

Clip: THOMPSON MICHAEL_MICHAEL THOMPSON WITH

**Name: THOMPSON MICHAEL_MICHAEL THOMPSON
WITH AVNER OFFER YORK_FML THOMPSON MICHAEL
THOMPSON DUB_BOX10_cust ref_MID19726963**

S1

10:00:05:07

He is throwing in the hot seat this morning is Michael Thompson, known to readers around the world as FM Al Thompson.

Benjamin Jowett, the master of Balliol, said that one man is as good as another until he has written a book. In 1963, Michael Yu published a history of English language society in the 19th century, a book which captured the imaginations of all students of 19th century Britain and set the agenda for a whole cohort of historians. You have spent your own career working out the history of society, economics and politics of English, land and society, an agenda which is still far from exhausted. More than 30 years on. This is a history which we want to trace today. And perhaps we will start by going back to origins to your home background. Can you tell us something about the social, cultural, religious background of your home? Where did you come from?

S2

10:01:01:15

Where did I come from? Well, a Quaker family born and brought up in Purley Surrey, which well, never formed terribly close associations with because maternally the family was North country in origin paternally also Liverpool in the immediate preceding generation, my grandfather and great grandfather and apparently somehow seem to come down. So I never wholly identified with outer suburbia. But however that's where I was brought up and as I say, both mother and father were Quakers. So I was brought up as a Quaker with them going to weekly meeting and so on. My father, he was trained as a civil engineer and then became one of the early town planners. So when I got to know anything about it, he was a town planner, said, What would you say? Professional, middle class background? And most of their acquaintances friends either the same or maybe, well, 1 or 2. One I remember was a tea merchant and so on. There was a mixture of background, that kind.

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S1

10:02:21:12

Did you discover a special interest in history while at that school?

S2

10:02:26:09

Yes. One had an extremely good history. History? Most who inspired, I say, Hargreaves. And a year or two after us, Christopher Holdsworth had the same history teacher. Whether whether Geoffrey Barraclough and AJP Taylor, who were products of Bootham as well, had the same history teacher. I've never really verified, but I mean the schoolmaster has quite a long span, doesn't he? Quite a long career and a period of 30 years. He has the opportunity to influence to 2 or 3 separate generations of historians. He was he was extremely good. And I think he he was the one who really set me off thinking that the main thing one is doing with history is being doubting of authority and statements which appear to be authoritative and dogmatic. The historian can quarry away at these and be sceptical and questioning. And I think this was the main thing he was putting across. Apart from anything else though, of course, being a very good teacher, he was sort of channelled into a history stream to attempt a scholarship to Oxford.

S1

10:03:54:13

Which is where you went.

S2

10:03:55:11

Which is where we went next.

S1

10:03:57:03

And was was history then a foregone conclusion at Oxford?

S2

10:04:01:08

I didn't think there was any element of choice at that point. One wasn't mature and old enough. I was extremely young. I went to Oxford in 1942.

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S1

10:04:15:22

So what kind of what kind of history were you taught there?
What kind of history was taught at the time? What was history
about in Oxford? At the time.

S2

10:04:23:16

I was asking this the seamless web of English history, that sort of
question. Well, certainly the whole of it was had to be studied, as
it were, and very analytical history. There was quite a strong
Marxist element around my modern history tutor in Queens was
Edmund Dell and Edmund at that time.

S1

10:04:53:13

Later on, politician.

S2

10:04:54:21

Politician, later the Labour, Labour Cabinet minister and so on. I
still see Edmund from time to time, but at that time Edmund.
Edmund, I think was would have been one of the group of Marx
historians. He was he was very close with Christopher Hill, and
he and he and Christopher collaborated and producing a book of
Civil War documents. It was always thought that Edmund didn't
hold a full fellowship. He held a temporary three or whatever
lectureship. It was always thought that he wasn't continued on
the grounds of of his politics, that there was an objection to his
Marxism and the college refused to to reappoint him to a
permanent. And he went into the ECI and then into the Labour
Party.

S1

10:05:43:19

And so this filtered down to the undergraduates. Were you aware
that this problem was. Yes, yes.

S2

10:05:49:18

Yes, yes, Yes, one was, yes.

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S1

10:05:51:14

So the question of class really already emerged as an issue during your undergraduate period?

S2

10:05:58:15

Yes.

S1

10:05:59:06

Yes, yes. And did you find it exciting? Did you find undergraduate work exciting at the time? Exciting, Challenging?

S2

10:06:07:06

Most of it extremely exciting and very and very challenging. I had an extremely good medieval historian, tutor John Prestwich, And and I would have thought that he was extremely influential on my own approach to history. He and his wife, Menna, was a husband and wife, historian team in Oxford were formidable, both intellectually and sort of socially in terms of their network, and they had very much perhaps this doesn't come out in my own work, not quite conspiracy theories, but sort of group and group and faction theories of history. So it was a derivative of name arising, I think, in its origin. But I was very impressed in the way in which John Prestwich could could ferret out the networks and the factions in the reign of King John and men oppressed, which could do this with Cranfield and James, the first and so on.

S1

10:07:15:15

And was this all political or legal or this?

S2

10:07:19:00

This seemed to me a better tool of explanation than a blunt Marxist class analysis. I mean, these were factions or groups formed within a class and one got the notion of intra intra class affinities. Conflict.

S1

10:07:36:17

That's a key.

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S2 **10:07:37:10**

Yes, that's right. Yes. Derivation from affinities. Yeah. Now, all this was I found extremely exciting and I got very much imbued with, with this as, as the form of intellectual activity, which was attractive and one would just like to go on with.

S1 **10:07:53:15**

And probing the for the roots of your life work really. And they lie somewhere.

S2 **10:07:59:03**

Somewhere around.

S1 **10:07:59:24**

That time. Yes, in that time.

S2 **10:08:01:11**

Somewhere.

S1 **10:08:01:22**

So how did you, uh, how did you latch on to, to this problem, perhaps. How did you conceive of the problem at the time? What did you start to investigate? What did you think you were investigating at the time? Well.

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S2 10:08:22:14

I do remember I had to come up with a plausible looking research topic quite rapidly while I was really preoccupied with with preparing to sit to sit schools. So I didn't really have the opportunity to talk very much with anyone about this. I talked briefly with Edmund Dell, but Edmund is pretty much a sort of gruff, grunting, kind of the kind of person who maybe sort of nods and grunts assent, but doesn't give very much positive input. And John, which didn't know anything at all about the 19th century, though he made encouraging noises. So now I must have thought of this large. Large, largely. I must thought this larger for myself and the the elementary problem question that occurred to me was to explain what was then taken for granted as being the erosion of aristocratic landed political control and power first signalled in a big way by the first Reform Act of 1832 and finally demonstrated by the Second Reform Act in 1867. So it was assumed the complete loss of political influence and power had occurred. Certainly by the second of those days, to equate this with the reigning kind of perhaps crude Marxist determinist analysis, which which said that, well, political power and control being merely a superstructure, resting on some sort of economic dominance and control of the means of production must therefore presuppose a decline in in the previous economic position and power of of the landed classes. So and it seemed to me no, no one had actually demonstrated that there was any erosion and decline in the financial economic position of the landowners that in any way coincided with this apparent loss of political power. So I thought this was what I would investigate.

S1 10:11:01:16
Echoes of the rise of the gentry. Well, of course.

S2 10:11:05:00
The rise of the gentry was going on. Yes. And that, that and the great vogue for for for Harington's Oceana meant that there was a very strong view at the time of the of the coincidence of possession of land and possession of political power.

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S1

10:11:30:21

Yes. And who supervise your, your dissertation, uh, when when you embarked on. Well, when I.

S2

10:11:37:15

Embarked on it is a Briggs. So the first year, as a postgraduate as Briggs was my supervisor, was he. He encouraged me to go and read a lot of pamphlets, pamphlet, literature, which put me on to a line, certainly of the the political professional attack on perhaps the legal foundations of land ownership, or perhaps only on the irrationality and absurdities of the land law. But he pushed me on onto looking at some of that literature.

S1

10:12:26:03

There's a big chunk in your dissertation of, uh, of this issue which did not really make its way into the, into English land society, did it?

S2

10:12:36:03

No, no, no, it didn't. It didn't in the end seemed to me either sufficiently exciting and interesting in itself or sufficiently easy to latch on to and integrate with the kind of material one got out of the state papers and and private archives.

S1

10:13:01:06

So this is a kind of mismatch between the amount of noise generated by an issue and its intrinsic importance.

S2

10:13:09:05

Well, it seems it was scarcely noticed by but scarcely noticed by the landowners or their agents. They didn't really think it to add much significance.

S1

10:13:23:09

And this this association lasted for a year. And who supervised you next? Sorry? Who supervised you next? Yes.

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S2 10:13:30:02

Well, John Habakkuk, he was then called Hrothgar. Habakkuk, of course. And great pity he dropped the name Hrothgar, but he didn't think it sounded well with a knighthood. That's that was some years later. Yes. I mean, he moved to Oxford from Cambridge. He moved to the Chair of Economic History in 1950. Yes. In October 57th, I had one year supervised 5051 by him. And of course, he remained my my titular supervisor thereafter. And I wasn't in Oxford after 1951, so I didn't see all that much or didn't see him all that frequently after.

S1 10:14:19:19

But there's a much greater correspondence of interests here, wasn't there? He had. Yes. Yes. He had this interest in land in the States and so on. Did he influence you in any particular way? Did he have any particular, uh, uh, mythological preoccupations?

S2 10:14:38:12

He he very much left around to get on with it, making a few suggestions as to particular estates or particular families that one might approach. Though on the whole, I chose I chose the majority of families for myself on the perhaps completely extraneous and irrelevant grounds from outcome on to or not in a minute. But he very much left ground to get on with it, emphasizing always the importance of the legal side. Get at the get at the settlements, get at the marriage settlements, because that was his starting point and remained firmly his his his main interest. He was extremely helpful at explaining, dissecting, deconstructing the marriage settlement would be the modern terminology, no doubt in explaining what the various trusts and trustees where this was hit up in the settlement and which were the important operative parts and and so on. And he put one on to the whole process of marriage negotiation and the importance of relating dowry to joint and and this sort of stuff. And he was rather frightening. I found in a way as a supervisor because he's he's got a very sort of devastatingly sharp, rather legal kind of mind which would dissect what one was saying quite well. So quite accurately, but but mercilessly.

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S1

10:16:42:07

How did you go about doing research? It's a fairly long term project. Did you plan out a series of questions, a series of stages? Was the problem well defined in advance? Did you envisage a series of steps? How did it work out?

S2

10:16:57:06

Um, I don't think I'm as methodical as any of those questions might suggest. And oh, certainly. I mean, yes, I had a number of questions at the back of my mind. What I was interested in discovering was, was really what, what made an estate tick. How did it function? Was the landowner himself directly concerned and involved with the management of the estate and making any key decisions? Or did he was it all left to the to the agent? Was an estate merely a source of of income which land owner might spend as an absentee altogether if he cared? So yes, it was essentially the economy of the estate and who pulled the levers in it. And this this led me into needing to understand a great deal about agriculture and tenancy agreements and finding tenants and investment in.

UU

10:18:18:02

Different kinds of interests. And so on, which I.

S2

10:18:22:22

I'd never come across before. So, I mean, one had to teach oneself all about what. What were the in things of country estates and agriculture in the period between the 1830 and the 1870s, which was that was the period of my thesis.

S1

10:18:43:08

So, so you went into the record room or perhaps into the record office and looked for the most likely files and read through them with the hope that over time a picture would emerge?

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S2

10:18:55:12

Yes. Yes. Yeah, One and one thing. I'd always wanted to start with the skeleton of of the income and expenditure.

S1

10:19:05:07

Was that was that easy to establish? It must have been.

S2

10:19:07:13

Sometimes not very easy to establish. Sometimes quite. Quite, quite straightforward. Most of most of the records were still in private hands of county record offices were were developing quite rapidly at the time, but most of most of the 19th century family in the state records was still in private hands.

S1

10:19:30:21

I'd like to ask whether you felt any personal engagement or involvement with the people you studied. Did you seek to empathise with the with the landowners? Did you feel part of the class system or perhaps outsider? Did you feel in contact with the landowners on a level of equality with them? Were you, in a sense admitted to the circle? How did you feel vis a vis the the subjects of your study?

S2

10:19:58:16

Oh, I was certainly never admitted to that circle. I don't think any of them are aware that I exist. And now I think Country.

S1

10:20:12:12

House has a copy of.

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S2 10:20:13:22

English society. I doubt it. I doubt it. No, I started off really from this sort of moderately, moderately restrained, radical, professional, middle class kind of background and position with the idea that it was quite interesting and important to get to know thine enemy that the landed aristocracy were, as you later thought, they were basically a set of parasites who were functionalist and were supported by the the hard work and toil of the agricultural labourers and and tenant farmers and led an interesting, maybe life of leisure bordering on luxury, but that it behooved one to to investigate how it was done and also why people put up with it. And not that I ever got very far, perhaps in investigating the second question as to why the rest of society did continue to tolerate and put up with this. But I think probably as I went along, my my my initial views must have changed and softened. Not that I've ever become an out and out admirer of of the landed class and their way of life. But I don't know once I understood more of what they were about. And one has no I haven't gone away with the impression that they were all public spirited, highly socially responsible people, certainly somewhere. And but even the most sort of extravagant and self-indulgent frivolities have have a certain panache about them That one one can't help but admire is admire the perhaps too strong a word. One can't help being fascinated by that. Certainly I'm I don't think I'm as critical of the whole social order as I was when I started out.

S1 10:22:52:04

The book is influenced, as I said, a whole generation of historians, and I think it's fair to say that in its field it is not been equalled, but a generation has passed since it was written. Has the picture been substantially revised, added to how a subsequent research affected your view of London society?

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S2 **10:23:13:02**

Well, as you said, there's been there been a great deal of substance. Research. Um. On. I think probably my book writes off the the economy of the of the land aristocracy to to rapidly and puts them into decline too soon and that if I if I rewrote it decline would be placed post 1919 rather firmly and and not not not before.

S1 **10:23:54:03**
The present is a terrible crisis isn't it the agricultural depression?

S2 **10:23:57:17**
Yes, it is. Well, it is still a it is still a crisis for for many, but not for all. But yes, it's regionally selective and well, I mean, I've written written about that in 1 or 2 articles more recently. And I, I mean, there's a great deal more to be said than I ever said about about the gentry. But again, most research rather like mine and perhaps has had as overemphasized because it's easy accessibility the landed magnate rather rather than the gentry and gentry records on the whole is a rather fragmentary. Whereas great estate records tend to give a long continuous run and a much, much better picture in that sense. Yeah.

S1 **10:25:05:08**
What do you say suggests that mostly what remains to be done is mopping up. Is there still a big agenda in this in in this field? How do you see the agenda of research into language society?

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S2

10:25:22:00

Well, I think probably the whole thing should be approached much more in terms of rural society as such with far more. I mean, I didn't set out to have any place at all for village society. I hardly say anything about agricultural workers. I don't say anything about rural craftsmen. There is certainly a scope for a much more sort of cross crust class in fully integrated history of rural society than I ever attempted. But whether anyone's about to attempt this, I'm not sure. I don't get the impression that they are. Certainly there's a lot quite a lot of work has been done and is being done at the lower end of rural society. Very interesting work. Some of it is.

S1

10:26:18:14

Of course, the farmers are farmers.

S2

10:26:21:09

They don't the farmers, the rural middle class is extremely neglected and and difficult. That will be somebody or groups of some groups of people really should set about serious research on on the farmers who were not a homogeneous group at all of course.

S1

10:26:50:13

I don't know.

S2

10:26:51:11

Well well okay you don't know. But a priori one thinks one knows that they aren't.

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S1

10:27:01:01

The two powerful movements in the discipline in the English speaking world. At any rate, um, during, during the period of your activity, one was Marxist history and the other was climatic history, perhaps to two opposing poles or two opposing approaches. And perhaps I won't ask you in general how they influence you, to what extent they influence you. But I will perhaps try to focus my questions a little more precisely and ask is the paradigm of exploitation which is the underpins the Marxist approach? Did you ever find that of any use in your approach to social history?

S2

10:27:43:15

Um, yes. I mean exploitation and resistance to it, certainly of use. But I think I would have said that I, I, I found, I found a general Marxist analysis useful in suggesting to me that that classes in the crude sense didn't exist and that that social groupings were, were much more complicated than was was suggested by but by a basic. Marxist analysis. And that the interesting thing was to try and delineate a, a structure which was much more sort of multilayered and much more flexible when one individual might at one time think he or she had an affinity with one group. And another situation was was a quite different social group and that this was much more like what society really, really was than than either a three class or some of the refinements of five classes. Analysis might indicate, but one one certainly is is deeply indebted to to the basic insights that I suppose relationships to the means of production and material circumstances and occupation have an enormous influence on what an individual is, where they belong, how they how they behave. And this, I'm sure, is the legacy of Marx, isn't it?

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S1 **10:29:54:00**

I'm going to go lightly over three further books, which you published, *The History of the Surveyor's Profession*, which provides a professional dimension of land and society, and the book about Hempstead building a borough which provides an urban dimension, and the edited book on the rise of suburbia, which yet again perhaps brings you back full circle into the world. You mention, and I'd like to move on to, to later projects. One is your book on the rise of respectable society and the other is the *Cambridge Social History*. And both of these have given you the opportunity to reflect on the grand sweep of British history and British social history in particular. What do you think it is mainly about? Is there an abiding theme and abiding problem in British social history.

S2 **10:30:56:05**

That takes me somewhat by surprise? I wouldn't expect that to be an abiding problem. Well, the lack of over certainly over over a couple of centuries of the *Cambridge Social History*. And unless you're thinking in terms of a methodological problem, perhaps, I mean, the the problem for the 19th century and the rise of respectable society was certainly one of a society in its different strata being influenced by and coming to terms with the whole urbanization industrialization business and the contraction, relative contraction of the rural and the agricultural element. I would hesitate to say that this is the problem that embraces the whole of 1750 to 1950. It's not the way in which I think each of the individual contributors saw it, at any rate, in that volume. But rather respectable society was intended to be my own overview of this this complex process. Responding to to urbanization and and industrialization and the decline of relative decline of the of the rural rural element.

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S1

10:32:40:12

We'll be fair to say that your your overview of of the substantive historical process is one of successful accommodation to change both to rise both to economic growth and urbanization and so on, and to the subsequent process which some people experience as or perceive as a period of decline. Whether you would, you are more inclined to stress the adaptability of institutions. Would that be? Yes.

S2

10:33:08:11

Well, yes. Qualified, qualified and moderate success in adapting to to these changes. Certainly not an unqualified success. There are enormous amount of problems and tensions and conflicts left if you end your study, as my respectful society did at the very beginning of this century, and there are an awful lot of problems left if you end your study at at 1950s as the Cambridge volumes were meant to do. But okay, in comparison with many other advanced economies and societies, relatively successful in the sense that there is no complete breakdown of social order and there's no great revolution, there's no civil war. And the absence of these things I would regard as a sign of of success.

S1

10:34:15:15

I'll ask you an American question now. What are you working on now?

S2

10:34:21:18

Well, I have an idea that I gave some four lectures two years ago. I have an idea that I have a moral obligation, if not a legal and contractual one, to to turn those into a book. And I think that's probably the next maybe the last thing. I've been sort of sidetracked by writing for the new DMB over the last two years, but I shall get around to that. It needs it needs a bit more thought and some more work on my part. I'm sure that when I reflect about it.

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S1

10:34:56:16

The total English society in the 20th century has been stolen, hasn't it?

S2

10:35:00:08

Someone stole them. Yes.

S1

10:35:05:14

Yes. Well, looking back on what you've done so far, are there any high points that stand out? In particular? What would you regard as the highest points?

S2

10:35:17:01

Oh, I don't know. There are many high points. Well, one, of course, was 1963 when the publication of *English Landed Society*. I must tell the story again when I was greeted in in Malet Street by the secretary of the Institute of Historical Research, who congratulated me on publishing two such wildly different books in the same year, the wildly different book being E.P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class*. Now, that was a very high moment and my life when I was credited with both of those. And no, I suppose I mean of obvious steps like becoming president of the Royal Historical Society or being elected to the British Academy of a very high spots that that one remembers. And there we go.

S1

10:36:18:14

Yes. And do you have any do you have any regrets?

S2

10:36:23:07

Um, no, not very serious ones, I don't think. I mean, there are things that I thought of doing which got left undone and which I'm sure I shall never do now, which in a way I regrets. I mean, I thought at one time I would write a book on the social history of the horse and make make the horse and the employment and ownership and training and whatnot and breeding of horses. The central theme for.

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S1

10:36:54:14

That's three quarters written, isn't it?

S2

10:36:56:15

But I don't think I'll ever write it as well. It may be three quarters written, but I don't think I'll ever write it now as a as a study on on its own. And I suppose I rather regret that I've been wholly a British and mostly an English historian that it would have been it would have done me good. It would have been very interesting to have done research over. A broader spread of of societies.

S1

10:37:29:11

I suspect I suspect that this is where a technological factor might have come in, which is a cheapening of international travel, which has made all of this mess much easier.

S2

10:37:38:24

Yes, Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.

S1

10:37:41:21

Well, thank you, Michael. You have written some wonderful history. And maybe with this video you've contributed to the making of history as well. Thank you very much.