

Matthew Grant, interviewed by Tracey Loughran, 22 September 2025

Matthew Grant is Reader in History at the University of Essex. His current research charts the impact of the Cold War on Britain, exploring the changing ways that citizens interacted with the state from the 1940s to the 1960s. He is author of the chapter 'Making the Transition to University' and co-author of the chapter 'History and Policy' in *A Practical Guide to Studying History* (second edition).

Interview

Tracey Loughran (TL): *An easy question to start. When, where and what did you study at university?*

Matthew Grant (MG): I studied history at university, although that wasn't the original plan. I started university in the autumn of 1998, at what was then Queen Mary and Westfield College, part of the University of London, and is now called Queen Mary, University of London. I actually enrolled to do history and politics. But in welcome week, during the introductory talks, I decided that politics wasn't for me. And so I changed to straight history and did BA history. I graduated in 2001 from my undergraduate degree.

TL: *I'm interested in why you felt that history and politics wasn't for you. It seems as though a lot of historians start off with a strong interest in another subject area.*

MG: When I was doing my A-levels, I did History, Government and Politics, and English Literature. I was very interested in political history. I was very interested in politics as well, but interested in politics as the politics of places, and the machinations of politics, and the ins and outs of it. I didn't really understand that political science as a university discipline was focused much more on theory

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

or numbers, things like normative concepts of democracy and similar ideas. I think I would find that much more interesting now. But when I was eighteen, I felt, this is not for me. I wanted to do the politics of places. I wanted to understand the politics of what was going on in Latin America or somewhere else. And I wanted some background, I wanted to understand context. So the politics approach felt very disembodied from reality, whereas history felt very rooted in what had happened, and I felt that it could help me to understand the world. So that was why I changed.

TL: *Once you'd started doing your history degree, which speaking as a historian was definitely the right and best choice, what was your favourite module and why?*

MG: Oh, that's really hard. Across the three years, I changed so much, and the modules that I took at different points did very, very different things. I did a module in the second year called 'Cabinet, Premiership and the Conduct of Central Government', which was about British political history and the inner workings of the constitution. That lasted the whole year, and it was just very, very interesting. It was a very, very good group, and I knew lots of people in it. So it was a lot of fun doing it as well. That was one of the modules I found that I enjoyed most. There was another module called 'The Left in Europe since 1945', which was about socialism and communism in Europe after 1945, which was also very, very interesting. But there's loads of modules that I really enjoyed.

TL: *It sounds like part of the reason you liked those modules was the topic, but you mentioned a good group of students on the Cabinet and Premiership module. So was it partly the seminar setting as well?*

MG: Partly the seminar setting, there were some trips, and there was a good dynamic. And there was a sense of community. Peter Hennessy ran the module, and there was a real sense of learning community, a real sense of everyone being there together on this journey. That was really exciting. That was really key for me, that sense that we were part of something bigger. We did all work individually, writing our own essays, there was no group work or anything like that. But there was that sense that we knew each other, and we could talk about things. And that was really good.

TL: *And did you take any skills, historiography or theory modules as an undergraduate?*

MG: Yes. There was a first-year module, which was called 'Basic Skills for Historians', which I remember very, very little about. It was everyone in the first year in a big lecture theatre for two hours, being lectured at. There was no discussion, there were no seminar groups, and it felt very dry and very boring. And I remember very, very little of it. There was a historiography module in the first year, something called 'The Methods of History'. But that wasn't compulsory. That

was in the spring. And I decided not to take it. I took instead a module called 'Introduction to Film Studies', which I enjoyed greatly, because that seemed much more fun. Later, I kind of regretted that, because I feel like I would have gotten a lot out of the 'Methods of History' module, probably, like understanding some of the basics about how you approach certain ideas in history, how you think about causality, how you think about sources. Later in my career, once I'd left university and was doing postgraduate research, I had to go back and do a lot of that reading myself. So I did miss that.

TL: *Do you teach on any of those kinds of modules now?*

MG: Yes, and I've taught on them for years. My first teaching job once I finished my PhD included teaching on a module of that sort, a second-year historiography module at the University of Sheffield. And I really enjoyed that. I enjoyed doing the reading, reading classic texts from different periods in different countries. And I really enjoyed teaching it. I enjoyed the discussions in the seminars and enjoyed conveying to the students why this mattered. Today, I teach a module at Essex, a second-year module that's about how we approach history as a discipline, that talks about secondary literature, historical debate, how we analyse historiography, but also how we do independent research and looking at primary sources and different types of evidence. That's a really, really interesting module. I think students can really get something out of looking at those things in isolation. Teaching those texts and teaching historiography is where you can break free from worrying too much about content and what's going on, and you can break it down about how historians argue and how they build their analysis, which helps demystify the processes of history, I think.

TL: *I'm interested that you said you really liked teaching that module at Sheffield because of reading about lots of different periods in these classic texts. This is something that often people don't think about for historiography modules, that they can be really good at giving students a sense of breadth.*

MG: Yeah, exactly. And also, you know, sometimes classic texts are classic texts for a reason. They're really exciting, they're really interesting, they cover really cool topics. And for someone like me who really enjoys history, but has become, like all professional historians become, very, very specialized, reading something on the medieval peasantry, or eighteenth-century France, or seventeenth-century England was just exciting. I knew nothing else about the topic apart from what I was reading, because it wasn't about that. And so that was just really great. It introduced me to a lot of different types of history, and I think it does that for students as well.

TL: *At the same time, there can be particular challenges in teaching historiography. How do you try to make this material interesting for*

students to help them understand that it is an important thing to get to grips with?

MG: I think it's really important to explain the point of why we're doing them, and that the key exercise of looking not for content, but for argument, is actually a really, really good skill to learn. One of the key things is being confident; you don't need to know everything that's going on, all the detail and so on, to actually understand what the key points of these things are. I mean, that's a key skill, full stop, in history for building sophisticated argument; you need to be able to understand the historian's analysis, not just what they're telling you about something happening. Historiography really helps you do that; it really focuses and trains that skill. So it's helpful to encourage students to throw out some of that stuff about content and not worry too much about it, but just focus on why this is interesting and what it does. That's actually quite liberating for students at times. I think in the past, on some of the modules I've ended up working on, historiography can get almost rarefied. It's this idea of, oh, it's important because you're a historian and it's important to know the discipline of history. And I think that's always a bit problematic, because why should anyone care? That tension within the heart of historiography is, are you teaching people the history of the discipline, or are you teaching people skills? Encouraging students who might be struggling with the argument to see it as a topic within itself, as the history of the discipline, that what you're teaching is about the growth and the development of the discipline, and that's the thread that runs through, and it's almost like an intellectual history module, that the content happens to be different historical texts, can be a very helpful way of getting across the point of it to students. But I also think teaching historiography in that way can lead to a very dry and progressive model of, you know, you start with objectivity and Ranke and you move on steadily through the decades until you get to cultural history, and then it's the cultural history of everything. And that can feel very unmoored. Because one of the problems with that approach is also that you end up with the idea that all things were either this, a certain type of history, or they're *that* type of history, or they're a third type of history. And historians don't really write like that. You don't want students reading texts, looking for things to tell them that the text is either X or Y, because that's not how historians work.

TL: *History is often described as a magpie discipline in terms of historians taking what they want from everywhere, and some people see that as an unfavourable characterization of the discipline, whereas I think it's quite a nice one.*

MG: I agree. There's an essential pragmatism to history, a practicality. It'd be unfair to characterize history as a discipline that is

unfriendly to theory, though I think some historians are indeed unfriendly to theory, but it has to be rooted in practicality. And historians traditionally are cautious about universalizing theories, because the whole point of history, and the whole point of studying the past, is that there are so many examples where things don't fit these universal theories, because of the sheer complexity and weight of human society. And so instead, historians are looking for tools and theories that help do certain things and explain certain things. There's that practicality to it. Those analogies of historians having a toolkit, or a craft, are also quite important, because craftspeople have tools, they select the right tool, they have the key knowledge about how to do that. And there is something rich about that, which I think is really important.

TL: *With this resource, we're aiming to help readers think more about the different kinds of historical research out there. I know you've used a lot of different types of primary source material in your work. And I wondered if you could say a bit about a type of source material that maybe students wouldn't have encountered when they're doing A-levels, and why you think this is useful for finding out about the past?*

MG: Well, I suppose all sources are potentially very, very interesting and very rich, but have their drawbacks and potential difficulties in understanding them. And understanding their production and their original use is obviously always key. And I think one of the drawbacks of teaching with lots of sources or relying on online sources is that they can get very disembodied. So one example, which almost certainly students would have used before, is newspapers. I use a lot of newspapers in my research, and most students probably would have come across newspaper stories or newspapers but actually understanding how newspapers work in any given time period or any given context is really important. So, for example, their reach, you know, it could be a tiny local newspaper, or it could be a massive newspaper that's seen by half the population. Realizing that the story that you might be interested in is only ever a small part of a newspaper, and that it exists within the context of a page that could have numerous other stories on it, and that page could be one of many. And the realization that so many people would have bought that newspaper and barely looked at that story or never even looked at it or ignored it. And so just understanding that context, I think, is something that you develop at university. The other source I've been using that students might not have come across are the sources of intelligence services, from government surveillance on people. This is a really complex source, because these are working sources for a government agency. They don't provide any context, they're very direct, and they're very focused on delivering something. So each

source in isolation is quite difficult to research; you need that mass of them to understand. Also, because they're highly sensitive, they're often very patchy, lots of them have been redacted. So there's lots of blank spaces where the government has decided they're too sensitive to release. They're very interesting to look at, and you can read lots of detail, but you really need a lot of material to build this picture; you need to understand who they're writing about, and what they're trying to do, and why it matters. So lots of these sources are actually quite hard to grasp, unless you've done a lot of background reading, unless you've done a lot of secondary reading. Primary sources are always a very exciting way of studying history, but you can't ever really understand them without having done and doing lots of other reading.

TL: *So what do you use these government intelligence agency reports to understand?*

MG: So I use them in two ways. One is to understand what the government assumed was happening. So I look at security service or MI5 reports on communism in Britain in the 1940s and 1950s. MI5 put communists under surveillance in order to understand the nature and the extent of the communist threat to Britain, which they highly exaggerated, which some people in MI5 understand and some people don't. So I'm reading these reports just to understand the extent of their reach and the extent of communist activities, which there's a lot of detail on. But I'm also using them to try and understand more about the everyday experiences of these communist activists themselves, because a lot of these reports can be very, very detailed about the nature of communist meetings, about the movements between communist networks, between how people were interacting with each other. For example, there's lots of examples of telephone conversations that have been intercepted, transcripts of letters between communists that have been intercepted. These sources actually provide a rich social history of the period, because they're an unintentional archive of everyday life. So that's the way I use them.

TL: *That sounds really interesting. I also wanted to ask you some questions related to your chapter on making the transition to university. Could you summarize the main take-home message from that chapter, what that might be?*

MG: I think it's to remind readers or reassure readers that universities are very large, and often quite strange places, but that they're full of people who are there to help and who really, really want to help you. I mean, universities are full of wonderful people who want to make sure everything is okay for new students and to help you understand how to get embedded within the new university and to understand how you're going to go about your course and begin to learn and to really thrive and be excited by your degree.

But at the same time, universities are slightly strange places with lots of weird names for different things, and the vast majority of people who work in universities don't seem to understand how weird some of these names are. There are lots of people who work in universities who have been there for many years and just take these weird names for granted. So I've been very struck in the past that people in universities can be very anxious about making sure that students are welcomed and included, but then will meet students and start talking about things that these students may well have never heard of before, or heard described in that way before. And that just leads to even more confusion. So the chapter tries to encourage new students not to worry too much if there's things they don't understand, not to worry about taking everything in, and also to give some practical suggestions about what students can do to feel more embedded in the university and to get a sense of place. Because people's sense of community, a sense of rootedness on the ground in any organization, actually makes a huge difference to their lives. So for any student starting at university, just understanding the campus, the buildings that you're going to be taught in, where to get a sandwich, where to do your laundry if you're living on campus, these are the things that make you feel more secure in a place and will help you then get on with your studies a lot better.

TL: *Would you mind saying a little bit about how you found the transition to university? When I started university, I found the way that a lot of people spoke about it quite alienating. There seemed to be this assumption that most people had parents who had also gone to university, that everyone had a ready-made support structure of people who knew how it worked. None of that really spoke to my circumstances as an 18-year-old, and that felt quite difficult.*

MG: Actually, when I started university there probably wasn't that assumption that everyone had parents who'd been to university. Where I started my first year there was probably more of an understanding that lots of people came to the university being the first in their family. But there was very much an assumption that you would know how things worked, especially the teaching style. There was no real discussion about what a lecture was for, or what a seminar was for, or how things would work. And I struggled with that a bit. I also struggled, and this is something I tried to talk about in the chapter, with not understanding exactly what the point of the order of learning was. Because I don't think there was one. You know, looking back, I think the idea was that you had a lecture where information was given to you, a seminar where you were meant to discuss that information, and your own reading, in order to further and deepen your knowledge. But that wasn't explained and actually there was very little scaffolding to help you do that.

I mean, we often would have the lecture and the seminar very close together, so you'd have to do any reading before the lecture, so you'd be struggling to understand the context. Tutors very rarely set any seminar questions. So you were reading these things, but not really knowing what it was you were reading about. And that really encouraged you to focus just on understanding some of the background about what was happening in your topic, rather than any argument or analysis. So that really struck me. And that meant that when you were writing your essays or giving presentations on this topic, you could often feel very unmoored, very uncertain about exactly what you were doing. That's one of the things I think has changed a lot in university education. There's a lot more structure. There's a lot more understanding of how people learn and the support people might need.

TL: *You started at university in 1998, and in a very real sense, you've never left. So is there anything that was particularly surprising and good about your experience when you started university? What did you like? What made you stay?*

MG: I think it was the subject. It was that opportunity to find out things and find out more things and the realization in history that there's always more things to find out. There's so much history. That sense of enquiry and having that time and space to do that in depth was just so exciting. And being introduced to modules and ideas and topics I never knew, would excite me or make me interested. I vividly remember spending a lot of time writing an essay on the fall of the French Fourth Republic in 1958, and getting to understand the very weird politics of France in the 1950s, a subject I'd never known or knew anything about. It was just really exciting, and really, really good. And having really good lecturers and teachers who could help you understand that material and point you in the right direction was also really, really key and really exciting.

TL: *You mentioned earlier on that one of the first-year modules you took was an introduction to film studies. So I suppose that's part of that sense of the unexpected too, because that's not something you'd done at A-level.*

MG: Yes, exactly. I mean, 'Introduction to Film Studies' was an interdisciplinary module, so focused on film theory and other things, not history. But then I did film history after. I always loved films. So being introduced to different ways of looking at films, but also to different types of films from different cultures was just so eye-opening and exciting. And there are films that really changed my life that I watched in that class, films like *Vertigo* by Alfred Hitchcock, films like *Breathless* by Jean-Luc Goddard. And I think that's the real opportunity for people to embrace at university as well, to do something different, do something that really excites you, do things

that you think might be interesting, and then if they're not, you don't have to worry about them, but who knows what's going to seize you and capture your imagination.

TL: *So that sense of excitement might partly answer my next question, but how did you end up as a historian?*

MG: I think I enjoyed my degree so much, that sense of the intellectual inquiry, that I thought it would be a really rewarding and exciting career. When I first thought about doing it, I had no sense of what the other side of the career would look like, in terms of the moving around the country, the long periods without secure employment and, you know, the endless meetings, but that's enjoyable in a different way, and rewarding in a different way. I think once I'd got to my third year, I was doing the independent research, and that's the thing I really loved, the idea of going to the archive, doing something that I knew people hadn't done before, or that it was just me and the sources, that was just so exciting, and I just wanted to do that more.

TL: *And what do you most like about being a historian?*

MG: Probably still that sense of the creativity involved, and the sense of immersing yourself in the material, and thinking these things through as problems, and connecting different people's lives. I really, really enjoy that. But the other thing I enjoy as much is working with students, the times when you're able to convey complex topics to students, get them to see things in different ways, introduce new topics, and different ways of doing history to them, it's just always really, really exciting and rewarding.

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

MG: Two things, I think. One of the most obvious things to think about is technology. I mean, I started in 1998, and email wasn't really a thing. Email did exist, but people didn't really use it. We didn't have virtual learning environments. You had to go to the library and physically photocopy chapters of books, or journal articles, or anything you wanted. Which, actually, as someone who still uses paper a lot, that was very pleasing. So there's that sense that massive shifts in technology have made history simultaneously easier to do, because of the amount of material that's online, but also harder, in the sense that it's easy to get waylaid and distracted by the availability of things, rather than understanding and thinking about the connectivity of things. That technological shift has meant that the sense of community that I valued as a student is harder to maintain. Back then, you had to be in the library to do the reading or collect material. You had to come into the university to hand essays in and pick them up, and also, the vast majority of people did not have computers at home and so had to work in computer labs on campus. You were around the university more, and that meant

that you knew more people, perhaps, but you also connected a bit more with staff, and there was a sense of community that I think has lessened now. The second aspect is perhaps connected to that. I think a big thing that's shifted now is to do with students' mental health and the conditions under which they operate. Students seem much more anxious, much more stressed, and I think there are lots of complex reasons for that, partly around technology, partly around the sort of ever-present nature of the world. It's very much harder to switch off, it's much harder to be undistracted. But the education system also often puts much more pressure on people before they get to university, making things much more stressful. So those two things combined make it very much harder to be a student now, I think. Lots of people like to think how much harder people had it in the old days, but I just don't think that's true when it comes to being a student. I think it's much harder now. The financial pressures are harder now, and those things combined make it a very different experience.

TL: *And finally, what's your top tip for students today on getting the most out of studying history at university?*

MG: Knowing themselves, I think. Knowing their limitations, knowing what interests them. I would like to say the top tip is organization, knowing where you have to be, what you have to do. But actually, you can only be organized if you understand your own limits. Some people thrive on structure, some people thrive on being a bit looser and being a bit more spontaneous. But if you have that structure and you know what you're doing, you can be calm as you can go about things, that'll then give you the opportunity to embrace uncertainty. And university is all about embracing uncertainty and taking risks and doing things you wouldn't normally do intellectually, but also socially, finding your community and exploring those different things over the time you have at university.