

***Clip: RUNCIMAN STEVEN\_STEVEN RUNCIMAN WITH JON***

**Name: RUNCIMAN STEVEN\_STEVEN RUNCIMAN WITH  
JONATHAN RILEY SMITH CAMBRID\_BETA PAL\_BOX8\_cust  
ref\_MID19726613**

**S1**

**10:00:10:01**

So Steven Runciman has been the leading British Byzantine historian for over half a century, but his reputation also rests on his history of the Crusades and related works such as the Sicilian Vespers. His history of the Crusades is by far the best general history of the Crusades written in English, and his influence on English crusades studies has been enormous. Several generations of historians brought up on his history and inspired by it have in fact led to England now being the one of the leading centres of crusade studies. Sir Stephen, your interest in history dates back to your childhood. I think.

**S2**

**10:01:08:21**

Well, I think although most historians have probably started by being romantic children brought up on romantic fairy stories and on such is a history as our island story. Yes. Yes, I do. And that starts when imagination working. And begin to want to know about the past and about these glamorous characters, which seem so much more interesting than the people you read about in the newspapers today.

**S1**

**10:01:50:08**

But it clearly in your case was more than that. I mean, you clearly were a very studious child. I mean, were not knowledge of languages at a relatively early age was quite extraordinary for the time.

***Clip: RUNCIMAN STEVEN STEVEN RUNCIMAN WITH JON***

**S2**

**10:02:04:10**

Well, I was very lucky as a child in having an extremely good governess, a good Highland lady who had been brought up herself bilingual, which she brought up in a Gaelic atmosphere and who was a wonderful linguist. She absolutely bilingual in French and in German, and she had a passion for the classics. She started me off the Latin when I was six. And then John French. I don't remember beginning to learn. But Latin. I was six then when I was seven she taught me on German and Greek, but I rather took against German, but I took very much for Greek. And so that that gave me a start, which wasn't much delayed when I went to school.

**S1**

**10:03:06:22**

And, and, and. And when did you learn Russian. Because that you knew by the time you were.

**S2**

**10:03:12:06**

When I was 11 I decided that I wanted to read Russian. And so my mother arranged just the beginning of the First World War and there was an Anglo Russian society. My mother arranged for an excellent Russian lady who became one of our best family friends to come and teach me Russian. Well, I've never had enough practice to learn, speak Russian properly, but I did learn to read it. And that. I don't. I am very grateful for having that now.

**S1**

**10:03:58:22**

Do you think that contributed to the interest that developed in you or in the in Orthodoxy and Eastern Christianity?

**S2**

**10:04:07:07**

I think it was. I was interested in Greek. And I prefer to agree that I admired the Latin language, but I prefer the Greek language. And that end Russian, I think, did turn my sympathies very much to Eastern Europe.

***Clip: RUNCIMAN STEVEN STEVEN RUNCIMAN WITH JON***

**S1**

**10:04:30:09**

You said you've written somewhere that it was reading Walter Scott's Count Robert of Paris that sort of made you interested in Byzantine history and that you were so dissatisfied with the account given by Walter Scott that you wanted to find out what the truth was?

**S2**

**10:04:47:03**

Well, I think it is in a way, too, and I think one ought to write a study on the works. That inspire you by irritating you. And certainly Walter Scott, I thought, got medieval history pretty wrong and I didn't believe that, Byzantium said as he depicted it in Count Robert of Paris. I didn't believe that could be right. And I still think that I am really more right than he is over that.

**S1**

**10:05:17:10**

So what did you do? You went then started to read.

**S2**

**10:05:20:10**

I started to read I that made me read. For instance, Ana Camino whom he quotes. Yes. And miss quotes. And it's very much helped in my interest in Byzantium, but that hasn't been going anywhere altogether.

**S1**

**10:05:42:08**

Was this one? Sorry.

**S2**

**10:05:44:12**

Partly, perhaps, because I rather liked taking on something that no one else seemed to be interested in. And at that time, no one much in this country was interested in presenting.

**S1**

**10:05:58:08**

Was this while you were still at Eton?

***Clip: RUNCIMAN STEVEN STEVEN RUNCIMAN WITH JON***

**S2**

**10:06:00:11**

While I was still at Eton. And I was able to read quite a lot then It never appeared in what I was officially supposed to be learning, but I had spare time. I said good luck of being rather ill so that I didn't have to play games and go to the school library instead. And so my interest, the veteran developed all the more and they felt rather arrogantly. Perhaps I was being something of a pioneer.

**S1**

**10:06:46:03**

And so then after Eton, you came up to Cambridge as an undergraduate. And. Were you at that stage as an undergraduate able to pursue your interest?

**S2**

**10:06:56:16**

Very little. And the Cambridge had really got no room for Byzantine studies. No, no medieval history papers. There were perhaps 1 or 2 questions that dealt with present objects who were world figures like Justinian, but not much else. However, I. By just doing my very duty of bits of history. I had to learn and amuse myself by reading more and more about that I wanted to learn.

**S1**

**10:07:39:16**

Did anyone who was supervising you at the time I mean, encourage you at all?

***Clip: RUNCIMAN STEVEN STEVEN RUNCIMAN WITH JON***  
**S2 10:07:43:21**

No one's advised me at the time. But when I when I got my degree, I wanted to do research. There was a professor, the regents professor, because of JB Muir, which started life as a classicist but ended up as a resented. He was. In residence, but. In Cambridge, but old and frail and notorious. He didn't like pupils. He'd had 1 or 2 in his earlier days when he'd been a professor in Dublin, hadn't cared for them. And when it was suggested to him that he might take me on as a pupil. It didn't go down at all well with him, but he agreed at last to see me. He was very discouraging, saying very few people were fitted to deal with Byzantine history. And certainly it was no good trying unless you could read symbolic languages. So I piped up. Brave thing, but I can read Russian. And at that his whole attitude changed and he took an interest in me and told suggested of talking a bit what period I should study. And at the end of the interview he said, Well, if you read Russian, you can manage this. And he took from his shelves to enormous volumes in Bulgarian saying that they're not nautical by Satoshi. In each of those you go and read them and come back in a fortnight and tell me what you think. Well, Bulgarian is fairly like Russian. I can't say I read them entirely because there wasn't a single dictionary of Bulgarian into any Western language in the whole of Cambridge, but I made sense of them sufficiently to satisfy him. And after that he was very encouraging. But. Well, not part of it. Not very helpful because he was very seldom in his professorial rooms in kings. If I wrote a note to him to his house, I never got an answer. And I was very puzzled why till someone told me about Mrs. Beery doesn't like him being bothered with letters. She destroys them and eventually most of my supervision was done because I discovered he went for a walk on the backs every afternoon and I would waylay him with a notebook and a pencil and ask him the questions I wanted. And I think he quite enjoyed that. But I had very little time because after one year, which I was away quite a lot being ill. He retired the illness. And so I really had only one year and after that I had to go on without any supervisor. No one.

***Clip: RUNCIMAN STEVEN STEVEN RUNCIMAN WITH JON***

**S1** **10:11:03:05**

No one at all.

**S2** **10:11:05:08**

Know, I'm autodidact in that way and. Well.

**S1** **10:11:10:13**

Did you. The thesis that you were writing was on Ramana Slocum on rumors.

**S2** **10:11:16:08**

You.

**S1** **10:11:16:17**

Did. And then, of course, when that came out very shortly afterwards, your book on the first Bulgarian Empire came out. The two presumably came out of the world. Well.

**S2** **10:11:27:06**

The Bulgarian born was I'd done a sort of appendix on Bulgarian history for my fellowship thesis. And so I filled that up to make it a separate book soon after. And that that was rather interesting doing it because then I had to do more or less myself because there was no Western. Well, one book by in German by a for historians, the only western book that dealt with the subject.

**S1** **10:12:01:17**

It was a pioneering book, and so was the Byzantine civilization, which I don't think really there had been anything quite like that before.

**S2** **10:12:09:14**

Yes, but I think it's rather a bad book. I'm a bit ashamed that civilization. I thought I knew more than I did after.

**S1** **10:12:24:05**

After this, of course. You became a fellow of Trinity.

***Clip: RUNCIMAN STEVEN\_STEVEN RUNCIMAN WITH JON***

**S2**

**10:12:27:05**

Yes.

**S1**

**10:12:28:19**

And it must have been some time during the time that you were fellow that you began to think of the Crusades.

**S2**

**10:12:36:23**

Yes, I'd always have had that in mind. Really? From childhood. But the very things I wanted to get some things done first. And then I also did a book on Julius Harrison. Yes. Which is rather written out of my Bulgarian book. And then I felt free to settle down to the Crusades. And I was very lucky during the wars. I was in the Middle East all the time, and I was able to go over a great deal of crusading territory.

**S1**

**10:13:18:20**

This was when you became professor in Turkey and before that? Before that.

**S2**

**10:13:23:09**

Before that. I'd been stationed for a time. In Cairo, time in Jerusalem. And then when I was in Turkey as a professor, my holidays all spent in Syria or Lebanon.

**S1**

**10:13:42:13**

It was it was Guy Burgess who got you out into the east when the.

***Clip: RUNCIMAN STEVEN STEVEN RUNCIMAN WITH JON***

**S2**

**10:13:47:07**

Wars in the war started. I was recovering from a very bad attack of a maybe dysentery. Let me say I was saved by a German drug. They managed to get over just before the war broke out so that none of the armed forces would look at me. But my first pupil, who was a traitor, Guy Burgess, was by then working, I suppose, the orders of his Soviet masters in the British Ministry of Information on the Near Eastern Desk, West European Desk. And there they wanted someone who could deal with Bulgaria and he knew that I could read Bulgarian. So my whole career, when I was ready to take on a war career was. Oh, 3 or 4 months at the Ministry of Information. Then they sent me out as a presidential aide to Bulgaria, and I was away from Britain for five years, never came back.

**S1**

**10:14:54:19**

This was in Bulgaria first.

**S2**

**10:14:56:04**

And then when I was in Cairo dealing with broadcasting from the various Balkan languages. Then in Jerusalem, for a time where my two main jobs were some rather delightful. One was censor film, censor the Palestine. I hardly allowed them see anything. And the other was sort of government liaison for publicity with various heads of the religions, which, of course, Jerusalem abounds. I enjoyed that. And was rather. Disappointed when I was summoned off to become a professor in Turkey. Oh.

**S1**

**10:15:46:13**

And throughout all this period, the Crusades were sort of brewing, was brewing.

**S2**

**10:15:52:06**

And I was taking notes of the place as I saw it.



***Clip: RUNCIMAN STEVEN STEVEN RUNCIMAN WITH JON***

**S1**

**10:15:56:10**

But the reading behind the Crusades is absolutely immense. That must have been done after the war or started before the war?

Well, a.

**S2**

**10:16:03:19**

Little during the war, but one more didn't have time. Or any libraries. Yes. Yes. Particularly when I was in Istanbul as a professor. The only good library was in the German Institute, which naturally I couldn't consult. Robert College had not a bad library, but yes, but nothing really profound. So most of the really steady reading had to wait till I got home.

**S1**

**10:16:35:17**

And you got home, what, in 1946? Was it.

**S2**

**10:16:38:09**

1947?

**S1**

**10:16:39:17**

Seven? Oh, yes.

**S2**

**10:16:40:14**

I retired to Istanbul in 45. I'd been rather ill that year, so they were quite glad to get rid of me. And I spent two years setting up the British Council in Greece, which was very useful for getting to know all the Greek side of things. Yes. And then I was at home and could concentrate. On. Who says, My God, there's a lot to read.

***Clip: RUNCIMAN STEVEN STEVEN RUNCIMAN WITH JON***

**S1**

**10:17:08:07**

A tremendous amount of it. Did you once the Crusades was written, I mean, after that you did. I mean, before that you've written the Crusades. You had more or less concentrated on Byzantine history. But once the Crusades over, you did right on Western things as well as Eastern things. I'm thinking of the Eastern system which combines both. Or the Sicilian Vespers. Yeah. So that you were then really spanning both Latin and Greek.

**S2**

**10:17:40:10**

One shouldn't just try and spend word. And you've got to remember the correlation of Eastern and Western civilization, Christian civilization. And and after all, in fact, the boat's an interesting.

**S1**

**10:18:02:06**

Did you. You've written in a very interesting essay published by the Royal Society of Literature that for you history is. Is in the end literature as well as the science of history. I mean, you see the end product as being a literary as well as a what broader sense? Scientific one?

**S2**

**10:18:31:22**

Well, it rather disappoints me that go back two centuries only the great historical work was an important literary event, Gibbon, for instance. And later on, Macaulay and even Carlyle. Now, a lot of you historians seem almost ashamed of writing good literature. Some of you do, in spite of yourselves. But it rather distresses me that. See that admirable society. The Pen Club once asked me to join, but the pen was. And so poetry, essays and novels. That's what I said. I wouldn't join a society that dropped its ashes where I was. History, however, didn't want to give me a silver medals. I can't. Silver pen. I can't complain.

***Clip: RUNCIMAN STEVEN STEVEN RUNCIMAN WITH JON***

**S1**

**10:19:40:02**

How do you how do you set about the the process? I mean, you you pick on a topic which interests you, sparking something from perhaps from a long way apart. But then do you focus on any particular on people or ideas or.

**S2**

**10:20:05:15**

Well, the first thing I think you should try and find the original sources and go through them that begin to shape your your mind and your interests. Yes. And. But all the same, in my interest in history, I must confess it's very largely the person, the character, the historical characters. Which means that my interest is in a way rather snobbish, because after all, the characters we know about in history are the eminent. And the music player is a terrible snob. I would gladly know more about the lesser people, but it's difficult to find much about them.

**S1**

**10:21:01:22**

But so so in that particular stage, I mean, you're drawn to the characters and you're you're reading about them and making up your mind about them out of the reading. And then there comes a point at which you feel that your ideas about them should be communicated in a form which is you've said in one one of your books, Epic.

**S2**

**10:21:27:02**

Well, I think I know that it's rather important to start writing the book fairly early on because what what else that great historian Rising has said. How can you make the sources give you the answers you want unless you know what questions to ask? Yes. And I think you've got it's by trying to arrange things for writing the questions, then come clear in your mind. And so I think one would always be have the written thing in mind in order to get get the information you want.

***Clip: RUNCIMAN STEVEN STEVEN RUNCIMAN WITH JON***

**S1**

**10:22:15:24**

You have you have written about and I think the second of the essays that the Royal Society of Literature published about the epic quality that in good history.

**S2**

**10:22:28:05**

Yes. Well, I think they is of epic quality and. I think. I think I rashly wrote in the preface my crusades at home as well as Herodotus, where the fathers of history. And I do believe that is much that history gets across much better if it is literature. And know. But I don't know. Maybe by turning it into literature, one takes too many shortcuts. I'm still possible.

**S1**

**10:23:19:03**

The the another thing that you have defended in history is what you've called the romantic imagination.

**S2**

**10:23:28:11**

Yes. Well, I think you need imagination for history. But of course, it's a very dangerous thing. Imagination. It's got to be very well controlled. And in a way, it's one of the agonies of writing history. Is it you do want to loosen the controls of your imagination, and sometimes you think how nice it would be to write a historical novel. But I don't think it would be because I think one wants, in a way, the discipline of sources.

**S3**

**10:24:08:18**

Yes. Yes.

**S1**

**10:24:12:00**

What? What? Which which of your historical works is pleased you most? I mean, in retrospect.

**Clip: RUNCIMAN STEVEN STEVEN RUNCIMAN WITH JON**

**S2**

**10:24:20:10**

It's very difficult to say. I think my best book about Byzantium, it's a paperback I published called *And Still and Civilization* that a brother, Please. Because I thought on the whole I summarized fairly well. So I must say, when I looked at it last, I wasn't so sure. Otherwise it's a little difficult to say. I enjoyed very much writing a book on the on post resentment of the Greeks under the Turks. That was way rather untrodden territory.

**S1**

**10:25:10:11**

Your range is enormous because there is that book on the patriarchate after after the Ottoman conquest. But then you've also written about the 19th century and Borneo and the.

**S2**

**10:25:23:22**

Well, I was asked and I thought, probably good for one, do something out of one subject. And I wrote on the white trousers of Borneo, largely because the white trousers seemed to me rather crusading characters. And The White Ronnies seemed like the worst type of present an empress. But I didn't like writing about modern history because. You can't really say what you think without being rude and gallant or rendering yourself liable to libel actions. So I never I shall never write about modern history again. Now I'm writing my memoirs. I ain't going to stop in 1939 hoping that most people I write about will be dead.

**S1**

**10:26:18:08**

So you won't be covering your history of the Crusades?

**S2**

**10:26:20:12**

No.

**S1**

**10:26:22:12**

Is that is that the reason I mean, that that this is that the people will be well can't be offended.

***Clip: RUNCIMAN STEVEN STEVEN RUNCIMAN WITH JON***

**S2** **10:26:28:11**

Minds being told that their grandparents were rather villainous or rather ridiculous. But you mustn't say that about their parents. Yes. So I'm old enough to keep to the grand parental generation.

**S1** **10:26:42:14**

Do you find writing easy?

**S2** **10:26:45:08**

I used to. Now in old age, it's. Well, I suppose that one task more quickly. One can't concentrate so long.

**S1** **10:26:57:20**

Are you one of those people who write a page and don't have to alter it or one of those who make lots and lots of corrections? I.

**S2** **10:27:05:12**

I do most of my writing in my head. Walking in the country, that sort of thing. I then type out an old fashioned typewriter with a certain number of misprints, but not very many and very few alterations and very it's mostly the first draft I sent to the publishers.

**S4** **10:27:29:04**

Yes.

**S1** **10:27:29:17**

Well, I mean, the speed with which those if you think those three volumes on the Crusades were produced, I mean, if you've got back from the war in 1947 and the first volume came out four years later, didn't it, in 1951. That is astonishing. The productive.

**S2** **10:27:44:24**

Well, I was I wasn't doing anything else. So to me, it stood.

***Clip: RUNCIMAN STEVEN STEVEN RUNCIMAN WITH JON***

**S1**

**10:27:49:19**

Nevertheless, it is it is a remarkable speed of of production. Did you when let's say I'm concentrating on that because the span is so great over the three volumes when you began writing on Volume one, which is after all, dedicated really to the First Crusade and the immediate period before the Crusade, did you already have in your mind volume three and the 13th century on more.

**S2**

**10:28:20:03**

Or less, but not in detail. In outline, but not in detail. No, no. The first one, because the whole is easier to do. It was a straightforward, fairly limited story. Second volume was, in a way the least rewarding to do because there are so much of it was just internal struggles or local struggles. And then the third volume took 1 or 2 widely. And when you found out of having to deal with the Mongols. Yes. That sort of thing. Yes.

**S1**

**10:29:07:05**

Do you I mean, what do you feel about the way history has gone in the last. Well, I suppose last 50 years, I mean.

**S2**

**10:29:15:20**

Well, I do find a lot of it rather unreadable, I must confess. I mean, I think the standards of research have gone up. There is. On the whole very well. But it doesn't always mean that the results are readable and think if the results are readable, there are other ways. Did you know for the point of writing books is that they should be read? Yes. I remember that Hilaire Belloc epigram said when I when I am dead made this of me, but said his sins were scarlet, but his books were read. And I think. When does all the hope that one's books will be read?

**S4**

**10:30:02:05**

Yes.

**S1**

**10:30:02:24**

Why do you think it is that history has become less?

***Clip: RUNCIMAN STEVEN STEVEN RUNCIMAN WITH JON***

**S2** **10:30:07:08**

Well, I think for the admirable reason that people are taking research more seriously, which is a very good thing.

**S1** **10:30:17:09**

And how does that lead to the books being. You mean they're not concentrating enough on.

**S2** **10:30:22:12**

They get rather lost in the detail? Yes. And they're so anxious that every detail is right. I think some of us do occasionally take risks in history. We may not detail. And you can't find what you think the detail is. So you have to improvise. And I suppose that is really wrong, but it does help the writing of history.

**S5** **10:30:56:10**

Do you think.

**S1** **10:30:57:04**

The picture has changed of the past? Do you think it's less romantic? I mean, I, I share with you this this romantic image of the Middle Ages. I think there are people now don't to have a more sort of I don't know.

**S5** **10:31:13:04**

What you call it.

**S2** **10:31:14:21**

Yeah but Well I think their stories seem not to share our view but the readers do.

**S5** **10:31:23:01**

Yes.



***Clip: RUNCIMAN STEVEN\_STEVEN RUNCIMAN WITH JON***

**S2**

**10:31:24:10**

And now to all the proof of the pudding is in the eating books. In the reading of it.

**S1**

**10:31:32:05**

Well, I should like to thank Sir Stephen Runciman very much for giving up the time to give us his views on history.

**S4**

**10:31:42:02**

Now we start talking together.