Clip: SAVILLE JOHN_JOHN SAVILLE WITH KENNETH BRO

Name: SAVILLE JOHN_JOHN SAVILLE WITH KENNETH BROWN BELFAST __BOX8_cust ref_MID19726646

S1 **10:00:07:04**

It might be said that the writing of history goes in fashions and that at any particular time a specific theme or a period or a topic attracts a lot of attention. And that was certainly true of labor history, particularly in the late 1950s and the 1960s. A number of journals, a number of societies all formed to focus interest on labor history and labor history, also attracted the attention of a number of formidable minds, many of them also active in left wing politics. And prominent amongst those minds was that of John Saville, lecturer, reader and professor of economic and social history in the University of Hull until his retirement in 1982. John, you were born in 1916 and you went up to the London School of Economics in 1934. Was there anything in your childhood which suggested to you that you would pursue a career on the left of politics or in academia?

S2 **10:01:07:22**

I think not. My father was killed in the First World War and my mother married again after about 7 or 8 years. My stepfather was a very reasonable man and we had a very happy family life. And that plus plus the school that I went to, which was a very good grammar school, meant that I had a very a relatively placid, I think, and not troubled early life up to my going to look at the age, the age of 18. But the reason that I became very quickly committed to the left was undoubtedly the political situation in which, of course, everybody found themselves at that time, the rise of fascism in Germany. It was already existing in Italy. The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, inside domestically, inside the country, the hunger marches meant that many intelligent and lively young men and women not all, of course, became easily to accept a left, a left position. And in my case, as with so many of my contemporaries, I joined the Communist Party a matter of months after I first went to LSC, and I remained, as you know, until 1956.

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S1 **10:02:45:14**
Did you choose the LSC because it was a sort of radical institution, not as radical as it since became? No.

S2 **10:02:53:16**
I didn't. I was the only one in my sixth form who was studying the social sciences, and I would have gone to Cambridge if I'd had Latin and not having Latin. I then sat for a scholarship, which I got at Elysee. I went to LSC. I knew absolutely nothing about LSC except the fact that it it offered a range of the social sciences of a kind that nobody else did in the country.

S1 **10:03:22:04**
You're on record as saying you didn't actually do a great deal of formal work at the LSC. You worked by yourself a lot at the time.

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S2 **10:03:27:23**

Looking back it really was extraordinary. Now I specialized for three papers in economic geography. It was quite a good department in the sense that it had some interesting people in, but it was incredibly badly organized and I never wrote an essay for the first two years of my of my career in in LSC, the tutorial system was almost nonexistent. I had Evan Durbin as my economics tutor for only about three visits. And generally speaking, the organization for the students at LSC, in my experience at any rate, was extremely meager. And the fact is, as so often happens, you learn a great deal more from your peers than perhaps from your tutors. Laski obviously affected me and influenced me enormously. I mean, Laski was the man who really drove you into the library. I mean, he really communicated that enthusiasm for for your subject and for knowledge that nobody else had into anything like to anything like the same degrees. But it was the caliber of the undergraduate students and not least I think of the postgraduate students because the DC nearly half the student body was of what were postgraduates and the postgraduates ate alongside the undergraduates so that you would find yourself sitting by an American. A post graduate or somebody from Europe, but particularly from the United United States. And you learned a great deal.

S1 **10:05:16:14**

Okay. So you left the LSC in 37. Did you consider an academic career? Oh, yes.

S2 **10:05:21:15**

Yes, I did. I was certain and assured by everybody that I would get a research scholarship, of which there were only two, and I didn't get it. So I was unemployed for something like six months. A very happy time, I may say, because I, I worked in a voluntary capacity for the Union of Democratic Control, which was run by Dorothy Woodman, who was living with Kingsley Martin of the New Statesman. And it and his politics suited me, of course, very well. However, my family, not unreasonably, started putting pressure on me that I should earn my living in some way or other. And so I went into business and had the war not occurred, I think I should have been a businessman. I started a post, a part time post graduate thesis at least whether I should have finished, I don't know. But the war came and answered that particular question and I was called up in the spring of 1940.

S1 **10:06:28:24**

Right. What was the thesis on, incidentally?

S2 **10:06:30:23**

Well, it was it was on the flows of capital from 1872 to 1914, a very interesting subject. And the relationship with the economy of the United of the United Kingdom. It's a matter which, as you know, has been much written about. But at that time in 1937, it was only just beginning to be to be worried about, concerned about, thought about. And I was recommended to do this by H.L. Beale's, with whom I had quite a friendly relationship, and it remained, I may say, until his death very much later.

S1 **10:07:18:24**

So the war interrupts this?

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S2 **10:07:21:06**

Yes. And I was called up, as I mentioned a moment ago, in the spring of 1940. Now, I had an unusual Army career for somebody with my accent in that I did not take a commission. The the British army normally operates on the basis that if you have a middle class accent, as I had, and you were obviously material for the officer class, so that within a week or two of my being called up, I was in fact, it was in fact suggested to me that I should consider seriously an officer training course. Now, the Communist Party, although it thought that the war quite erroneously was an imperialist war, nevertheless instructed, instructed in a very gentle kind of way, I think it's fair to say. And but expected, perhaps, is the better word expected its middle class recruits to take commission so that if you look at the wartime history of communists from 1939 on and you'll find that almost all of them, some of them have already been on this program were officers. And I was unusual in that. I argued with King Street, which was the headquarters of the CPC, that this was an absurd idea, that if there was any trouble and I had no idea in 1940 what trouble meant in the Army, but if there was any trouble, it would be better to be outside the officer's mess then inside it. So I refused to commission and and for my pain since or whatever was in the end forcibly promoted to Sergeant Major and remained that until the end of the war.

S1 **10:09:29:04**

Was there a lot of interest amongst the soldiers that you were with in politics? No.

S2 **10:09:34:07**

I joined up with with a mostly East End working class blokes who were, I would have thought, wholly cynical about about the war, who only wanted to get back to to civilian life, who were extremely pleasant to be with. They were they were just very good comrades. But it must. He said that they really were not interested in the war.

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S1 **10:10:11:07**

Were you conscious of any radicalization going on in them, though, over the course of the war? Because after all, the 1945 election might suggest that something had changed? Well.

S2 **10:10:21:15**

I think you have to talk now about post Beveridge. I think you have really to talk about the years 1943, 44 and 45, when undoubtedly I think there was some radicalization going on, although I am bound to say that the historians who have stressed and emphasize the radicalization of the army have probably taken their examples from a fairly limited from a fairly limited series of case studies. There is no doubt that with the with the Cairo Parliament and the similar parliaments elsewhere, that there was a certain degree of radicalization going on. It's much more, I think, an anti toryism that as the war went on, if you use the argument, remember remember the depressed areas, remember the hunger marches this began began to echo and to have some sort of resonance. And while I certainly would not play down the radicalization that had taken place by 4445, I think it fair to say that most historians are probably over over exaggerated and emphasized it. And I say this in spite of the fact that I myself, by 44 and 45 in India, I was in fact involved in very considerable political activities, both in the army and on the fringe of the army. And in January, February 1946, just before I came back to England and was demobilized, I was involved from the outside in a in one of the really important RAF strikes that took place at that time against against the slowness of demobilization, which was in this particular case in Karachi, actually led by by communists who were part of a group of which I was chairman.

S1 **10:12:31:18**

Did you run into any opposition in the Army because of your political views? I was thinking as well that immediately after the war you go into the civil service, I think, and I wonder whether you came across people who were very suspicious of you because of your political sympathies?

S2 **10:12:46:17**
I don't think so. Certainly not in the Army, but in the post-war years. I mean, in the immediate post-war years. I came back in the spring of 46 and stayed in the civil service until 47, by which time by the summer of 47, the Cold War was, of course, already getting underway. And undoubtedly I would have had, I think, very considerable problems. And I stayed in the civil service. Indeed, if I hadn't taken the job at Hull very much against the advice of all my friends Hull, they said whether hell is hell, but if I hadn't taken the job in Hull in the summer of 47, I don't think I would have got an academic job. Because after that, you were competing with with chaps, mostly chaps, who had come through the war and who'd got their degree in the summer of 47 and who were backed by there by their various professors. In the case of history, I mean, there were two people in the late 40s and throughout the 50s who were largely responsible for jobs, largely I don't say in every case these these two were TS Ashton of LSE, and the other one was Postern. Of course, of Cambridge. And in certainly in terms of economic history, there was hardly any social history. But in terms of economic history, jobs in the late 40s and and 50s, Ashton and Boston more or less divided it between themselves.

S1 **10:14:28:00**
Now, you started then, I suppose, your career of publishing, and particularly in the field of labor history with which you're very much associated. I suppose there's an obvious reason why you found Labour history attractive given your politics.

S2 **10:14:46:06**
Yes, it's also a personal matter. I was a very close friend of James Jeffries. James Jeffries got a first at Elysee. He was a year ahead of me and he got a leverhulme to America. Did a doctorate in two years. I worked in a Coventry factory during the war and wrote the story of the engineers, which is a very good trade union history in 1946. And I think it was his influence that shifted me when I came back from the Army, having been, after all, out of

any kind of intellectual life in England for eight years. I think it was Jeffreys who interested me in in Labour history in the first place. Secondly, of course, I started as soon as I came back. Almost as soon as I came back. Attending the the Communist Historians group. Now, this was a group which was formed in 1946, which originally its intention was simply to look at Al Mortons People's History of England, which has been published in 1938 and suggest a series of revisions. But the Communist historians group in in my own experience lasted for ten years and we divided up into periods so that copies about myself and others were in the 19th century. We had almost nobody in the 20th century. There was the very important 17th century group around Christopher Hill, and there was an early modern group. There was a medieval group around Rodney Hylton. There was a very important classics historians group, Benjamin Farrington and that and George Thompson and and that sort of person. The Communist historians group for me, after about 1950 was increasingly important. We met, I suppose, 2 or 3, sometimes four times a year, but 2 or 3 times a year, usually occasionally in 2 or 3 years. We all gathered together at a house, at a holiday home or holiday house in Hastings. And I remember in 1954, perhaps 55, we had a whole week where we started in early medieval times and everybody read a paper. So we had about 2 or 3 papers a day and going right through into the early 20th century. And for me, of course, the intellectual contact with people like Victor Kiernan and Christopher Hill and Hilton and especially, of course, Hobsbawm in the 19th century was I think, of very considerable importance. Now that, by the way, a background in terms of labor history, I suppose it was a woman called down a tour who was the translator and editor of the Selected Correspondence of Marx and Engels, who was herself a very considerable scholar who never wrote what she was capable of, of writing. But she was of enormous help to everybody from the 17th century group to the 19th century group. And I think it was done at all who suggested that Ernest Jones was a possible subject. And so I started on Ernest Jones and she gave me a very considerable, very considerable help having done that. I was then somewhat deflected by the fact that Dartington Hall, through

Michael Young, the Michael Young of the Consumers Association and so on, who was a contemporary of mine at ADC and who was a trustee of Dartington Hall, asked me if I would do a study of rural population in in the southern part of Devon called the South Hams. And so I went to Dartington and spent three extremely enjoyable months there and 1950 and decided to turn the study into a national study. And I published in 1956 my rural population in England and Wales, 1851 to 1951. In between I had kept going some of my labour history studies. Having edited the first volume, I think of any collection of Marxist essays called Democracy and the Labour Movement, and my own contribution was on Christian Socialism of the Christian Socialists of of 1848. And from that time when I'd finished rural population, which I enjoyed, I may say enormously widened my intellectual horizons, I think considerably since I'd never done population studies before and was. Very important, I think intellectually for me. I then went back to labor history studies and I can't remember how I came in contact with him, but Ace Briggs and I decided to come together and edit a volume for Douglas Cole for GH Cole. He Cole knew about it. He died during the year. It was being prepared. And but in 1960, we published the first volume of essays in labor in Labor history. By that time, there was already a movement for the underside of of history. I Hobsbawm had published his primitive, his primitive rebels. Briggs had edited chartist studies and a group of us had formed in 1960. The Society for the Study of Labour of Labor History, and it went on from there.

S1 **10:21:08:18**
I wondered if you've got any thoughts about that, why it was that Labor history seemed to become very much at the leading edge of historical work for those years.

S2 **10:21:17:11**
I'm not sure that in the 70s Labor history as such. I think it was becoming a little earlier, I think Labor history in the 60s certainly then I think Labor history, as it were, began to merge into general social, into general social history. And it was social

history, not entirely that influenced, I think, people to come into my into my department. I, I, myself, I must make the point, although I spent most of my research on labor and social history, the fact is I very rarely taught it and I always taught the economic history to the first year and the third year in my department. And I've always believed that social historians ought to have a very good grounding indeed in economic history. And one of the problems I think, of social historians in the 70s and now is precisely that they haven't got that kind of that kind of of basis for their for their work. I should add that by the end of the 70s, I was becoming increasingly critical of what social history was being produced. And in my own case, if I may just make this as it's not a general example, but as a particular example, I decided in the late 70s when I was coming up for retirement that when I retired I would in fact complete all the outstanding work in labor or social history and move on to the 20th century into diplomatic history. And this I've done. And I ought to add that I that what started me on this were two things. One is I was becoming very critical of the history from below. I thought it was becoming very antiquarian. And I'm now when I say I thought it was, I mean I'm now talking of about the second half of the 70s and I still think that's true. I still think that there's much too much too much antiquarian ism in some of the social history at any rate, that is being that's being produced. But the second reason why I shifted from 19th century labor and social history into 20th century international relations is that I happened almost by chance to have reviewed three major biographies, one of one of Gaitskell, one of Attlee, and the third volume of Bullock's life of Bevin, which deals with Bevin. You know, it's an 800 page book or so which deals with Bevin in in the Labor government as foreign secretary. And having read these three, it seemed to me that they were not in fact offering what I thought actually happened. And I became therefore increasingly critical of the of the material that I was reading, both biographical and historical, concerning the 20th century and particularly the Second World War and the post war. And so I decided, having finished 1848, that I would move into the area of the foreign policy of of the Labor government with particular emphasis upon

the character, nature personalities of. The ruling elites. And it's this that particularly interests me. I don't think I'm going to in any way, even if I lived right. The definitive history of the foreign policy of the Labour government of 45. What I hope I shall be able to do is to give some pointers to a an analysis of the upper classes in their varying varying aspects, so that in my first volume I deal with the mind of the Foreign Office in considerable and considerable detail in my second volume, which I'm now working on. I'm going to do the mind of the military, I may say, with enormous pleasure since, hey, I thought the military were plain stupid during all the lot of them in the Second World War and my reading of them in the last 18 months, as has, I think, confirmed, confirmed that I shall be, of course, as objective in quotes as I need to be in these matters. Well, I don't know about tactful, but yes, I suppose so.

S1 **10:26:18:06**
I think it's Ralph Miliband who says that you really saw your role very much as an organiser of of academic works as much as contributing to it yourself. And I guess one of the the major organizing bits of work that you did was the Dictionary of Labour biography. I wonder if I could ask you to say something about the inspiration for that and how you went about tackling it.

S2 **10:26:41:14**
I don't think inspiration is the right word. Actually. It came about in this way. Asa Briggs and I were producing this memorial volume to Cole. He died. The volume appeared as a memorial volume. And when and afterwards, Margaret Cole, his widow, offered Eisa Briggs and or myself some manuscript volumes, which Douglas Cole had been collecting for many years. Douglas Cole, as you know, was a very important labor historian. I mean, one of the pioneer labour historians. And these volumes were sort of skeleton contained, skeleton biographies. I once used the phrase, and Margaret Cole was much incensed, but they were I mean, they were names, dates as far as he got them and 2 or 3 lines. And Margaret said, Well, why can't she was talking to Eisa and myself, Why can't you use these and really make it into into a

volume? And Eisa, who was just about to move to Sussex, said no. And I said, Well, if I get money and financial assistance for for some kind of research help, then I will perhaps do it. I regretted it. I may say for a number of years. I experimented throughout the 60s, well, for 5 or 6 years in the 60s with what kind of shape it should be. I first of all, spent a year or so doing a who's who of the labour movement, and that didn't seem to me right. And then I did a kind of truncated sentence edition and I wrote about 100,000 words. And when I came to read it, it seemed to me absolute rubbish. So in the end and in the end means about 1967. So this is seven years after all this happened. In the end, I decided it had to be a dictionary of national biography, but with much larger and fuller bibliographies, because at that time labour history was very badly served with bibliographies. And so I was fortunate in getting a research assistant, Joyce Bellamy, who is not an historian, who up to that time, I think probably I'm not sure I should say this. It voted Tory, who proved to be exceedingly competent at what she was asked to do, and she did all the correspondence and the and checked the bibliographies and turned herself into one of the outstanding copy editors of our time. And I've been very fortunate indeed in in having her the text of all the entries is my responsibility. Well, the first volume, I think, is not a particularly good volume. I think the shape of the dictionary took, took, started taking, started taking its place with volume two. I planned did, however, from the beginning that it should go on. Ad infinitum. So unlike the usual biographical dictionaries, which are from A to D and E to G and so on, my dictionary is A to Z. And for that you therefore must have a consolidated name index. The other innovation I introduced was the subject index, which is very unusual, and I had to plan the subject index from volume one so that it could be more or less run through all the subsequent volumes. Now, obviously there had to be some changes, but actually most if you look at Volume nine, most of the headings in the subject index are those which are in volume one and two. And the third thing was that we produced serious bibliographies. So I started work on this new version as it were, which I had come to about 1967, eight, in about 1967, 819, and published the first volume, I think about

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1971, 72. And it's it's gone on since then and I'm now working on Volume ten. And then I shall finish and it will be passed on, I hope. Well, it's already been agreed to someone else who will, I hope, do another ten volumes and then it will continue.

S1 **10:31:32:17**

What principles of choice did you use in deciding who went in?

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S2 **10:31:37:18**

That's a very good question. Everybody asks this question. So it's it's absolutely the right question to ask. No, no principles at all, except that the dictionary covers from the 1790s to the present day providing or dead. And one of the most difficult things, you know, is when you approach, say, a Labour MP about his biography, you have to say very tactfully in some way or another, well of course you know mate, that you won't get this in until you are dead. And I'm not exaggerating when I say, you know, if you write to old people, it is a difficult you have to be very tactful about this. So it's from the 1790s to the present day providing a debt and some volumes simply take personalities from the whole spectrum of time. Other volumes do have a greater emphasis upon, say, autism, which is one volume but not but no volume is ever concentrated on one period or 1 or 1 movement. That that's the general idea. But the second point is that I was very concerned with the dictionary, and I don't think I was influenced by the words I quoted from Edward Thomson about, you know, the condescension of the past. I was. But Edward and I were very close in the late 50s and early 60s, so I have no doubt that some of this rubbed off on me. And I was very concerned with the dictionary that it should not be like the dictionary of National biography concerned only with the top brass. In fact, the contrary. My general principle has been that if anybody is likely to get a biography, so be careful about this, mate. If anybody's likely to get a biography, then they don't go in the dictionary. And we made a mistake by accepting Ramsay MacDonald in Volume one, but we haven't made that mistake since. So it's the, you know, next to the top rank and right down to the secretary of the local Trades Council. And I'm particularly interested in the Secretary of the Local Trades Council. The other thing is, I suppose increasingly we have tried to get more women in and this has proved difficult. I mean, we've succeeded, but only to an extent, I think. And one of the things that feminist historians don't do, it seems to me, is to write biographical essays on women in the labour movement. And yet women in the labour movement is a very important part of the of the labour movement and I wish I could get more to do it.

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S1 **10:34:40:15**
I'm tempted to say they're interested in writing biographical dictionaries of themselves at the moment.

S2 **10:34:45:11**
Well.

S1 **10:34:47:08**
Would you regard the dictionaries your major academic work?

S2 **10:34:53:16**
I would like to think that my present work on the state and the upper classes and the ruling classes would be the one I'd be most remembered by. I am, however, certain. That. You're right. It's rather like Harold Nicholson, who when he read one of the volumes of his diary, which one of his sons edited it said, Well, I've written about 20 books. He said. But I would guess, I suspect, regretfully, that it's my diary that's going to be the one that everybody reads in 50 years time. I have a feeling, in fact, I'm sure that this is true, that anything I've written will in fact be on the shelves and that the dictionary will still be consulted.

S1 **10:35:43:18**
Yes. One last question, then. Is there anything that you would like to have done that you won't do?

S2 **10:35:52:05**
Yes, I would like to have started work on the ruling class and the state much earlier than I did. Yes. And I much regret that. After all. I mean, my 80th year, I much regret that I'm now having only to do the second volume of this and it won't be published for another 2 or 3 years.

S1 **10:36:10:17**
John Saville, thank you very much.