

Mark Williams, interviewed by Tracey Loughran, 12 September 2025

Mark Williams is Reader in History at Cardiff University. His interests include the cultural, religious and political history of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, with particular interest in cultures of movement. He is the author of the chapter on 'Nations' in *A Practical Guide to Studying History* (second edition).

Interview

Tracey Loughran (TL): *Hello, and thanks for agreeing to be interviewed. Let's start off by situating your own background as a historian. When, where and what did you study at university?*

Mark Williams (MW): So, as an undergraduate, I studied at Queen's University in Kingston, in Canada. That was, if you want the exact dates, 2002 to 2006, I started off as a History and English double major. At that point, I was not at all convinced that I wanted to choose between the two. And the virtue of that was that I could narrow down the courses that I was taking in order to focus on the two subjects that I really loved coming out of high school. And rather than having to choose between two subjects that I really loved, I decided to focus on those two intently, as best I could. As the degree progressed, though, I had lecturers or professors who really inspired me in the history end of things, and also arrived at the conclusion that what I really enjoyed most about studying English literature was the historical context of it, situating it as something that was a product of its time. This is not to say that I only ever read literature to contextualize it now, but I think at the time I just really benefited from a few modules that grabbed my imagination. And, so, having finished that, I had a couple of professors in third and fourth year

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

of the undergraduate degree, which is four years in Canada, who really nudged me in the right direction towards postgraduate study, towards thinking that actually that's what I wanted to do with it. I initially pursued a master's degree, or an MPhil in this case, at Oxford, with a view towards taking that back to do a teaching degree in Canada. Then again, having undertaken the MPhil degree, I thought, actually, I quite like this too. Can I do it a little longer? And picked up the doctoral study from that. So being a historian was not a choice that I made from the outset. It was something that arose organically as I became more and more familiar with the process, what it allowed me to do, what it allowed me to think about, the people that it allowed me to surround myself with, and the sort of questions that I could be grappling with on a day-to-day basis. It was not something that was in me all along, something that I had to kind of find out for myself. I just happened to have the right teachers at the right time, the right inspiration, and it just was something that took form.

TL: *I suppose it's quite encouraging in some ways to think that your experience of university was so positive that you decided to never leave!*

MW: My working theory is that becoming an academic was exactly that, which is that, at least in the abstract, not always in the day-to-day functioning of a university, I love the idea of it enough that I want to be around it all the time. At its best moments, it does allow you to spend your life thinking about, in this case, the past, and to be around people who are also thinking the same things in similar ways, and that has real virtue to it. But in my more cynical moments, I also think that I'm probably at some level institutionally addicted to the idea of getting grades and feedback and the approbation that comes with it. But, in the more, kind of, positive turn of it, I just love the environment of academic life, and I love what universities are trying to do. It's something I can really get behind intellectually and emotionally.

TL: *We've known each other for years, and I don't think I knew that you started out as a History and Literature major. I was also very torn about whether to take English Literature or History at university, and my reason for choosing History was far less worked out. I literally thought that I would carry on reading fiction whatever happened, but I probably wouldn't carry on reading history.*

MW: It took me a fair bit of time to come around to the idea that doing one doesn't mean it has to be to the exclusion of the other. And, in terms of my historical research and writing, I've benefited from reading as much or more fiction than I do nonfiction.

I think that reading and reflecting on what fiction is able to do, the way it can be constructed, the way it can be used to convey different

emotional registers, different ways of thinking about the world, translates much better into writing history than I think it's often given credit for. I think, looking back on it with the undergraduate study, I'm glad I didn't close that off completely, and maintained that connection to the world of literature and fiction writing and so forth, because I think I'm probably a better historian for it.

TL: *I think a lot of historians that I know have had a similar experience of having started out doing a joint honours degree, or being really torn between subjects, and I wonder if it's something about history as a discipline, that it actually attracts people who really like to think beyond disciplinary boundaries and bring different interests in, because you can do so much with it.*

MW: Yes, there's often this kind of slightly backhanded way of describing what historians do as being kind of magpie-like, like we just gather material and make a nest out of it, whatever it happens to look like. That seems to me to be a little too haphazard. I don't think one can write history without it being in some way interdisciplinary. It's a very holistic way of understanding the world. I don't see, for example, how studying the period that I do, the early modern period, that you can understand that world that you're looking at without having some comprehension of religious studies, of sometimes literary studies, of art history at some times as well. That means that we get accused of dabbling at times, but also, that's a comprehensive and, I think, much more expansive view of how to do this research than much more, quote-unquote, pure areas of study and disciplinary boundaries can often facilitate. And as you say, a lot of historians I talk to have that kind of backstory, where they had to choose at some point, and felt that they had to narrow at some level, but where they are at their best, and where they feel that they can really contribute something new and authentic and original, is in bringing those different facets of their curiosity, their personality, to bear upon the research that they do, to ask questions that they are best positioned to ask. So, I'm happy to own it, really.

TL: *And also, there's nothing wrong with being a magpie. Corvids are very intelligent birds, as you know. But, just going back a bit, could you tell me about your favourite module as an undergraduate?*

MW: See, I was thinking about this ... As a first-year student, I had a choice between two formats of first-year teaching for history. One was a purely lecture-based module, sort of an overview one, your classic kind of history of the modern world, kind of thing. The one that I chose was a seminar-based one, very traditionally titled, which was 'The Intellectual Origins of the Contemporary West'. Which, you know, looking back on it, it was very fusty. You read the great thinkers and examined their context. But what it did do was introduce me to the seminar format. So, we were reading from

year one what was still, despite being very high intellectual history, primary source material. And we sat in a room and discussed these sources. And it was a wonderful experience, because it was very challenging; it was a very big departure from anything I'd done prior to that. That kicked things off really positively. But as the degree went on, I took two strands of different historical focus. One was early modern, so I took a couple of modules in my third year on what was then termed the English Civil Wars, now called the Wars of the Three Kingdoms. And, in my fourth year, I also took a course on modernism as a broad cultural movement. And I remember as I was applying for graduate school, going through this crisis of whether I was going to be a modernist or an early modernist, and what that implied about me and all this. But in any case, these modules introduced this idea to me that there were these multiple strands of historical inquiry that weren't necessarily exclusive from one another, could be in dialogue with each other. And it just hit at the right level, and, I think it was ... it was in that third year where we were looking at historical debates around the Civil Wars, especially where I started to get that kind of sense of historiographical foundations, that, history was more than just setting out a narrative of events. These, in many ways, quite childish debates between people like John Adamson and Mark Kishlansky. That was the module that really started to kick off this idea that historiography is a thing, that historians actively shape these debates, and that history itself is not a fixed category, or a straight line and narrative. And, so that, that was what pushed me into ultimately doing the early modern end of things, and it's something I've never really abandoned. I've been happily in the early modern period since then.

TL: *So it sounds like you didn't do any specialist historiography or skills modules as part of your undergraduate degree, it just came into other modules.*

MW: No. I'm not sure how commonplace it is in other Canadian history degree schemes, but there was nothing in my undergraduate training that was method-driven, nothing historiographically minded. It was something that was brought in through the larger discussion of a period or a particular historical theme, but nothing by way of sort of the core modules that you see in undergraduate programmes here in the UK. That was something I had to pick up either passively or did later on when I was doing graduate training and then having to teach it myself. I wish I had taken a module like that as an undergraduate. It would have been really helpful earlier on in my career.

TL: *There's a surprising number of historians who first got to grips with a historiography module through teaching it.*

MW: Yeah, and that's also partly built into the way that contracts and employment tend to work coming out of the PhD in the UK and elsewhere. If you're being hired on a short-term contract, it tends to be to cover somebody else's teaching while they're on study leave or funded research. And so you have to have that kind of journeyman-type capacity to land in a place and teach historiography. In a lot of UK undergraduate degrees, at least there's some sense of a common pool of reference points that anybody doing core methods has to be able to do. I'm so far removed at this point from how history degrees work in Canada, I can't necessarily speak to whether it's present there or not, but I think it probably is more common now than it was when I was doing my undergraduate degree.

TL: *Do you think that teaching on historiography modules has enriched your practice as a historian in any way?*

MW: Yeah, immensely. For better or for worse, having taught these core modules, I find that I'm much more interested and compelled to think about what the bigger questions are that I'm trying to respond to, rather than perhaps the minutiae that I ought to also be paying more attention to. I think the need to convey to students why any particular historical topic matters. Also, it matters to convince them that, whatever it is they want to talk about as a historian for their own specialism, as a group, we all share common questions and go through the same crises, think about similar methods, similar approaches to source material, for instance. That helps to, I think, embed a certain sense of solidarity between scholars as well. If we can all step back and say, yes, one of us might be working on the early modern period, another one might be a historian of the early Middle Ages, but, a few steps removed from the specificity of that, we are thinking about the same problems, the same questions. And, for my own research anyway, I try to step back and ask myself, why should somebody who's not working on my period, on my subject, care about what it is I'm saying here? And that often is informed by having done the historiography, the methods stuff. I'm certainly a better historian for it; I'd like to think.

TL: *That's a very, very articulate way of thinking about historiography modules, which, as you know, are very close to my heart!*

MW: You are a historiographer.

TL: *Always. But, moving on, let's talk about your chapter in A Practical Guide on 'Nations'. How does this topic relate to your own research and teaching?*

MW: It's both very difficult and very enticing to just talk about the history of nations in the period that I studied, because one of the supposed reasons why the early modern period is designated as such is because it sees the classic narrative of the emergence of

nation-states, as opposed to, say, nationhood or nationalism in the nineteenth century. What's so intriguing about it is that it is so amorphous in the period that I study. I mean, from my doctoral work, I had a background in early modern Ireland. The place of ideas of nationhood in the early modern period for Ireland is very important. You can't really discuss things like, you know, the Ulster Plantation, or the Nine Years' War, or the Cromwellian invasion of Ireland, and not be more or less speaking to these questions of how nations are formed, and ideas of, say, the role of Catholicism or Protestantism, or ethnicity in formulating those things. So, you have to be thinking about nations when you are studying near the modern period, because it is part of that built-in narrative. But the inverse of that is that it's a much more interesting period to talk about because it is so amorphous, and constantly fluctuating and being informed by things like, you know, global encounter and movement and so forth. And so it's a fun period to test these theories that the nations are already forming, starting to sort of develop the foundations that would become a firmer sense of nationhood in the nineteenth century and the twentieth century. And, often early modern developments prove those theories wrong, but that's much more fun for it. So it's a great testing ground for these things.

TL: *I remember, as an undergraduate, first encountering scholarship on nations, on a module called 'The Science and Politics of Race'. There was all this theoretical material, people like Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner. And I remember just being completely thrown by the idea of the nation as an imagined entity, and the way that the literature went into that idea at this very abstract level. I found it so difficult to get to grips with. Is this something that you find when you're trying to get students to understand the idea of the nation as a historical construct? How challenging do they find it?*

MW: I think that students can find most any topic you pick up in a core theory module very challenging, but it helps to define commonplace, everyday instances where a student might see very abstract, as you say, and often hard to latch onto ideas, translated into a daily interaction. For instance, the idea of sort of imagining a community or a nation taking form – for example, in [Benedict] Anderson's work, or [Edward] Said's *Orientalism*, if you can point to the role that mass media is now playing, formulating differing ideas of nationhood, of community, and so forth, students will pick that up. When you say to them, well, more or less, Anderson's talking about the advent of the newspaper and proliferation of new media in the nineteenth century in this sort of register, they'll say, oh, I can see how that would actually play into these sort of abstract concepts of nationhood. And fundamentally, Benedict Anderson is a political theorist as well as a historian, and Edward Said is as much a literary

scholar as a historian, so, they're using those interdisciplinary foundations to ask something new about how nations were formed. But I think, too, students are also more and more sensitive to the idea that nations are not fixed entities in time and space. They're more and more aware of the role of power structures, but also, mass media, different cultural forms, in articulating what matters to whom and why. They are, in their own day-to-day life, constantly engaging in different sort of forms and articulations of community across different media. So, I think it's reasonably workable these days to translate these very high-minded, abstract works and say, well, where can you translate this into something that a student can hold on to?

TL: *And why do you think it is important for students to understand the history of nation?*

MW: Yeah, it's hard not to be very presentist about this at the moment.

In an environment where we're seeing a much greater spike in nationalist fervour, nationalist ideas, to the exclusion of others, I think coming back to this fundamental notion that nations are not things that are fixed in time and have always meant the same thing, that helps to build in a sense of fluidity to how students might think about their world. Simply saying to a student sometimes that 'things have not always been so' can be a much more radical idea than we give it credit for at times. And, even if they're just able to step back and say, 'hang on, does this idea of nation and idea of self, because they too often overlap, warrant being militant or exclusionary about', then that can do some good in the world. At the other end of the spectrum, and these things are mutually informative, we are also operating in a world that is much more connected than it's ever been in many respects. And, that doesn't mean, as we're finding out, that that is to the exclusion of adaptive and new ideas of what the nation is in this context. In a lot of respects, the spike in nationalism is a response to that global interconnectedness, and if we don't understand the interplay between these things, then we're really not doing much of a job of understanding how history has informed all of it, and how we got to where we are. Going back to Benedict Anderson, the whole idea of these imagined communities is driven in part by a greater degree of connectedness through the news cycle, through the increase of the mass media. So I think if we're not sending our students out into the world with a critical and historicized sense of what the nation is, what it has been, what it could still be, then we're really missing one of the key historical lenses through which they're going to see the world.

TL: *Given those global entanglements, do you think that the nation is still a useful framework for students to learn about and to study through?*

MW: Absolutely, yeah. I think for one thing, from a purely historiographical standpoint, you can't deny that that's been the fundamental lens through which a lot of history has been written. For a very long time, when university staff were asked to think about history, they were asked to think about it in a national context to help inform a broader sense of public good. But also, as I say in the chapter, we have to be really careful not to assume that people further back in time only ever wrote a more narrow, almost parochial national history. There have always been people writing, essentially, international, transnational histories before the term existed. But, I also think that, we've never really seen that framework, that way of viewing history through the lens of the nation, or nationhood, or nationalism completely recede. It has fluctuated. But if you look at, say, the shelf in your average Waterstones or Blackwells, or in the airport, that national lens is still pretty pervasive. Beyond the conversations that we have in a closed environment in universities, we have to acknowledge that for most people, picking up a history book, the first point of reference often is: what is the history of the place I'm from? And for as long as that remains the case, we have to keep that language going, we have to keep that dialogue in place. We can challenge it, and we're doing a very good job of it, but I don't think it's going away anytime soon. And I don't think we would want it to.

TL: *I always think that people think much more historically than they realize they do, even if they're not historians, because everybody does have that question, you know, 'how did I become me?'*

MW: Not just self-indulgent people like myself! But I also don't want to set this up as, kind of, tension between the high-minded academic historians thinking globally, transnationally, so forth, but having to write national histories for the plebs, it's much more complex than that. Going back to that question of what you would see on a shelf in Waterstones, there are more and more histories that say 'the global blah blah blah', and that are selling well. And I think that that tells us something about the moment that we're in, where people are thinking about where they are and where we have been in a global context. But, at the same time, local histories, histories of a particular city, or a particular region, or histories of things like bodies of water, or particular spaces, these are all still selling very well, but they're doing that alongside histories that focus on particular nation-states and particular historical moments. And it creates a wonderful dialogue.

TL: *You've already touched on quite a few developments that have happened within the study of nations, and global connectivity and so on. Do you have any idea where the history of nations may go next, or where you would like to see it go next?*

MW: Yeah, I think in some respects, a lot of the optimism that was attached to that shift towards the global, the transnational, the interconnected, is starting to wane a little bit. Again, that is a response to the current global situation. As we're being compelled by various things to reassess what globalization has done, and it's continuing to do, there's an understandable desire to say, well, if we shift away from that liberal optimism that a connected world is necessarily a better world, then that's driving new questions. If, for example, you look to the early modern period and say, well, this is the first age of global connectivity, then it is also an age of global empires, of massive exploitation, the forced movement of millions. That, I think, is being read more and more into how we ask new questions of nationhood, of the rise of nation-states. There are two trends that are emerging from this. There's more and more by way of histories of empire, and I think that's not coincidental. It's partly because of the moment that we're in in Britain, as far as reappraising the legacy of the British Empire, but beyond the British context of that, the changes in America's global influence, its place in the world, and that rising competition with, say, with Russia, with China, other states, means that imperial context is becoming more and more important to these conversations. So I would say probably imperial histories are going to become more and more commonplace. The other trend, I think, is that, lots of questions are being asked about who constitutes the nation, in terms of race and gender. These questions have been around for a while, but they're becoming much more pressing and much more relevant questions to broader public discourse as well. So I think that kind of amorphousness that I referred to at the beginning is going to be brought in more and more to these conversations to say, well, where did the boundaries of nationhood stop? Who was incorporated into it? Who was brought into it against their will? Who was allowed to shape it, who was denied that capacity to do so? What were the mediums through which these formulations occurred? When did those different imaginings of nationhood fail? When were they made to fail? These are all things, I think, that become more and more important as the geopolitical situation changes.

TL: *Moving away from nations, I wanted to ask about some of your research sources. You've done a lot of research using letters, so could you say a bit about the value of letters as sources for historians?*

MW: Well, partly that's to do with the sources that have survived. But, because of the nature of the questions that I tend to ask, these things, like writing histories of institutions like the English and Dutch East India Companies, letters become fascinating, because they can be deeply personal. They also are, at times, just a bureaucratic product. So they serve different functions, and one of the interesting

dimensions of that is thinking about what lies behind the letter as it's produced, who's reading it, what are the different emotional registers it's meant to work across? Also, thinking of nation, letters are one of the things that travel great distances across this period. It can be six to eight months, at least, between when a letter is written and when it's received and acted upon. If we're talking about the rise of nations being formed through people saying, 'well, what matters to me, where am I now, how do I orient myself in the world', letters can do a lot of that work. And so, in terms of what's binding these worlds together, letters often do that.

TL: *A fun question now. What do you most like about being a historian?*

MW: I think when you are really engaged in teaching interesting material, or when you're really immersed in your research, you are constantly being asked questions by the history that you're looking at. Your imagination is constantly being prodded into thinking new things, making new connections, reassessing what you thought you knew of the past. And it can be deeply disorientating in that respect, but in a way that allows you to constantly be thinking differently about your world. It just makes every day that you do the job an imaginative exercise.

TL: *That's a lovely way to think about it. The next question is, what do you think has changed most about the student experience since you were an undergraduate?*

MW: I think, in the best possible way, we're giving students a lot more latitude to think about the past in different registers, moving away from the idea that doing history is simply a matter of reading as much material as you can and producing an essay that synthesizes it in some sort of way, and instead prompting them to think, 'well, where do you see the past in your day-to-day life? Where do you see history being produced, challenged?' I'm thinking here, for example, of even just practical things like the assessment regimes that we put into place for students in their undergraduate degree. Apart from maybe a few very forward-minded people on this point, the sort of creative exercises and what we ask students to do with the past now would not have been there when I was doing my undergraduate degree. It was all very formulaic. You write an essay, the essay's marked, you get feedback, you write another essay on the back of that. Rather than saying, well, what can we do that gets students to think creatively about it, to see that history manifesting in their wider world? And I think that's a great change, something that I'm very happy to be engaged with.

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

MW: Embrace historiography. The more that students can become comfortable with the idea that they don't owe anything to the canon, the more they'll get out of it. In the best possible way, the theory modules, the historiography modules, are a way of saying, 'Can you use these people who have written about this material as a springboard for your own imagination? What can you do with it? What questions does it raise for you? Where might you take it?' And student can seize upon their own agency in this. Say, 'What's grabbing my imagination? What's inspiring me to do the history?' Rather than saying that you have to, you know, shoehorn Foucault into any given thing, just get back to, 'What are the core questions that are being asked here about what we do and why history matters', and then see where you want to take it. I think the worst kind of history would be the kind that becomes almost scriptural, that we have to cite chapter and verse, who wrote on this subject and where. And what we're benefiting so much from as historians now is that we're bringing more and more people into the conversation to say, well, where can you take history based on not just your own experience, but your perspective, your own imagination. We stand to gain everything from that. I don't think we can stand to gain much from asking students to say exactly what Geoffrey Elton thought about this thing. We've heard what Geoffrey Elton had to say, and we can move on from that.

TL: *Poor Geoffrey Elton, I end up feeling quite sorry for him.*

MW: I should say, Geoffrey Elton, I think, was a much better historian than we often set him up to be. But I think he, along with E.H. Carr, who I have, admittedly a good deal of time for, E.P. Thompson, these sorts of people, we set them up as these totemic people, where we say, like, what would they have thought of this? And that has value insofar as it puts us into conversation with what's preceded us. But it can only move us so much further forward.

TL: *That seems like a good note to end on!*