

The interviews with Richard Marshall

On 12th September 2017 received the following email from Richard Marshall.

Dear Alan Macfarlane

I am a contributing editor at 3ammagazine.com, an online magazine of ideas and culture. I am currently interviewing thinkers about their work and wondered if you would be interested in taking part in this. I completely understand if this doesn't appeal but if it does please drop me a line and I can send along some questions for you to respond to at your leisure.

I am also a former student of Ernest Gellner. I did my MSc with him at the LSE in the early 80s. I am a bit of a fan. I wondered if you had a copy of his Men Of Ideas interview with Brian McGee that you could send me a link to. It seems as if all the interviews are on You Tube in the original English except Gellner's which is only available in Iranian! I have no idea why –perhaps you do.

Anyway, even if you decide against doing an interview I have listened to your online talks and read some of your work with pleasure and interest.

Yours Sincerely

Dr R Marshall: Interviews I have done can be seen here: <http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/index/interviews/the-end-times/>

I replied that I would be happy to do an interview, especially since he had a connection with my mentor and friend Ernest Gellner. Richard then wrote again on 15th September as follows.

Dear Alan

Thanks for the response and your willingness to take part. As a leading figure in anthropology I'm interested in getting your take on the state of anthropology today - developments/changes, as well as asking about aspects of your work, especially your interest in China, and reflections of Gellner. I'm happy to come to Cambridge with a tape recorder - filming it would be an excellent idea if that can be arranged and Christmas break would be an ideal time.

I'm a Head teacher in a state Secondary school in Greenwich by day. I have also been a contributing editor at 3ammagazine.com since it started in 2000. I think we're the oldest literary on line magazine in the world, for whatever that's worth!

I have spent the last four or five years focusing on interviewing philosophers about their work as I hold a doctorate in philosophy. I did my MSc at the LSE with Gellner and have continued to take an interest in what is going on in the academy even though I never was part of it. I've had a couple of books of the interviews published with OUP. The latest one was 'Ethics at 3M'. I was inspired to do this by watching the interviews Brian McGee did on TV back in the seventies and it was the interview he did with Gellner that made me want to go to the LSE and study with him. The interviews are aimed at a general readership/audience but a pretty sophisticated one. Increasingly academic philosophers have started to read the interviews and seem to like them too, which is encouraging.

If this still appeals then I'll start getting some questions ready and aim to come and see you at your convenience over the Christmas holiday.

Yours Sincerely, Richard

If Richard had come to Cambridge to do the interview, it would have been the usual one, lasting one or two hours at the most, speeding through my life and touching on a few of my ideas. Richard would have transcribed this from his audio tape and put it up on his website. It

would not have been very deep, though given his interests and the amount of preparation he normally did, it would have approached my life in a more informed and sympathetic way than some of the previous interviews.

I now learn that Richard was seriously ill shortly afterwards and the idea was dropped until I suddenly got another email on 9th January 2021 as follows.

Dear Alan Macfarlane

I am Richard Marshall, editor of 3:16am, a magazine of philosophy and ideas who has interviewed over 400 philosophers for the magazine here: <https://www.3-16am.co.uk/articles/.c/end-times-series>

I studied with Ernest Gellner for a year in 1982/3 for my MSc in Social Philosophy. Since then I became a teacher in secondary schools and retired recently.

I have recently been looking at the correspondence of Popper and Gellner held in the Karl Popper Library at Klagenfurt University, Austria with a view to publishing it. However, I don't think that the letters alone will be enough as there aren't that many and some of it, though fascinating, will need contextualising.

I know that you knew Gellner very well and have continued to ensure that his legacy is not forgotten. I also know, however, that you are probably very busy with your own projects and that this may not appeal to you. However, if there is anything in what I have said that does appeal, please drop me a line and we can go from there.

Yours Sincerely

Richard Marshall

PS I believe I contacted you some time ago for an interview and you agreed but I never took you up on this. I can only apologise - I became seriously ill for a time and on recovery it completely slipped my mind. Even if you were not interested in this letters project I would still like to interview you if possible for my series, although of course with the Covid plague I would have to send you written questions for you to respond to at your leisure. But of course, as with the letters, I completely understand if this no longer appeals.

I again replied to suggest that I would be happy to do the interview. Yet since a physical meeting was impossible because of Covid, and rather than answering questions over the phone or in emails, I suggested that we do a Zoom interview. Richard liked the idea and so, with the help of Zilan Wang, we set up the session for 10 am on Sunday 14th February. The meeting lasted well beyond the hour or so I had expected. It covered a number of topics I had not anticipated and it did not overlap too much with my previous writings.

The delay of over three years since his first approach turns out to have been extremely fortunate. As described above, during the last of those years, 2020, I had used the opportunity of the almost total absence of interruptions because of the Covid lockdown to write an account of my life and ideas. This was an anthropological analysis to complement the nine volumes of ethnography I had previously assembled. This meant that my ideas were more concisely worked out. So the timing of the request for the interview was perfect.

Furthermore, the change in the recording methods was also helpful. It is very unlikely that Richard would have had the time or energy to make more than one, or possibly two, visits to Cambridge from London to undertake the interview. Yet, being able to use the Internet – Zoom – which also gave an easy and immediate (film) recorded version, meant that there was no friction of distance. We could space the interviews as we liked, making them into a Sunday-morning ritual lasting up to two and a half hours, punctuated by a tea break.

The context was unusual and propitious, yet the most essential ingredient was Richard's interest and skills. In the intervening three years, Richard had retired from the demanding job of being a school headmaster and so he was under less pressure. His experience of doing more than four hundred interviews, many of them through asking questions in writing and then getting written replies, but some orally, in many fields, though predominantly in philosophy, had given him a great deal of experience. He knew how to prepare carefully, to

ask good and engaged questions and how to listen and encourage the interviewee. Above all, he was seeking for some answers to serious questions and wanted to know what the person he was interviewing thought.

Because of his long-time interest in the problems that Ernest Gellner had posed about the nature, origins and effects of modernity, Richard was clearly intrigued by my attempts to critique and carry on the Gellnerian search. So he gently guided the interviews, like a shepherd, and kept to this theme. Yet he also allowed me to stray a bit and explore other themes.

I found myself in that most liberating of environments where I could talk to a knowledgeable person who had taken the trouble to read much of my written work and watch many of my filmed lectures and interviews. This meant that I felt that the interviews were real conversations. Richard would helpfully intervene after ten minutes or so with a fresh question, often arising out of what I had just said or other parts of my work, probing and pushing me on. He would force me to consider things from a new angle or to comment on ideas which had not occurred to me before.

It was clear that Richard was finding my answers helpful in re-thinking his own problems, just as I was finding the presence of an interested interlocutor very stimulating. The dynamics were no doubt improved because of a certain intellectual starvation I felt, caused by being unable to leave our fenland home for almost a year. Although I had a lively email correspondence with many friends, and gave some Zoom talks, and in particular chatted to Zilan and my young Chinese friends and others on Zoom, the only continuing conversation in the flesh was with Sarah. She is wonderful, but obviously knows me and my work so well that she is not likely to ask the sort of questions which come from a relative stranger.

Thinking back over the experience, one thing that strikes me is the fact, commented on before, about how the medium of expression alters the message. Oral recounting and reflection is very different from writing, as Jack Goody and others have long pointed out. Writing condenses and inscribes our ideas in a more precise, logical and deliberate way. It allows us to make mistakes, simplifications, and then to correct them. It can be done at any speed we like, taking a few minutes to write a sentence if we wish. In many ways it is like oil painting, which allows the painter to work and re-work the image for as long as they like, to try things out and then re-shape them.

An oral account is like brush work in Chinese painting or calligraphy. There is only a second in which to make the stroke, then the ink is absorbed from the brush into the paper. It has to be effected immediately and in an almost inspired way, for there is no re-shaping. As I have seen with skilled calligraphers, it is entirely spontaneous, like a dance. It is like a move in a complex game, whether football or speed chess. There is no going back and the implications are permanent. The ideas and the action are fused and, if it works, something magical and unexpected can happen.

The spontaneity comes at a cost. It can be exhausting since one has to concentrate even more. Than when writing. You cannot take a break in the middle of a sentence or slow down. You are riding a mental bicycle and have to keep moving. One is constantly aware of the danger of over-simplification, using a basic vocabulary and syntax, and just one's present memory. The tendency to over-generalization for effect and to keep the interviewer's interest, or to bring complex ideas to a point where they can be swiftly communicated, is always present. Often one cannot immediately recall, as one is speaking an important detail, especially as, when aged seventy-nine as I now am, I cannot remember a name, fact or date. Nor can one remember a few of the many wonderful quotations or examples which can be woven into a written text.

Often one is aware soon after an answer that one has made mistakes and they cannot be corrected in the film version without difficult editing. Things are muddled and joined which

should be kept apart. One is constantly aware that there are certain things one might like to say but if they go out onto the internet in film they could cause hurt to some people, or rage and retribution from others, particularly in this jittery time.

Yet, speaking rather than writing also gave me a sense of freedom, a release from the effort of writing by hand or typing, the pleasure of the simplification into spoken language which allows the mind to travel faster, or so it seems, and unconstrained by some of the grammar and logic built into written forms.

I felt in these interviews, as I had done when working with David Dugan and Channel Four, that I was exploring connections and idea which had been locked inside me, but could now be expressed. It was like a journey with a friend, like the description of the legal historian F. W. Maitland's style. Maitland's writing, although about very complex and potentially dry legal subjects, has the freshness of a conversation with a friend on a walk. This is perhaps because he often wrote as if he were speaking. He would stand at a lectern and talk through a subject to an imaginary audience, and take down what he said. Adam Smith is reputed to have done the same – pacing up and down a small room while an amanuensis took down what he said. Ernest Gellner did the same thing, either getting students to transcribe his lectures (I was twice involved in arranging this to be done), or speaking into a tape-recorder and getting it typed out. All these and numerous other examples show the way in which an oral text can be produced. This is certainly different, and in some ways more engaging, than a written one.

I have found this, of course, through my life. For the experience reminds me of many occasions when I have walked with people who I was fond of, and where we had built up a shared and mutual interest in exploring subjects together. In particular, walks with Sarah and other members of my family, with deep friends like Gerry Martin and Mark Turin, or some of my Nepalese, Japanese and Chinese friends. Most of my exploration of Japan, for example, as I recount it in *Discovering Japan* (2020) arose out of a fifteen year conversation with Toshiko and Kenichi Nakamura.¹

Extended conversations and friendships can be enormously productive of new ideas. This set of interviews is something like that. I do nearly all the talking in them, as is inevitable, but Richard intervenes enough to make it into a conversation. And though the encounter in our lives has been a very short time of a couple of months, because of our shared interests in the Gellnerian problems, it feels as if we have known each other for longer.

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The final outcome of this series of filmed Zoom interviews can be seen from the list of topics we covered, with the length of each, in the nine sessions that took place between Sunday 14 February 2021 and Sunday 11th April. The first interview of 111 minutes was the shortest, the last of 164 minutes was the longest. On average, they lasted nine and a half minutes each, with the shortest being two minutes and the longest twenty-three minute. There were 135 separate sections, lasting a total of 1289 minutes That is a little under twenty-one and a half hours in all. I probably spoke for twenty one hours, and Richard's questions and comments took up most of the other thirty minutes.

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As explained, I have left the interviews in the order in which they were done. Yet it may be helpful to indicate briefly some of the general themes covered and where the films about them can be found,. This can only be done roughly since one of the strengths of the approach was

¹ http://www.alanmacfarlane.com/FILES/DISCOVERING_JAPAN.pdf

that Richard asked questions which cut across the normal divisions of my previous work, his forced me to think about links and connections I had not considered. This was a creative process, but it does mean that many of the answers could be put under several headings. Yet years are a few obvious groups of a rough and provisional kind.

Some of the main themes covered in the interviews

Archives and ancestors: 9:5, 9:6, 9:9, 9:10
Books and reading: 9:1, 9:2
China: 3:6, 3:7, 38:8, 3:10, 3:11, 7:7, 7:8, 7:14, 8:7
Civilization and globalization: 5:19, 8:2, 8:3, 9:11
Communicating: 10:6, 10:7, 10:8
Computing and multimedia: 4:6, 4:7, 4:8, 9:7
Creativity and working methods: 6:16, 6:17, 6:18, 6:20, 9:3, 9:4
Demography and ageing: 5:10, 5:11, 5:12, 10:4, 10:5
Disease: 10:1, 10:2, 10:3
Education: 6:1, 6:2, 6:3, 6:4, 6:5, 6:6
Enchantment and modernity: 1:2, 3:5, 3:12, 4:1, 4:2
Family and life: 1:1, 2:1, 2:2, 6:7, 6:8
Gender, class and race: 5:13, 5:14, 5:15, 5:16, 7:21, 7:22, 8:9
Great thinkers: 1:3, 2:5, 2:6, 3:3, 3:9, 6:14, 6:15, 7:11, 7:12, 7:13, 7:16, 7:17, 7:18, 8:1, 8:6
Law and Politics: 1:4, 4:3, 4:5, 7:1, 7:2, 7:3, 7:4, 7:5, 7:6, 9:12
Literature and arts: 5:6, 5:7
Museums: 4:11, 9:8
Nightmares: 7:9, 7:10, 8:8
Peculiarity of the British: 5:16, 5:17, 5:18, 5:20, 7:20, 8:4
Reflections on the current world: 10:10, 10:11, 10:12, 10:13
Technologies and economy: 5:1, 5:2, 5:3, 5:4, 5:5, 5:8, 5:9, 7:15, 9:13
Theoretical methodology: 2:3, 2:4, 3:1, 3:2, 4:4, 6:9, 6:10, 6:11, 6:12, 6:13, 6:19, 8:10, 8:11, 8:12, 8:13
Visual work and interviews: 4:9, 4:10, 8:14, 10:9

The full list of the interviews is as follows, with the timings and where they can be found on the internet.

[approx. duration of interview in minutes in figures]

All the films are up on the Cambridge website and can be seen and downloaded from there:

Streaming Media Service at Cambridge:
<https://sms.cam.ac.uk/collection/3442946>

The films can also be seen, as they go up, on:

Youtube:

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTCcS6e700aMB3rNW_pM71glzmjo0dKAW

Session 1. Sunday 14th February 10 am -12.45

PART 1

- 1:1 Childhood and the shock of school and separations - 9
- 1:2 Modernity – it's nature, causes and consequences – 12
- 1:3 Maitland on the origin and nature of Trusts – 13
- 1:4 Civil Society, Trusts and democracy – 15

PART 2

- 2:1 Iris Macfarlane and Sarah Harrison and their influence – 12
- 2:2 Friendship and Chinese guanxi – 9
- 2:3 History and Anthropology, Keith Thomas and Jack Goody – 7
- 2:4 Anthropology and History – differences – 10
- 2:5 Braudel – an assessment – 8
- 2:6 Live and Works – Montesquieu, Smith, Tocqueville – 16

Session 2. Sunday 21 Feb 10 am-12.30

- 3:1 Nature of anthropology and apprenticeship in – 10
- 3:2 Large paradigms in anthropology, esp. functionalism and structuralism – 16
- 3:3 Karl Marx as evolutionist – 3
- 3:4 Alan's experiences of fieldwork – Nepal and Japan – 11
- 3:5 Nature of religion and cross-cultural comparisons – 9
- 3:6 Encounter with China and recent book – 8
- 3:7 Structure of China and how to understand – 13
- 3:8 Jack Goody on Eurasia – 12
- 3:9 Ernest Gellner – limits to his vision – 16
- 3:10 How disenchantment and modernity/science fit – 6
- 3:11 How China, though enchanted, can be modern – 4
- 3:12 Belief and stories of spirits and supernatural beings 17

Session 3. Sunday 28 Feb 10.15 – 12.55

- 4:1 'Oasis' enchantment in separated societies - play and arts – 14
- 4:2 The rainbow of enchantment, from Anglosphere to Japan – 12
- 4:3 Nations and the theory of nationalism – 9
- 4:4 Empires and the role of anthropology – 9
- 4:5 The British and other empires compared – 6
- 4:6 Memory and information retrieval before the computer – 16
- 4:7 The computer revolution in Cambridge and various projects - 23
- 4:8 Participant-observer in the fourth communications revolution – computers – 22
- 4:9 Visual anthropology and the use of filming – 10
- 4:10 How film can help anthropology in analysis and preservation – 11
- 4:11 Why did anthropologists stop collecting artefacts for museums – 5

Session 4. Sunday 7th March 1010 – 12.55

- 5:1 What is technology and what are its effects – 8
- 5:2 The long history of technologies – 11
- 5:3 How I became interested in technologies and their importance – 9

- 5:4 The Renaissance and the role of glass – 9
- 5:5 Why glass did not develop in China and Japan – 3 CHINA
- 5:6 Painting, music and literature across Europe – 7
- 5:7 The reasons for excellent children’s literature in England – 6
- 5:8 The importance and effects of tea through history – 16
- 5:9 The medical effects of drinking tea – 11
- 5:10 Thomas Malthus and his theories of population –8
- 5:11 Malthus 2:0 The tendencies of population – 12
- 5:12 Reasons to encourage fertility and the ageing of populations – 5
- 5:13 Women’s role and status in British history – 12
- 5:14 Why did women’s status go down in C19 Britain – 3
- 5:15 Why class was so important for Marx – 2
- 5:16 Peculiarity of the English – humour – 6
- 5:17 Peculiarity of English – individualism – 3
- 5:18 Peculiarity of English - playing the game – 8
- 5:19 Is the world all becoming uniform – 5
- 5:20 British separation of society and culture – 9

Session 5. Sunday 14th March 10.05-1pm

- 6:1 The nature of British education – body, spirit, heart and mind – 15
- 6:2 Difference between British and East Asian education – 8
- 6:3 Distaste for physical labour by elite – Britain compared to others – 4
- 6:4 Differences between universities in Britain and Asia – 11
- 6:5 Mixing of western & eastern education and politics of education 12
- 6:6 The Oxbridge College system and its independence – 6
- 6:7 M.R. James the ghost story writer – 3
- 6:8 Ghosts and memories of childhood – M.R. James – 2
- 6:9 Epistemology and paradigms – 7
- 6:10 Basic paradigms in the last 500 years – 8
- 6:11 What causes paradigm shifts – political relations – 7
- 6:12 Types of functionalism, static and pendulum – 6
- 6:13 From community study to civilizational analysis – 8
- 6:14 A portrait of Max Weber and his methodology – 9
- 6:15 Karl Jaspers and Axiality – 4
- 6:16 Reasons for specialization in academic life – 6
- 6:17 Creativity and how it is encouraged – 8
- 6:18 Need for visionary work for creativity – 7
- 6:19 Are there laws or tendencies we can discover? – 12
- 6:20 Bureaucracy and spontaneity – Japan and – 8

Session 6. Sunday 21st March. 10-05 – 1pm

- 7:1 Law and justice compared between civilizations – 8
- 7:2 Two legal traditions in the world; Anglosphere and the rest – 10
- 7:3 How was legal independence maintained in the Anglosphere? – 7
- 7:4 Japanese legal and political traditions similar to Anglosphere – 4
- 7:5 Equity or fairness in the Anglosphere legal tradition – 5
- 7:6 Spread of Anglosphere legal tradition over the British Empire – 5
- 7:7 Reforming the Chinese legal system and its tensions – 8

- 7:8 The Islamic legal tradition and the Chinese reaction - 17
- 7:9 What the study of witchcraft teaches us – 10
- 7:10 Contemporary witchcraft and the reactions to modernity – 11
- 7:11 The loss of foundations and the birth of sociology – 4
- 7:12 Karl Marx and his legacy – 6
- 7:13 Was Marx a Marxist? – 5
- 7:14 What is Communism with western characteristics in China? – 6
- 7:15 Is the economy the infrastructure and can the free market work? – 6
- 7:16 Durkheim, his strengths and weaknesses – 13
- 7:17 The value and limitations of current sociology – 2
- 7:18 Max Weber and his greatness and despair – 3
- 7:19 Weber on the city and patterns of urban-rural relations – 10
- 7:20 Cities and the countryside, urban and peasant mentalities – 8
- 7:21 Systems of stratification compared – caste, class and status – 9
- 7:22 Class relations in the world today – growing gaps – 3

Session 7. Sunday 28th March 10-05 –1pm

- 8:1 – Fukuzawa Yukichi and the rise of modern Japan - 13
- 8:2 The Four Little Tigers of East Asia 2
- 8:3 The Clash of Civilizations – 14 –
- 8:4 Memories and feelings about the British Empire- 5
- 8:5 The Clash or Harmony of Civilizations – 18
- 8:6 Rousseau and Hobbes and their views of human nature – 5
- 8:7 The new Silk Road and western perceptions of China –13
- 8:8 Civilizational nightmares – heretics, jews, witches, communists, abusers & terrorists - 17
- 8:9 Race and racism – especially in the United States – 6
- 8:10 What is anthropology and what has it contributed to the world – 9
- 8:11 Is it possible to get outside our ethnocentric vision? – 6
- 8:12 What is history and what can we learn from it? – 11
- 8:13 What I have learnt from studying my own life – psychology & autobiography 22
- 8:14 The nature and history of my interviewing project – 8

Session 8 . Sunday 4th April 2021

- 9:1 Building a library and bookshop - 8
- 9:2 Digital books and how to read books – 9
- 9:3 Working methods – the arrangement of space and time – 19
- 9:4 The life of an academic – teaching, research and administration – 15
- 9:5 An archival revolution and the new social history of the 1960s – 14
- 9:6 The relative production and survival of records in different civilizations – 5
- 9:7 The Naga Videodisc and multi-media – 21
- 9:8 The return of cultural objects to the cultures that produced them – 4
- 9:9 Our work on the lives of my ancestors and imperial history – 18
- 9:10 Iris Macfarlane’s rebellion against the British Raj – 6
- 9:11 Going north to south with societies, rather than west to east – 4
- 9:12 Feud and war and what to do about them – 17
- 9:13 Famine its causes and consequences – 15

Session 9 Sunday 11th April 2021-04-06

- 10:1 Disease – why I am interested in and how to understand - 6
- 10:2 Water-borne diseases and their history – dysentery, cholera and typhoid - 10
- 10:3 Vector-borne diseases; plague, malaria and typhus - 23
- 10:4 The Third Age and the ageing revolution – causes and consequences - 14
- 10:5 The Third Age, retirement and its implications – 17
- 10:6 Types of communication and enquiry - oral – 14
- 10:7 Types of communication – writing – 5
- 10:8 Types of communication – visual and internet – 9
- 10:9 The film interviews – future plans and what I learnt – 11
- 10:10 What De Tocqueville would have made of contemporary America – 18
- 10:11 What Max Weber would have made of contemporary China – 9
- 10:12 What Karl Marx would have made of how the world has evolved – 9
- 10:13 A few general reflections on the future of our world – 9

Session 10 Sunday 2nd May 2021

- 11:1 Ernest Gellner on nationalism – a critique –11
- 11:2 Ernest Gellner on nationalism – further discussion – 3
- 11:3 Why China has never been a nation, but is a galactic civilizations 7
- 11:4 Ernest Gellner symposium in Prague May 2021 – further thoughts – 10
- 11:5 Ernest Gellner as a world historian – 5
- 11:6 What is ‘modernity’ and how is it related to enchantment and non-Axiality – 8
- 11:7 Gellner, embedded thought and cultural pluralism – 9
- 11:8 Enchantment, disenchantment, play and games – 11
- 11:9 Is Gellner immortal and why it is difficult to ask the big ‘why’ questions – 9

144 Interviews

A total of 1362 minutes, a bit over than 22 and a half hours in all.

Approximately 160,000 words when transcribed