretty acute for those times. I was extremely interested in the relationship between economics and politics. It was a depressed place. I was interested in essentially in terms of human experience. Uh, but I did not come from a political family. My father, probably throughout the whole of his life until the general election of 1945, voted conservative. My mother, always, throughout the whole of her life, I think, voted liberal. I bought some element of Labor Party life into the family when I was a boy. I was very much in demand as a boy speaker in the local Cooperative Society Guild and the WPA. I later became president of the WA. I had no idea when I was a boy that I'd ever become president of the W, but I got to know that world intimately.

S1 **00:12:21:24**

You mentioned that your father hated being a shopkeeper. Yes. And he sounds an interesting historical figure in his own right, this Tory Anglican vicar's shop keeping.

S2 **00:12:34:00**

It was quite an interesting figure. Is that right? It was full of life. He enjoyed betting. He enjoyed drink. He really my family descendants represented and I should say I'm very fond of them both. I had really, despite considerable economic difficulties and being very, very conscious of the pressures of worries about economics and money. I had a very interesting and happy childhood, but my mother and father were totally different. My mother used to sing in in a Congregational chapel choir, and my father would be having a drink in the pub while she was there at the service. So I've always been able to relate to chapel and pub to each other very effectively.

Clip: BRIGGS ASA_ASA BRIGGS WITH JOSE HARRIS OXFOI

S1 **00:13:20:03**

So your father's discontent with shop keeping had nothing to do with being an intellectual monkey?

S2 **00:13:25:18**

No, he was interested in music. He played the piano very well. He had not had he had had a grammar school education himself. He had quite a good influence on the early part of my life because he liked to argue and therefore, from the point of view of of being brought up in an environment which was, I think, a very stimulating environment. My arguments with my father about politics, for example, were quite intense and they were always. I think in the last resort they always left me feeling that we'd drawn some of these things rather than that I'd won them.

S3 **00:14:06:09**

Yes.

S1 **00:14:07:05**

So you presumably you you won a scholarship to.

S2 **00:14:11:12**

I went to the local elementary school. I won a scholarship to the grammar school. And then in the grammar school, I was very strongly influenced by my headmaster, who was a historian and who had been at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge himself. He was the first Bentham that I'd ever met in my life. He genuinely believed in the greatest happiness, the greatest number, and all his viewpoint of life was utilitarian. He was a great headmaster at that time. Keighley Grammar School was sending about 10 or 11 people every year to Oxford or Cambridge and a lot of other ones to Leeds into other universities. And it was thought of as being fairly axiomatic to the headmaster that since I'd done well at school, that I really ought to go to Cambridge. There's never any question of Oxford. My mother and father, of course, knew nothing about universities that nobody in my family who knew anything about universities and therefore they were very much under his influence. He belonged to a time when the headmaster

of the school had a great influence on the parents as well as on the children. And it was through him that I went to Sidney Sussex College and I went there in 1937 to take my entrance examination. I had never been to Cambridge before. I felt very forlorn when I went up. It was a very, very strange time. And I was interviewed by the senior historian at Sidney Sussex College, Passant, who subsequently went to became Librarian of the Foreign Office, a very good friend and a big influence, personal interest, not a historian, not a historical person in my life, he said to me, he said, You're only a baby. He said, But there's going to be a war. And I'm going to give you a scholarship and you get one year of peace in Cambridge, just possibly. And I did. So I owe a great debt to passant in Cambridge, but I owe an even greater debt to to to Neville Hind, the headmaster in Keighley. I should say that I was very, very evenly poised when I was at school. Now, I'd have been turned into a scientist when I did my equivalent of the GCE of the old matric. My best subjects were really chemistry and some of the science subjects. I was taught physics abominably. If I'd been taught physics well, I think I would probably even then have been strongly encouraged to go into science. But I didn't. My history was less good when I was 12 than my chemistry.

S1 **00:16:51:02**
That explains why chemistry crops up and moves in and out of the text of so many of your books.

Clip: BRIGGS ASA_ASA BRIGGS WITH JOSE HARRIS OXFO

S2 **00:16:58:06**

I'm always interested in chemistry, and even now I don't believe that there's a really good history of chemistry in the 19th century. I think that chemistry in the 19th century was the science that linked practical life with questions of theory. The difficulty it always seemed to me, and I thought a lot about this, that chemistry is in some respects rather like history. There are a lot of variables. You've got to deal with practical questions. In chemistry, you never really get down to those fundamental theoretical questions that physicists have got to deal with, or indeed, mathematicians. And similarly, I think that historians don't really get down to some of the most difficult and profound questions of theory. I'm interested in the relationship between theory and practice, but I very seldom ever write about theory. But I do myself believe that my interest in chemistry proved in a kind of way, even at that age, that I was not going to be a theoretical person, essentially, but I was going to be much more interested in policy practical issues.

S1 **00:18:02:14**

We talked about the influence of the political context of your immediate neighborhood, but what about the wider political context of the 1930, the Spanish Civil War and the international situation?

Clip: BRIGGS ASA_ASA BRIGGS WITH JOSE HARRIS OXFO

S2 **00:18:18:01**

I think that the first foreign thing that interested me was the New Deal. And I do remember giving lectures at the age of 13 and 14 on the New Deal, a new very, very little about, say, looking back upon it on on some of its significance and implications and very, very little about American politics. But I did have just one very important element in my childhood, which I have not mentioned, which is that my school did have very, very close relationship with comrades in France. And I went out to France at the age of 13 for the first time, and that was the first time that I'd ever been to London. And I went to France and spent one month with a French family who were textile manufacturers. Quite interesting in Congress. I then became extremely interested in France, and I went to France three times before the war. As a boy, I learnt to speak French very fluently, if not, if still with a certain kind of accent. But that was a very important experience to me because that did open up my horizons. I found myself arguing with French boys who were much more intellectual than we were in Keithley. That was my first experience of a bigger world. I knew nothing really of the London world. Yes, I went on two occasions before 1939 to the opera in London and about twice to the theatre. But they were all when I was an undergraduate at Cambridge in my first year.

S1 **00:19:50:16**

Yes. Does that help to explain, do you think, why you're almost unique among 19th century British historians in giving London not exactly a wide berth, but certainly cutting it down to.

S2 **00:20:03:09**

Well, I think I understand London better to tell the truth in consequence by not being a Londoner. I mean, I tried to put London in its proper place. I've written really quite a lot about London.

S1 **00:20:12:12**

Let's come back to great cities and go back to Cambridge in 1939.

S2 **00:20:18:03**
And well, I was I didn't really find it at all difficult to settle down there. Any idea of there being some social problems on the part of a scholar from a grammar school going up to Cambridge? In my case, it was missing. Uh, I settled in very, very quickly into the college and I became quite an active person in the college. I did not become an active person in politics. I did, however, play quite an active part in movements in Cambridge to improve the historical curriculum. That's right. I was involved, in fact, in that side, and I did become president of the Cambridge History Society, the chairman of the History Society, Undergraduate History Society before I left.

S1 **00:21:07:23**
What was wrong with Cambridge history?

S2 **00:21:09:17**
Well, I thought it was need to put factory and I on the hill. I've shared this general feeling about the state of history ever since. First of all, I thought there were some really outstandingly good lecturers. I was very much impressed by Herbert Butterfield's lectures. I was very much impressed by the first lectures that were given by Postern when he arrived during the war. But the best lectures I ever heard in my life were given by Eileen Power, and we were very, very lucky that Lucy was evacuated to Cambridge. So I got the full weight of Elsie. I went to Beagle's lectures. I got to know Beatles well. I heard more Elsie lectures than I heard Cambridge lectures. Ernest Berkeley literally taught me everything I did politics, political theory with him. I did English history with him, but I never wrote any essay on any event in English history after the reform bill of 1832. Not one. The person I did two years, medieval history and one year modern history. But Ernest taught me medieval history also. Through him. I really, for the first time became acquainted with German historical scholarship. This is a good Victorian thing. Also. He made me read Read Gurkha and Trisha and I really read an enormous amount of German.

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S1 **00:22:28:11**
I'd like to come back to this later, but perhaps I can just ask you now about the fact that you go on later to Victorian people, Victorian cities, Victorian things, but not Victorian thoughts. No. And just as earlier I said there was a sort of lacuna in your writing about religion as a philosophic system. I suppose one could say that there's the same about thought as a process in its own right rather than thought as a manifestation of culture.

S2 **00:23:03:18**
I think you're right in a way. But I should say that what I have written about doesn't necessarily correspond to what I have myself thought about. This is very important because I spent a lot of my life thinking and working in parts of the world far outside England. I'm very much interested in third world developments, but I've not written about them. But during the war at Cambridge, I did do a great deal of work on thought, as it were. First of all, I did the papers on political thought. I went to Oakeshott lectures and Oakeshott was an excellent lecturer, very stimulating lecture. I went. I then did the paper on the Theory of the Modern state, and of course I did my economics degree more or less in parallel, and that was genuinely a combination of economics and political thought, particularly.

S1 **00:23:52:17**
That, by the way, at LSI in Cambridge, I.

S2 **00:23:54:24**

Did it well. What I did was, first of all, it sounds a very odd and and stupid thing to be extremely rational. A friend of mine at school at Keighley and who did not go to university, decided that he would do an external degree of the University of London. So I said to him, Look, I'll keep you company. We'll do it together. I did do the economics work. I went to the economics lectures in LSC, which has less impressed by. I did go to some of the Cambridge economists. I heard Keynes once or twice. I then took the BSC econ, but through that it was a most important part of the whole of my life because first of all, it gave me real knowledge of an abstract subject.

S1 **00:24:43:21**

So both degrees, the economics degree and the history degree were actually taken simultaneously.

S2 **00:24:49:08**

There were simultaneous I took the one in Cambridge, then I went up to Bradford and I took my the BSC externally in Bradford in, what is it the present a bit of Bradford technical it part of Bradford Technical College. I. I found that it was a very, very difficult exercise is to do. I had to learn subterfuge. I was very well equipped to go into the intelligence corps because I dare not tell anybody in Cambridge that I was doing this particular thing.

S1 **00:25:19:15**

You've mentioned your work in the intelligence corps, and one does meet quite a number of historians of that generation who worked in intelligence and whose mental outlook or intellectual outlook does seem to have been shaped by that experience. And I wonder if you could tell us a little bit more about that.

S2 **00:25:41:06**

Well, I had a very interesting Army life because remember, I'm still very young. I, I was 21. I celebrated my 21st birthday in the Army. I went, first of all, into the Royal Corps of Signals, where I was very quickly diverted into Morse, breaking Japanese, first German, and then I was going to be drawn into Japanese message a bit later.

S1 **00:26:12:21**

Go in as an officer.

S2 **00:26:14:06**

I went in as a as a as a private, a signalman actually to give myself a proper title. I rose to the rank of Lance Corporal and then I'd been in the Army for. A few months when I was then transferred to the intelligence corps. The. I'm not entirely sure quite why that happened, but when I had been transferred into the intelligence corps, I was then asked by my old mathematics, the mathematics fellow in Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge. I had a letter from him saying, Would I be interested at all in being transferred to Bletchley into the into cryptography in Bletchley? And of course, naturally I thought it would be very interesting.

S1 **00:27:00:03**

You didn't at that stage feel yourself to be an embryonic professional historian?

S2 **00:27:05:21**

No, I before the war, insofar as I had thought about what I was going to do, I thought of two things I was very much interested in, in the possibility of or I didn't think of it in that word of journalism. I thought that to be an editor would be a very interesting thing. But I also was quite interested in schools, and I thought it might be a good idea to be something involved in school administration. And I and I had indeed in my vacations at Cambridge when there was a great shortage of people in the early part of the war, taught myself a little bit in elementary schools.

Clip: BRIGGS ASA_ASA BRIGGS WITH JOSE HARRIS OXFOI

S1 **00:27:39:17**
We we've got you to the to the to the end of the war and a point at which your interests seemed to lie in. High politics, intelligence, political thought. And it might have been expected at that stage that that that would be the direction in which you would move as a as a professional historian. But instead, you emerged by the late 1940s as a pioneer of a new kind of social history. Can you explain to us how that transformation came about?

S3 **00:28:16:04**
It's very.

S2 **00:28:16:13**
Very difficult to say. I think that probably I worked something out of my system when I wrote patterns of making the I had done the degree in economics. Now, by a pure coincidence, this college was to college where we're now sitting was looking for a PPE fellow, a modern greats fellow, to teach economics and politics at the end of the war. And I had purely by coincidences and its most extraordinary part. What part coincidences play in your life? I had got somebody here, one of the fellows here, whom I knew, and in 1944 he got in touch with me and said, Would you be interested in a fellowship at Worcester College? Oxford? And I said I never thought about it at all, but I might be interested in it. Could I come over? So I came over and I was interviewed in the college and looked at. But I then came to Oxford and I then had ten years in Oxford. But for the first 2 or 3 years, I was mainly teaching economics and politics, but a very considerable amount of economics.

S1 **00:29:32:20**
You haven't mentioned the history of Birmingham, which must have been a turning point in some ways, yes.

Clip: BRIGGS ASA_ASA BRIGGS WITH JOSE HARRIS OXFO

S2 **00:29:41:10**

It is a turning point and it's interesting how one fails to understand quite where the turning points come. And I said from the start that I would do it if I could write about everything. And so and I did actually use the phrase at the time, total history. I'd never heard of Brendel at that stage, but I wanted to do a book. I explained the purposes very clearly in the book and indeed I wrote a paper on it also, in which I said that I was going to try to do with all aspects of the history of the Birmingham, beginning with its economic base and ending with its culture and really trying to look at the whole lot within that period. What I left out at the time greatly about which would now have to go in, which is the weakness of the book, is I was totally uninterested at that time in demographic history.

S1 **00:30:25:06**

Well, making it sound as though you're emergence out of the chrysalis of old fashioned history into a new sort of history was a very auto didactic, self-motivated process that there isn't a large cluster of great men hovering around you who are putting influences into you, but that you are in a sense ploughing your own furrow and discovering for yourself a sort of new identity for social history.

Clip: BRIGGS ASA_ASA BRIGGS WITH JOSE HARRIS OXFO

S2 **00:30:56:03**

I think it's true actually, and I say it really because I increasingly believe to be true that I was, in a sense, a product of a sort of autodidact tradition. You see, I did become associated with the Workers Education Association when I came to Oxford. And then, as I say, I became president in the early 1950s and I liked that tradition. I've always been sceptical about universities to some extent. I liked that tradition. I also found myself that there was no single great influence. As I say, Barker was a very good teacher, but he didn't influence me and I did begin to be influenced a little bit by a few people. When I went to the University of Chicago, I went to the University of Chicago in 1952, I think it was a 53. And there I got mixed up with people like David Riesman and Everett Hughes and Louis Wirth and sociologists, and I learnt a lot of sociology. Again, that was a very important bit of my life. I found the University of Chicago was the most stimulating place I'd ever been intellectually in my life. And I also then got interested in in the sociology of cities, in urban sociology as well as in urban history. But in a sense there were people there who did influence me, and there were some writers who influenced me. But I don't think that at any point in this stage of my life was I really intellectually dependent upon anybody. They said I believe I was in a sense or didactic in a way. I've always myself believed that the most interesting kind of history is that which puts you into the position of an explorer. I never like people who produce theses and books where they know what they're going to say before they start writing them, and who approached them really through a very elaborate theoretical apparatus. I think that the theory really should emerge. The person who, oddly enough influenced me thinking about it in this sort of way is, again, a historian that I've written about with whom I had no political affinities. Was JM Young. I do believe, like him, that if you start working on a historical subject, you should immerse yourself to begin with in all the available evidence and then start trying to sort it out and not from the beginning have a clear cut answer.

Clip: BRIGGS ASA_ASA BRIGGS WITH JOSE HARRIS OXFO

S1 **00:33:12:07**

And what about the great master theorists of the social sciences? When when did you first read Marx Durkheim?

S2 **00:33:21:22**

Weber I read Marx as an undergraduate, and I think I'd read. I think I'd read a lot of Marx before I went into the Army. I'd read no deal time. I had read a certain amount of paper. I had read English. Some English sociological writing, for what it's worth. I mean, I'd read a good deal of Hobson and Hobhouse and I had also met Ginsberg. I had read I was quite late in reading Durkheim. I did, however, during the war while I was in the Army read Potato.

S3 **00:34:05:00**

Oh, yes.

S2 **00:34:06:23**

And so I had I really had a fair amount of knowledge of sociological theory, but I went in for a bit more systematically, whereas in Chicago I thought I'd better learn some sociology. I also learnt a bit of psychology because it seemed to me that that was and still is, the missing element in any Oxford mix that you see there. I went when I went to Chicago. I was teaching for a time in the the very exciting place started by Hutchins, the College in the University of Chicago, where they got very bright young kids from the back streets of Chicago and gave them a very intensive education in the social sciences. And therefore there I found myself having to talk about Freud, and I had read very little Freud at that time, but I got some notion of a sort of interdisciplinary social science mix at Chicago. I think that was the place where well, that really developed in my mind.

S1 **00:35:04:15**

Yes, it's obviously a great strength of your work that you have. Covered a very wide range of theoretical positions. Do you think it's a weakness that you've been very eclectic?

Clip: BRIGGS ASA_ASA BRIGGS WITH JOSE HARRIS OXFO

S2 **00:35:19:06**

I suppose that if I had been less eclectic, I might well have been able to produce rather more rigorous history in certain fields, but I would never have been able to write either Victorian people or Victorian cities, let alone Victorian things. I was always interested in social history. Looking back upon it, if you ask me when my interest in social history started, I think I was just as interested in social history without using the term. When I was in Cambridge as an undergraduate, as I became under these influences at the end of the war.

S1 **00:35:56:21**

Eisa You've you've portrayed yourself to us as a kind of Ferdinand Magellan of the historical profession. You've gone round the world sketchily mapping new and unknown territories, and then you've moved on and other historians have moved into those territories and have have drawn the maps much more precisely. And in some ways, I think your critics might say that you've left it to these succeeding historians to pose the really hard questions in these new historical areas.

Clip: BRIGGS ASA_ASA BRIGGS WITH JOSE HARRIS OXFO

S2 **00:36:34:00**

Well, I think the first of all, I was interested in subjects which, when I became interested in, were not in any way institutionalised or specialised. I got tired of urban history when I thought it was making too many claims for itself. And also when it became too much of a kind of specialized subbranch of history. Now, labor history is somewhat different because I was one of the founders of the Society for the Study of Labor History. Indeed, the initial meeting took place in my office in Leeds when I was professor at Leeds. I managed to get together a group of historians whose ideologies were completely different, including Eric Hobsbawm, E.P. Thompson, Henry Pelling and others to work together. And we worked together very well. We got it started. I was interested in labor history and still am. But and I welcomed the move inside labor history away from concentration on the Labor Party or the ideology of Labor to a fuller and richer understanding of ways of life. But again, having been involved in the founding of the Society of Labor History and President for several years, I felt I really had enough of it. I don't really terribly like to be institutionalized for too long. This is one this is one one feature on that. I also have become and of course became extremely interested in the history of communications. And I think that this is still somewhat undeveloped history. Many other historians regard me as having wasted a lot of my time in writing the history of the BBC, and it could have been better employed in other activities. I've always thought myself that it was a kind of total history again, which made me feel deeply involved in the whole of the 20th century.

S3 **00:38:23:11**

Um.

Clip: BRIGGS ASA_ASA BRIGGS WITH JOSE HARRIS OXFO

S2 **00:38:24:18**

I like the kind of history which does set out to explore areas of study which have been rather neglected. And while I think then that there's a great deal of work to be done, which I call follow up work, which involves detailed monographic studies of a kind which I have not done myself within those fields. Then during that phase, I'm rather less interested than I am at the beginning. I'd like my own moves to be moves which in a way I've worked out for myself.

S1 **00:39:01:05**

I suppose your critics would say. A is a goes into new areas and he draws sketch maps and then he moves off and other people come in and ask the really hard question.

S3 **00:39:13:18**

I'd be.

S1 **00:39:14:07**

Using him as a I'd be.

S2 **00:39:15:22**

Perfectly happy if I thought that I'd perform that role. I'd be perfectly happy to have performed that role. I've never wanted to be an exhaustive historian. I do think, however, I've asked questions. I think the only point that I would say where I'd want to qualify the view of myself as a historian is that from the start I felt it's very important to ask questions, and some of the questions which I've thrown out have not been answered by people who followed up.

S1 **00:39:43:08**

I think I'd like to identify some of the questions which you feel that you've posed, which are the historians have dabbled with but have been unsuccessful in.

Clip: BRIGGS ASA_ASA BRIGGS WITH JOSE HARRIS OXFO

S2 **00:39:52:02**

Well, I think that one of them, which has been dealt with more successfully than some of the other ones, was when you talk about the particularity of a group of Victorian cities and deal with their profiles, if you like, what, in fact do these cities have in common which make them all Victorian? What is the relationship between particularity and generalisation about urbanisation in the 19th century? The best work on that, to my mind, has been done by urban geographers, not by urban historians. Another difference between myself and some other historians is that I would rather see a book come out, which is not necessarily my last word on the subject. Then just to wait until I've got it absolutely 100% correct. I do have something I'm bound to say, and I'll use a strong word of contempt for those historians who will go on for year after year accumulating evidence, become real authorities on the subject, and the never unleash it to the world at all. And in consequence, it may well be lost. And you did raise one interesting question, Jose, about the role of the historian and how it's changed. You see, I was brought up still in a generation where I think the historian has a role as a communicator. And I still believe that I'm communicating not just to other historians, but to a much bigger public. I really to tell the truth at times, I'm much more interested in that bigger public than I am in professional historians. I know that history has become very professional. It was professional when I entered it, but I have some reserves about the concept of professionalism. I also myself feel that the historian loses if the writing is in such a thick jargon that it cannot be understood by people who are themselves interested in history. Now, it may well be that Eric Hobsbawm, Edward Thompson people like that more or less of my own age and generation. However different our views may be, do have a conception of the public role of the historian, which is different from that of being a specialist teacher of history in the university.

S3 **00:42:06:21**

Yes.

Clip: BRIGGS ASA_ASA BRIGGS WITH JOSE HARRIS OXFO

S1 **00:42:07:09**

Do you see that? I think we were talking a little bit about this earlier, but it seemed to me that there was a whole generation of post-Second World War historians who had very different ideologies but were nevertheless all in some sense progressive historians who saw Britain after the war as being very different and having a different future from what anyone had ever seen before. And they saw writing history to fit that new generation as being a very, very important public role. And that whole role for the historian has been very much under attack over the past decade, partly from changing political and economic circumstances. Coming back, though, to the present state of history and if you had to define the problems and the agenda for social history in the 1990s. What would you say is the priorities? What are the what are the interesting themes which remain for young historians?

S2 **00:43:10:17**

Well, I think the first thing is that the the most important quality that's needed, I think is curiosity. And one of the changes that's taken place in history has really been the result of people coming from totally different backgrounds. I mean, my background is completely different from Nehemiah, say, or from AJP Taylor's and very different indeed from the Whig historians. But I think the fact is that for the 1990s, I'd like to see social history not becoming too trivialized. I would like to see it dealing with some major themes. I'm very strongly in favour of comparative approaches to social history. I believe that we should really look at urban, industrial and indeed rural and agricultural themes across lines of country and in continent. I also believe we've got to review seriously some of the assumptions of Marxist historiography in social history, for example, about the way in which the distribution systems have been built up. I've always been interested in retailing history and so on. Probably going back to days of the shop and I think there's more to be written about some of these subjects. I also think that we still do face fundamental questions about the shapes of the future, the relationship between majorities and minorities. Therefore, I am

interested in ethnic history and in the relationship between different cultures within the same culture. Lastly, my own moves, if you like, have been from economic history, which I'm still interested in through into social history, which I'm still interested in, but I have become more and more interested in what I would call cultural history. And I think there the anthropologists have made a real contribution to that. I've been very much interested in language and the terms that people use and the history of words, and I find myself more and more interested in this rather than less. I mean, I do chase up words a lot, and I've found I've learned more about processes of social change sometimes by looking at the way in which words have evolved than if I've looked to see what inventions new inventions have been employed in factories. I've now really come to the conclusion, which is a radically different conclusion from Raymond Williams. I think that in order to understand the cultural debate in 19th century England, which I think must be related to the cultural debate in other countries, you've really got to look to a very considerable extent, not at responses to industry, but at responses to communications and responses to things that were there in everybody's lives, whether they were living in industrial areas or not. And I think it's a very interesting subject. You see, in the middle of the 19th century, it was still possible to have some community of discourse. And I do get very worried about the future of the community of discourse.

S1 **00:46:11:15**
Could I ask just one final question to round up the the things you've just been saying and that is asking you very unfairly to predict the future for not simply history, but for society and politics. You've obviously become, over the past 30 years increasingly interested in communications, and it seems to be more and more the sort of leitmotif of your work as a historian. And I wondered whether you would see communications in the 21st century as offering the kind of central theme for the study of society that, say, welfare and industrial relations have offered in the 20th century and perhaps property in the 19th century. Will it have that kind of central and seminal status?

S2 **00:47:05:06**

I'm very unwilling to let all history pivot on communications despite Harold Inness and Roman World and all the rest, because I have sufficiently influenced by the older view that the modes of production really are themselves of crucial importance not to take the claims of all the people who want to make communications the central motif to seriously. What I think is happening is that with computers we are building up enormous information and knowledge bases which are independent of single individuals. And I think therefore that we are going to have a very, very different kind of way of dealing with knowledge in the future. I also believe that we're going to have sharper distinctions, and this is a matter of deep worry to me between minorities and majorities, minorities who are for whom this stuff is accessible and others are not. And I'm very much interested in the ones for whom it's not accessible. And then I think there is a very definite role for the historian in contributing to the making of policy, because I think that so frequently policies are evolved, which really are almost bound to go wrong from the start because they don't take account of previous experience in relation to such policies. I think of certain aspects of health questions which interests me very much of health policy, health issues, danger of by not taking under the things of making even sillier mistakes that were made in the past.

S1 **00:48:43:14**

So you think we really need to recover that late Victorian sense of history being not exactly a vocational discipline, but something which is a body of applied and applicable knowledge, which is which has a. Not a vulgar utilitarian purpose, but which is a it's more than purely.

S3 **00:49:05:09**

It's more than.

S1 **00:49:06:18**

It's more than grand opera.

Clip: BRIGGS ASA_ASA BRIGGS WITH JOSE HARRIS OXFOI

S2 **00:49:08:00**
It's more than grand opera. And it's more than just a specialized discipline. Now, I think in that sense I am a real Victorian still.

S1 **00:49:15:02**
Asa, we have to stop here. This has been compulsive listening for me and I hope it will be for the viewers. Thank you very much indeed.