

Nicki Kindersley, interviewed by Tracey Loughran, 6 October 2025

Nicki Kindersley is Senior Lecturer in African History at Cardiff University. She works on contemporary history and politics in Africa, researching histories of political education and working lives in South Sudan and its borderlands. She is the author of the chapter 'Choosing Modules: Risks and Rewards' in *A Practical Guide to Studying History* (second edition).

Interview

Tracey Loughran (TL): *Okay, so just to start off with, when, where and what did you study at university?*

Nicki Kindersley (NK): So I studied history. I started in 2004, graduated in 2007. I was lucky to get into Cambridge for my undergraduate degree and, and then I graduated into a financial crisis, which was fascinating. It was a really interesting time to be studying history.

TL: *And why did you choose history?*

NK: Oh, I think probably for the standard reasons, that I was really interested in it at school, but I was also good at it. And because it offers so much or so many options for making it what you want at degree level. I also really didn't know what the other options were. I don't think I'd ever heard of anthropology even when I was sixteen, seventeen. I also knew that I wanted to study world history in the broadest possible sense, because I was aware of the geographical limitations of my GCSE and A-level experience, let's say. I was aware of what I didn't know and where I didn't know about.

TL: *I think that knowledge of limitations is quite unusual for when you're applying to university. How did you become aware of the limitations of what you'd studied up to that point?*

This is an edited transcript of an interview carried out on Zoom.

NK: I think I wanted to know more about specific things. And I've always been a museums person. So, as a teenager, always very interested in taking myself off to old museums and so on, and there was just stuff that I had no handle on, because I had only really done European history and very modern European history as well. Actually, I think I've avoided studying the Tudors ever, including at primary school, which makes me probably one of the only people in the UK who's avoided the Tudors. But the endless cycles of World War Two history became really frustrating. I think I studied the industrial revolution three times because I'd moved schools. I was just aware that there were massive gaps in my understanding of Britain as well, because I had not been able to study any British empire history.

TL: *Did you find that your degree gave you opportunity to go over those other areas?*

NK: Well, this is interesting. I was thinking about this before we were talking. So I applied for Cambridge. And my second choice was Manchester, specifically because I'd looked at the syllabus and been like, oh, there's a lot of world history, there's a lot of stuff that I've never even heard of or never thought I could study. And I did actually get to study quite a lot of world history at Cambridge, but within the limitations also of the Cambridge Tripos. So by my second year, I realized that I'd only written two essays on the entire continent of Africa. And obviously for my plan to have a decent world historical knowledge, I was a bit annoyed by that. Also the essays had kind of fallen into the classic pattern of 'colonial history' and then 'postcolonial history' or independence movements. And so I was like, well, I'm studying the African continent through European interventions. I did have a great opportunity to study a lot of East Asian history. There's a really strong East Asian historical component in Cambridge, which was wonderful. But I got to the second year and I realized I really didn't know anything about the African continent.

TL: *We'll come back to that in a second, but you also mentioned not having heard of anthropology when you were picking your degree choices. Were you exposed to other disciplines at any point in your history degree?*

NK: Yeah, because at Cambridge you can move between faculties a little bit. Although, you know, I'm not certain how, how much I felt confident to do that, but that was when I discovered anthropology and a variety of social sciences and so on. I think my school was very risk averse, like a lot of schools are, particularly for students they considered to be academically gifted. They wanted us to apply for a very narrow set of degrees that they felt comfortable with us pitching for. I think, in retrospect, it would have been exciting to apply for something else, but I just don't think I would have been confident

enough to step outside of history. So I did start, as an undergraduate, looking at other disciplines and understanding different perspectives and approaches. But I've always considered myself a historian really.

TL: *And what was your favourite module as an undergraduate, or as a postgraduate, if you like?*

NK: Oh, I think it has to be an undergraduate module and it has to be that classic type of undergraduate module, which is the third year Special Subject niche module designed by a professor deeply invested in a research project. And I know that these are rare beasts now. I would love to teach one myself now. I don't think I realized quite how special this was until I was on it. But I was lucky enough to be there in my final year at the right time for Derek Peterson, who was a visiting fellow, I think, at Cambridge at that point. He taught a special subject on his project on East African revivalism. It was the first time I'd ever properly dug into archival material that the lecturer was still processing, including oral historical stuff, transcripts, songs. I remember Derek bringing in a really janky tape recorder and playing recordings of songs in the classroom, and it just blew my mind. And photos of archives that were incredibly ratty and in terrible condition, one of which I then went out and worked on in Uganda afterwards. It just opened up my understanding of how you actually construct history as well, how historical research actually gets built, in a way that my dissertation just didn't do in quite the same way.

TL: *Was that Special Subject a key moment in deciding to go on and study history further?*

NK: It was definitely when I realized, I want to do research. I love this. This is great. When I started to work out how research was built and all of the different questions and problems that you come up against when trying to actually construct things out of complicated, methodologically messy stuff.

TL: *Did you take any of your skills, historiography or theory modules during your degree?*

NK: Yes, I did. I think they were called History in Practice or something like that, the kind of standard name that all of these historiographical modules are called everywhere. I remember thinking that the lecturers were quite frustrated by these processes, and I really enjoyed seeing the various fights or implicit fights between lecturers over approaches and methods and ways of doing history. So that was the fun bit. The biggest difference between lecturers seemed to be around methodologies, at least on the courses that I took. And I remember the social and cultural history, and an oral history session that was really eye-opening. Although I don't think we ever really talked about interdisciplinarity, then I think this might be an early 2000s missing piece.

TL: *Do you teach any skills or historiography or theory modules now?*

NK: Yeah, I do, and I have for a while. I taught some at Cambridge. I actually taught on the old historiographical module at Cambridge that I was taught, which is slightly surreal to do and to go back to. And I do teach on them now. They have changed and they do change. But it's also that question of, you know, if you are introducing students to that eye-opening process of how you actually do and build history, you have to start from some first principles and do some unlearning as well.

TL: *What kinds of things do you have to help them unlearn?*

NK: Well, for my part, the essentialism around archives and where you get your materials from and how you get those materials, because the majority of my research is oral history, and a lot of songs and poetry as well. That kind of stresses out a lot of my students, which is actually quite helpful, I think. But I think also the question of fact and truth. I find students get very panicked when I say that I'm not entirely convinced that there is truth. And I think that's really healthy as a conversation for students to have very, very early on in their history degrees, but it might not be quite what they're expecting.

TL: *I suppose it's a way of thinking that working closely with oral history does lead you towards, because so much of the debate on oral history is very concerned with, not so much truth and untruth, but perspective.*

NK: Yeah, perspective and, and that sense of time and change and how people see change completely differently and see time differently and so on.

TL: *You also talked about using music. So how do students respond when you start introducing songs as sources?*

NK: I think a lot of students just have never considered songs as a historical source. In the second-year module I used to run on African history, I did encourage students to think of songs that have shaped their memories of historical events. Bringing it back to students' own experience of how that type of source has shaped their own historical memory means that everyone's much more comfortable talking about things from that starting point. And I think students often respond really well to this, because they can see this much more visibly in their own and their parents' understandings of history as soon as you bring it back home. But students can find questions of musicology, and the very different use of language and pace, and the cultural and social worlds of songs and poetry, really difficult to grapple with, partly because that's really hard to translate and to get to grips with in a UK classroom. So there's a limit to how far you can go, I think, with using these types of primary sources in the classroom. But there's not really a limit to offering up the possibilities for the method.

TL: *Are those limits in the classroom partly because musicological literature depends on a high degree of knowledge of how music works, which can be quite alienating?*

NK: I think you can end up going down a very technical path with how music works, but there's also this question of how music works within the societies and what music is for and how it works in history as well, that is really important and hard to get to just by saying, oh, I'm going to add this song into my research and mix, you know, I'm just going to pop it in and stir. And this is how you can end up very easily just using transcripts of lyrics rather than actually songs. In terms of my research in South Sudan, the role of songs in society is so fundamentally different to how music works in the UK, at least particularly in white communities in the UK, that it's very hard to not end up just looking at lyrics as an outsider. But actually, songs and song testimonies are much more the historical tradition in South Sudan than anything else.

TL: *I suppose there's a link there to debates in oral history about the idea of the transcript as a poor substitute for a recording, but then also that the recording itself is a poor substitute for the face-to-face encounter. So do you use any techniques or literature in thinking about oral history when you're trying to convey some of these ideas about music to students?*

NK: Yes, but again, it's hard to do in classrooms and increasingly hard to do in classrooms with the time limitations that are placed on us now as well. To set up a discussion about the various methodological techniques for digging into material collectively, I often play a clip of a group research meeting I ran in Aweil, a small town in northwest South Sudan, a couple of years ago, where a songwriter and poets performed a series of songs that were historically significant markers in the community's history that everyone knew. This is a video of everyone dancing and singing and then talking off different parts of the lyrics, using the song as a springboard and coming back to certain sections of the song and asking for the performers to restart at different points. That demonstrates a level of complexity. But again, it's a luxury in the classroom to be able to do that type of thing. Sometimes using films helps students situate where we're talking about and the context within which we're going to engage with something. But the luxury of time in class is what's needed really in order to get into this type of methodological and theoretical discussion.

TL: *So time is one pressure that makes it difficult to get into more theoretical and methodological issues. I'm also wondering, thinking about the context of UK education, how many of your students have formally studied African history before, within an academic setting?*

NK: Well, formally, very, very few. I'm trying to keep up with the curriculum changes at GCSE and A-level, and there have been really good moves at both levels. But it depends on the take-up of those modules. It depends on the training and the resourcing given to the teachers as well. And to be honest, the module choices are still deeply limited. You know, there's a tendency towards very obvious bits of curriculum addition. So bits of the British empire, bits of histories of slavery and specifically the Atlantic slave trade and bits of post-1950s Black British history, which is all fantastic, but again, contains its own limitations. More frequently, I have students with personal family heritage and family history that they're investigating and they want to investigate at university. They have extremely specific pieces and areas of knowledge around a specific country or location or set of experiences within a migrant or diaspora community that they want to contextualize and understand. And that's very tricky within the module structure of the university environment, but absolutely not impossible. But combining that, at least in my institution, with a majority of students who are white, mostly middle-class and very earnestly focused on getting through a curriculum that they are still pretty unfamiliar with overall ... taking a course, for instance, on African or anticolonial history feels very risky, because this is outside their experience. It's tricky. And I do say to my students, I respect that this is new and a leap and a risk that they're taking when there's so much financial and intellectual pressure on students to achieve a good grade, that taking a risk is increasingly not necessarily incentivized. But it's super-important that these modules do several things at the same time, that they cater for specific students' intellectual and historical needs and personal needs. These modules also do a lot of unteaching. There's a lot of myth-busting and reworking, for instance, of language around ethnicity within African history that needs to be done. There's a lot of ground-setting and a lot of dealing with, particularly, white students' anxieties about getting something wrong, offending people, sounding like they're talking the colonial language when they're trying to use this vocabulary. So there's a lot of work to do to make everyone feel like they have the tools to do this history. And again, that's about time and trust in the classroom and making sure that a reasonably diverse student cohort gets what they need out of the classroom. It's tricky.

TL: *Yes, very tricky. One of the things that's come up quite a lot in different interviews, in different ways, is the idea that students are increasingly risk averse, partly because of the marketization of higher education, but also because the cohorts we've seen for the past few years have had to deal with COVID, and, you know, the general state of the world. So I suppose, dealing with students who have opted to take the modules and have already shown a willingness to take that*

risk once they're in the classroom is one thing. But do you think there are any ways that universities or departments, when they're designing curricula, could be doing more to encourage that risk-taking as part of the intellectual journey?

NK: I think when we're designing our curricula, I would like us to talk a lot more and have more time to talk a lot more about how we make sure that there isn't a safe path in some respects, that students don't just look for the stuff that they can say, oh, I at least know the facts, I at least know the groundwork. That actually, in some respects, is about how we talk about all modules together, especially modules on Europe. But while it's difficult for me, providing the spicy courses around the edge of the curriculum, the ones that students might take as the single risk in their academic year, I'm always going to be encouraging my students to say, well done, you've picked something that you're really unfamiliar with, we're going to get the groundwork in place as quickly as possible, so you will feel safe and able to take this up ... While that's difficult for me, I wonder actually, if it's also really tricky for my colleagues teaching British and European history to knock students out of their comfort zone at the same time. So actually, I'd love us to have more holistic conversations to reset the framework around the whole curriculum, not to stress students out across the board, but I do think we can make sure that students don't think 'this one's safe, I know what I'm doing here, nothing's going to change on this module'. I think the more we can make the core modules in the first year demonstrate that global history, colonial history, postcolonial history, this is actually part of students' knowledge already, even if they're not aware of it, and that they have the tools to start tackling it, then it doesn't feel like such a wild choice for second or third year. I mean, I remember getting to the end of my second year and saying, right, I am taking a huge risk. I am going to do only African history for the entirety of my third year, and I've only written two essays on this. But that was a very different time. I had significantly less financial pressure than students currently do. I was not trying to do a full-time job at the same time as studying. So I do understand why students don't want to take on what feels like, at the bare minimum, a huge amount of work. But we could build in that all elements of this are risky, that they might come up against something in World War Two history that they had never previously expected to be there, and that they're going to be pushed further on every aspect of their historical knowledge and learning as well.

TL: *Moving onto the final few questions, how did you end up as a historian?*

NK: Through a bit of a circular route. After my undergraduate degree, I definitely didn't want to continue studying. I was exhausted. I thought, that's more than enough. But I really did want to do

some research. So I ended up being a research assistant for a couple of years, starting off with nine months at the British Institute for Eastern Africa, one of the British Academy Institutes based in Nairobi. I worked on a variety of other people's projects, doing archival work, doing my first oral history work, and a variety of other different methods. I worked with archaeologists and anthropologists and stuff, so that was where I started actually really getting field experience. It was amazing. And then I got heavily into thinking about migration and migration histories and contemporary migration politics. I trained as a legal advisor and caseworker in the tribunal system in the UK for asylum seekers. I did that until the legal aid system collapsed at the same time as all of the student fees and everything changed. And I applied for a PhD because I wanted to continue my research on migration and migration histories, combining some of the topics I had come across professionally with some of the questions that hadn't been answered from my work as a research assistant. I don't think I actually thought, when I went into the PhD, of ending up as a professional academic or ending up as a historian. I was just like, let me see where this goes and I'm going to use my historical perspective to build a really interesting bit of research and decide where I want to go. But actually, after a series of strange postdoctoral jobs – in legal anthropology, in a politics department for a bit, in African studies, I taught some international relations – I'd worked in a variety of different disciplines, but all of that actually meant that I increasingly self-defined as a historian, because I knew exactly who I was and where I was coming from. And that this approach, this way of seeing the world, this set of methodological tools, this is me. I am definitely a historian. So, actually, I ended up being a historian because I was popped into different disciplines, and popped into different departments, and increasingly knew who I was.

TL: *That's interesting, because people often see interdisciplinarity as diluting disciplinarity, but I've always found that seeing how other disciplines approach similar questions so differently does really bring your disciplinary skills and background into relief. So what do you like most about being a historian?*

NK: I like every bit of the journey of teaching students, and being able to try and solve some of the problems with how you actually gain historical expertise and knowledge and skills. I definitely don't feel I have solved all those problems, but it's just really great to be going through that whole path with students as well. Teaching, including the core, the first-year stuff, makes my research way better. When I do get the time to do my historical research, it's constantly being improved by having to design a new course on anticolonial resistance

or so on. So, the interconnected bits of being a professional historian are really great for me.

TL: *That process of doing survey course teaching, and particularly designing courses, it does make you zoom out to the bigger issues.*

NK: Yeah, and then being forced to think about, you know, how would I run a seminar on the global history of the potato is fantastic, because suddenly I think, oh yeah, I really do need to think more about food in my work.

TL: *And what do you think has changed most about the student experience since you were an undergraduate?*

NK: Oh, I mean, I was an anxious undergraduate, but I don't think I've ever encountered so much anxiety as among the students at the moment, and it's completely, you know, understandable and for good reason. Graduating in 2007, 2008, when my friends who had got into graduate schemes were having those schemes pulled from under them at the last minute, and so on, does mean that I had a little taste of what it was like to panic about a graduate employment market that was atrocious, and just not really knowing what to do. So I do sympathize with students at the moment. It's a really hard time to be doing an undergraduate degree and coming out of it. But obviously, the debt is the thing that's changed most. I was lucky enough to be on £1,000 a year for fees, but it's not just the money, it's that the relationship I had with how I was studying and what I was studying was totally different. Because that's a nominal marketization, it meant that I did approach the degree on its own terms. I mean, it was why I could take the risk, right? It was why I could take the risk of studying all African history in Year 3, and why I was less panicked about coming out of it with no real plans.

TL: *And finally, what is your top tip to students today, to get the most out of studying history at university?*

NK: I think two main things. I would say, remember the total joy over finding new bits of history and new ways of thinking about the world. For me, that was the thing that has completely reshaped my own understanding of how I live, where I live, what I do and how I relate to the world. My politics, everything, has been completely reshaped by what I studied as an undergraduate. And so, make sure that you're not missing that in the wider scheme of trying to get the best degree, and trying to get all of this experience and so on out of it, make sure you're not losing the joy at shaping yourself, which is really, truly, the luxury of a history degree at undergraduate level. Then the second is to try to fight against the marketization and the pressure and the anxiety, and take some risks, and say, you know, 'What *don't* I know? What am I looking for? What are my big questions?', and then acting on it and taking a bit of a leap. Because if there's ever a time when you can take some risks, it is still at that point.