CREATIVE LIVES AND WORKS

FRANK KERMODE, GEORGE STEINER, GILLIAN BEER AND CHRISTOPHER RICKS

In conversation with
Alan Macfarlane

Edited by
Radha Béteille

SOCIAL SCIENCE PRESS

ROUTLEDGE

Creative Lives and Works

Creative Lives and Works: Frank Kermode, George Steiner, Gillian Beer and Christopher Ricks is a collection of interviews conducted by one of England's leading social anthropologists and historians, Professor Alan Macfarlane. Filmed over a period of 40 years, the four conversations in this volume, are part of a larger set of interviews that cut across various disciplines, from the social sciences, the sciences to the performing and visual arts. The current volume on four of England's foremost literary critics is the first in the series of several such books. Sir Frank Kermode, in James S. Shapiro's (Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University who specializes in Shakespeare and the Early Modern period) words is, 'the best living reader of Shakespeare anywhere, hands down', George Steiner, in an article in *The Guardian* is described as a 'polyglot and polymath', Gillian Beer is quoted in *The Guardian* as saying, 'I am historical remnant of free education: I was carried through by the state', and W.H. Auden, one of the greatest 20th century poets, described Sir Christopher Ricks as 'exactly the kind of critic every poet dreams of finding'. Immensely riveting as conversations, this collection takes one into the exciting world of literary criticism. The book will be of enormous value to those interested in Literature, History and Culture Studies.

Alan Macfarlane was born in Shillong, India, in 1941 and educated at the Dragon School, Sedbergh School, Oxford and London Universities where he received two Master's degrees and two doctorates. He is the author of over forty books, including *The Origins of English Individualism* (1978) and *Letters to Lily: On How the World Works* (2005). He has worked in England, Nepal, Japan and China as both an historian and anthropologist. He was elected to the British Academy in 1986 and is now Emeritus Professor of Anthropology at the University of Cambridge and a Life Fellow of King's College, Cambridge. Professor Macfarlane received the Huxley Memorial Medal, the highest honour of the Royal Anthropological Institute in 2012.

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Preface

I had learnt to love literature, particularly the poems, plays and novels written by English writers, from about the age of nine. At my secondary school, literature was my favourite and best subject. I had enjoyed the original authors, but also the critics who had written about them, in particular William Hazlitt. Then at Oxford as an undergraduate, though studying history, I spent a lot of my time with friends who were reading English. I wrote various essays and poems and read literary critics, particularly C.S. Lewis, Basil Willey and F.R. Leavis with great enjoyment.

When, in later life, I had the opportunity to interview selected individuals in depth, I was delighted to have the chance to include the four very distinguished literary critics in this collection. There is a unity between them since they all have strong Cambridge connections. Three of them also spent important periods of their life in America. I will deal with them in the order in which I interviewed them.

I had read and admired some of George Steiner's work over the years and was very excited to meet him as the only other guest at a dinner party arranged by my former student and close friend, the late Sue Scott or Dalgleish. Steiner showed his customary brilliance at the meal and agreed to be interviewed on condition that I filmed him at his home in east Cambridge. I did so in July 2007 when he was aged seventy-eight, and I was sixty-five. I felt it only fair to end after an hour and to come back for the second part a few days later.

The interview was lively and revealing and particularly struck me because of Steiner's feeling that a literary critic was far inferior to the objects of his attention. Basically, literary criticism was an enabling craft and far from the creative heights of great writing. I later found this view in the interviews of Kermode and Ricks.

Six months later I interviewed Frank Kermode. As I mention in the interview, I had seen him quite often in King's College, where we were both Fellows. Yet he was a generation older than myself, in his late eighties when I interviewed him, and greatly distinguished, so I had never talked to him before the interview. When I did interview Kermode, I had the feeling that I was a few years late. The interview lacked energy and he was struggling with his memory. He also referred a number of times to the fairly recently published autobiography which contained further details. I interviewed him in King's College, as I did the final two in this set.

I interviewed Gillian Beer in early 2009, when I was sixty-seven and moving towards retirement. I had heard of her work and found in her interview that we shared many interests. She was only seven years older than I was and I found her charming, approachable and lucid.

Finally, I interviewed Christopher Ricks some four years into my retirement. He was eight years older than myself and I knew of his formidable intellectual reputation and was somewhat nervous. Three of my closest friends as an undergraduate had been taught by him at Worcester College, Oxford, where he had, I discovered, arrived only two years before me. They had been overwhelmed by his brilliance and somewhat cowed by his high standards and sharp tongue.

Ricks showed all these characteristics in the interview. Fortunately, I knew a number of those who had been his friends and we shared Oxford and Cambridge associations. So, I greatly enjoyed an interview which took me back into the brilliant, sometimes cruel, world of academic politics and gossip. He was one of the most brilliant of my interviewees.

Alan Macfarlane
20 July 2020

Transcriber's Note

The transformation of videographed speeches into the written word has been a riveting experience. Transcriptions, while retaining the essence of a conversation, lend a new dimension to the oral transmission, opening them up to a wider readership, including those with diminished auditory functions.

This collection of transcripts tries to capture the engaging interactions between Alan Macfarlane, one of Britain's foremost social anthropologists, and the four eminent literary scholars – Sir Frank Kermode, George Steiner, Dame Gillian Beer and Sir Christopher Ricks. In fact, the intellectual discourses in these interviews on literary theory and criticism draw in the reader as a participant. And, while offering a different order of internal cohesiveness, accentuates the ability of the reader to retain information, in this case, knowledge and scholarship.

The four transcripts offer similar, yet varied experiences. George Steiner keeps his interview very precise and to the point, never straying from the question, Sir Frank Kermode's occasional lapses in memory are made up by his quiet humour and Sir Christopher Ricks' conversation comes close to snippets of class lectures ranging from religion, theology and literature to intellectual gossip. Dame Gillian Beer relates anecdotal accounts with much vivacity, whether she is talking about a child's psyche or recounting her interpretation of the 'origin of species', making it deeply personal and charming, yet highly informed, all at once.

Here, it must however be noted that not being a subject expert has been somewhat limiting. Besides, I have had to acquaint myself with speech patterns, accents, diction and intonations in areas that I was unfamiliar with when I began.

Furthermore, the transcribing of oral transmission leaves little room to represent facial expressions and non-verbalized sounds such as chuckles, laughs, sighs and for that matter exclamations, as well as pauses and idiosyncrasies in actual speech. Thus, I have taken the liberty to replace them with closely corresponding punctuations, so as not to alter the meaning or import of what is being said. Discrepancies in speech patterns have been isolated and addressed. Any misrepresentation of words and phrases, is entirely inadvertent.

The trust and generosity of Professor Macfarlane in sharing his wealth of scholarship with Social Science Press cannot be adequately expressed in words.

– Radha Béteille
20 July 2020

Introduction
Alan Macfarlane

There have been many autobiographical accounts of the creative process in science as well as in the arts, humanities and social sciences. Yet these tend to concentrate on one level, and within that one aspect, the cerebral, intellectual working of a single thinker's mind. If we are to investigate further the connections between the levels of civilization, institution, network and individual, and the fifth dimension of chance or random variation, we need to supplement these accounts, in particular by letting scientists and others talk in a relaxed way about what they think has been important in their lives and works. Over the years I have been collecting such data and here I would like to describe how this happened and what opportunities it opens up for further understanding of the springs of creativity.

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There is a puzzle as to why I have spent so much time and effort (and expense) on interviewing (on film) a large number of academics and others over the years. No one else has done this as far as I am aware and it has few tangible rewards except the occasional gratitude of one's colleagues. Why and how did this project build up over the years to a point where I now have about 250 lengthy interviews, almost all of them on the web?

One factor is clearly my anthropological training and the experience of anthropological fieldwork. Although some social historians of the recent past began to become interested in oral history and the tape recording of memories from the late 1960s, for example

Paul Thompson, Brian Harrison and others, on the whole historians deal with dead people who cannot be interviewed. Certainly, as a 17th century historian I was not interested in interviews.

Anthropologists, on the other hand, deal with the living and the 'life history' or in-depth study of one or two 'informants' naturally leads into the use of recording devices – again usually tape recorders, but also sometimes film cameras, to record interviews. So, from my first fieldwork in 1968–70 in Nepal, I was aware of the potential of interviews. Alongside the interviews with intellectuals described below, I have made in-depth interviews with my anthropological subjects, in particular a ten-part interview with Dilmaya Gurung in 1992. I also taped and filmed members of my family talking about their lives, especially my grandmother in 1978.

My interest in biographical details as a source of social history was also stimulated by the accident of moving through a number of different intellectual landscapes in my early years. My grandmother's stories of Burma and India and then my mother's vivid autobiographical writings in her letters and when she visited me from India were early influences which led to an interest in listening to older people talking about their lives. So, when I became an undergraduate and then a graduate at Oxford (1960–66) I spent some time listening to elderly academics, particularly my history tutor Lady Rosalind Clay with her deep immersion in the world of Oxford life through her father A.L. Smith (Master of Balliol), Sir Henry Clay, her husband and links to the Michison and Mitford families. She seemed to know personally many of the people whose books I was reading – Namier, Tawney, Trevelyan, Hill, Habakkuk, and she told me about their lives and personalities. I also began to hear about the folklore and gossip of historians from my other teachers – Harry Pitt, Keith Thomas and others.

The world of the historians was brought into relief by being on the edge of another group of academics, the social anthropologists. As I did my D.Phil. on witchcraft I began to meet the older members of the distinguished school of anthropologists, the Lienhardts, John Beattie and above all E.E. Evans-Pritchard. This was a particularly intense and gossip-connected tribe and I heard

their stories of the great feuds and friendships and how they had survived their fieldwork.

The interest in biography was also strengthened by my early apprenticeship in history at Oxford where I was taught how important it was to study not only the works but also the lives of great historians – Gibbon, Macaulay, de Tocqueville, Bede and others. This led me much later in my life to write detailed studies of other major figures in books on Montesquieu, Adam Smith, de Tocqueville, Maitland, Fukuzawa and others which put a strong emphasis on the biography as well as the ideas.

As a social historian I wanted to get inside the mentality as well as the social structure of the past. As an undergraduate I had discovered that letters (Pastons, Stonors) and diaries (Pepys, Kilvert) were wonderful sources for social history. So, my first book was a study of the life of one individual *The Family Life of Ralph Josselin*, based on the diary of a 17th century clergyman. Henceforth I collected letters, autobiographies, diaries, travellers' journals and made a great deal of use of this biographical material in a number of my books.

The early experience of eavesdropping on what appeared to be a disappearing world of a certain academic endeavour in the pre-war world of Oxford history and anthropology, was reinforced by moving to the London School of Economics (LSE) for two years, where giants of the post-Malinowski generation, Raymond Firth, Isaac Schapera, Lucy Mair, were on the point of retiring. Then when I moved to the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) I met another group of giants from a previous age, particularly Adrian Mayer and Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf who became my supervisor.

When I moved as a research fellow to Cambridge in 1971, I encountered again several oral worlds which intrigued me. There were a new set of older anthropologists, Meyer Fortes, Audrey Richards, G.I. Jones, Edmund Leach, S.J. Tambiah, Jack Goody among them. And there were a group set of historians, in particular Peter Laslett and Tony Wrigley. A third world was that of King's College, where memories of the Bloomsbury era lingered on with Dadie Rylands, Peter Avery, Christopher Morris, Richard Braithwaite and others.

With six or seven sets of oral history washing through my life by the age of thirty it would have been a rather insensitive and myopic young scholar who did not realize that he was experiencing something special and perhaps something that should be recorded for posterity. I did not want to write a conventional history of academic disciplines, yet I had a sense that there were webs of ideas and connections which were carried by elderly individuals which should be recorded. They should be treated with the same respect and desire to save and document as was accorded to small oral cultures around the world whose myths, legends, rituals and folklore was carefully recorded by anthropologists.

It was perhaps a jumble of such motives, combined with friendship with the Director of the Cambridge University Audio-Visual Unit, Martin Gienke, which led to the first experiment to record academics on film. I had been asked to organize a series of seminars in history and anthropology in 1976–77 for the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and this I knew would be a chance to gather together some of the leading thinkers in both fields. If they were coming for several days to Cambridge, might it not be an idea to film them, both as an archive for future generations and to show to students and colleagues who could not come to the meetings? So I organized the seminars and two were filmed. Amongst those attending were many younger scholars who would become well known – Maurice Bloch, Raphael Samuel, Keith Thomas, Keith Hopkins, Peter Burke, and a number of more senior figures in their prime such as E.P. Thompson, Edmund Leach, Maurice Godelier, Jack Goody, Arnoldo Momiliagno and Ernest Gellner.

I had assumed that this experiment, which is up on the web would be repeated by others as the technology became better. Yet, to my knowledge, it has hardly ever been duplicated. One of the few instances when something similar was done was again an idea I had. When making a six-part series for Channel 4 on the history of the world over the last 10,000 years, we assembled five leading historians and they talked for two days about various aspects of the past. The whole was filmed and is also up on the web.

The next step was probably influenced by this early filming attempt. Jack Goody had been involved in the filmed seminar and five years later, with the help of the Cambridge linguist Stephen Levinson, he arranged three seminars where Meyer Fortes, Audrey Richards and M.N. Srinivas would be filmed talking about their lives and work. Jack Goody then retired, but continued to take an interest in the project and interviewed several others for me, including John Barnes and Jean La Fontaine.

In 1982 a portable video camera which took low-band U-matic was available and so I founded the Rivers Video Project with several of my PhD students, to experiment with the use of film in teaching and research in anthropology. Among the early projects were several biographical and archival films, including a film of Brian Hodgson and a long interview in June 1983 of my supervisor Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf. The group also filmed my undergraduate lectures and some of the students made a film as part of their course on T.R. Malthus.

Now that I had started to film interviews, I could see the way in which my early interest in the gossip and interconnections of what was in effect a small tribe of British social anthropologists could be turned into a permanent record. The first interviews tended to be done by someone who knew the subject well – Goody in the cases above, Jean La Fontaine interviewing Lucy Mair, Caroline Humphrey interviewing Owen Lattimore. But gradually this faded away and I did nearly all the interviews and all the filming. About ten of the interviews were however done by friends and colleagues abroad and sent to me.

At first the focus was almost exclusively on anthropologists – with some sociologists who were also anthropologists such as André Béteille, John Barnes, Ronald Dore. Later it was extended to others in the general area of social sciences, more sociologists and some historians.

The filming continued to be done for the next ten or fifteen years on low-band U-matic and the tapes were stored away. It was not easy or necessary to edit them, but nor was it easy to show them,

so very few were ever shown to students or colleagues. I looked at the collection as an archival collection, a time capsule of a vanishing world, which might be interesting in a hundred years time. That was assuming that it would be possible to play them. Already twenty years after they were made the tapes of the ESCR seminars were unplayable in Cambridge and had to be saved by the National Film Council.

Then a set of interconnected technological changes occurred which affected many of my projects. The internet and high-speed broadband made it possible to send films across the world. Large external hard discs and new compression techniques made it possible to store and edit the films. The arrival of a digital repository in Cambridge in 2004 made it possible to put up the interviews we had done until that date in June of that year, an idea first suggested by Mark Turin.

This development, which meant that the material could be appreciated by many more people, and the arrival of better cameras for the filming, meant that I began to increase the number of my interviews. By 2004 I had done about 30 interviews, by 2006 there were about 70 interviews and lectures. I described my project in relation to the arts, humanities and social sciences to some colleagues in King's College. The scientists Patrick Bateson and Herbert Huppert were excited by the idea and asked whether I could extend the filming to cover the natural and physical sciences.

I was surprised that very few people or organizations appeared to be doing the in-depth 'lives and works' kind of interviews I had undertaken for the immensely larger fields of the sciences. (Two sites which did have interviews on were that at globetrotter.berkeley and the Vega project at Sussex initiated by Harry Kroto). I was also hesitant about my ability to interview in fields about which I knew nothing. But they urged me to try and introduced me to a number of distinguished scientists. Shortly afterwards Gabriel Horn became an active advisor on the project as well.

I started gingerly with the scientists, filming Dan McKenzie with whom I shared a room in King's, the co-discoverer of tectonic plates and continental drift. It went well and I greatly enjoyed it. Pat Bateson then interviewed Gabriel Horn and I filmed another session with them talking about their partnership, and I interviewed

Pat Bateson himself. So I was now sufficiently confident to interview other scientists. Having broadened it beyond arts and social sciences, there was all the world which lay between, such as economics, psychology, philosophy and so on. There were also other interesting people I wanted to film – the Vice Chancellor Alison Richard, the ex-Cabinet Secretary Richard Wilson, the musician John Rutter, the sculptor Anthony Gormley.

In fact, the series broadened out not only into politicians and civil servants, but into many other fields. There are interviews on the performing and visual arts, crafts and skills (pottery, gardening, sculpture), law, journalism, literary criticism, business, exploration, publishing, the military, filmmaking, classics, archaeology, architecture and linguistics. Whenever I heard of or met someone who seemed to have made a creative contribution to the world, whether they were a road sweeper or a College butler, up to some of the most distinguished thinkers in the world, I would try to interview them. It is a wide spread.

So, from May 2007 when the first scientists were filmed, until September 2009 when I formally retired as Professor, I filmed something like another 80 interviews and the total now stands at about 250 films.

As far as I know this archive is unique and as a number of the major figures are dead and others are getting very old, so the interviewing cannot now be done. There are some small projects, sometimes influenced by our experiments, in Germany, the London School of Economics and elsewhere. Yet on the whole there is nothing quite like this.

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Naturally the way in which I have done the interviews reflects both my own interests and my experience of what works. My central aim has been to let the speakers tell their own story, present themselves as they wish to do, without threatening or probing or adversarial questioning. Yet in doing so, and with a roughly chronological approach, I have been particularly interested in the question of what

accidents, historical contingencies, or personal traits have influenced the subjects and sent them towards a particular career. In particular, what they do has contributed to their more creative and sometimes inspired work and innovation in their various fields.

From the very start of my interest in the oral history of my seniors and contemporaries, I have been keen to learn what I should do to make me as good an anthropologist and historian as possible. What are the craft skills and what are the ways of thinking and ordering one's life which will maximize the chance of making a serious contribution to our knowledge of the world? This early interest was heightened when I found myself in the incredibly privileged surroundings of Cambridge for forty years, surrounded by the ghosts of Newton, Darwin, Rutherford and many others.

The following describes the topics I have tried to cover in my interviews. On the surface, the interviews are almost unstructured and I avoid referring to a written questionnaire as this can distract from the spontaneity of the occasion. I encourage the interviewee to talk about whatever they would like. My role is similar to a psychiatrist's, that is to say to let the subject narrate their life, in particular in relation to the obstacles and encouragements to creativity and discovery. We tend to cover the following:

when and where born
ancestry – going back as far as they like, including occupation and temperament and possible effects of grand-parents, parents and siblings
first memories and hobbies as a child
first and subsequent schools, with important teachers, hobbies, subjects which gripped them, sports and games, music, special books
university and those who taught and studied with them and interests there
first research, supervisors, mentors, influences
jobs and career and travels through life, work abroad
colleagues, friends and network of workers, partners and children
methods of working and thinking

major achievements and problem-solving during life, how they occurred, including especially important bursts of activity
administrative tasks
teaching and supervising of students
effects of their work environment (laboratories, departments, Colleges etc)
philosophy and religion
political views and activities
advice for a young person starting out in their field
specifically ask if there is anything which they would like to have talked about and I have omitted to ask about

Yet if the subject does not want to follow this order, or to answer all of these, or to add further subjects, that is fine. What I want the reader to see is the inside of a life, told in a conversational and personal way.

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The interviews are an intimate probing of personal experience, usually by a complete stranger who is holding a potentially threatening video camera. The subjects know that this may be seen by almost anyone in the world – friends, students, competitors, and enemies, now and in the future. This could be intimidating, especially to older subjects and for those who share a widespread reserve and distaste for talking about themselves.

I have, therefore, developed a number of techniques for putting the subjects at their ease. These have contributed, I believe, to the rather startlingly honest and trusting conversations which I have managed to have with a wide range of near strangers. It is worth briefly summarizing these since they could be helpful for others who help to extend this project.

1. It is important to have a fairly small and unostentatious camera that does not dominate or frighten the subject. The less intrusive the microphone the better – which is one reason why I have

given up using lapel microphones. I place the camera on my knees and do not use a tripod, which can again be intimidating.

2. The room in which the interview is done is important. I avoid formal settings if possible – lecture theatres, 'offices', and seminar rooms. A room with gentle furnishings, an easy chair for both interviewee and interviewer, books and pictures and objects in the background, a pleasant view all helps. And of course absolute silence and absence of telephones, mobiles, computers and interruptions is essential. I do not sit too close, or too far away. I sit at the same level, as I would do in any normal relaxed conversation between friends.
3. I try to develop the sheep-dog technique. When gently moving a flock of sheep to its destination, a good sheep dog is mostly silent and still. Each time the sheep move in a satisfactory direction, the dog creeps forward. And then sinks onto the grass and waits attentively. It does not bark, just guides. So, if possible, I try to help the interviewee along, but only interrupt when they need encouragement or direction. I never shut them off (though I occasionally warn them if the conversation is getting into the realms of damaging speech and check that they are aware of this), but try to bring them to subjects as they are needed.
4. I always try to show interest, however little I know, or even care about the subject being discussed. What is being said is often important to the subject and has a depth which I, or others, may only realize later. They deserve serious attention and respect for what is often a summary of a life. Of course, I may verbally disagree a little, or query things, but I try always to do so in the pursuit of a common goal of understanding. Curiosity is the most important attribute.
5. It is important for there to be no sense of rush. If I want an hour of film, I allow 90 minutes, which gives time for general conversation, a cup of tea etc.
6. I used to prepare carefully for the interviews. With people in my own subjects, this was possible. With scientists, beyond reading a brief life in an encyclopaedia, I cannot really prepare. It seems to work as well without preparation.

7. I used to think that it would be good if the 'subjects' prepared themselves in some detail, and when they asked me, I would advise this. In fact, I have found that spontaneity, even if it leads to some confusion, forgetting of names etc., is better and I advise people not to think about the interview – just that it will be chronological and they can say what they like (though they can look at one or two of the earlier interviews on the web if they would like to do so).
8. The fact that there is no commercial side to the endeavour has an effect. That I am doing it without specific pay for the job and not as part of a well-funded project, is usually obvious and helps. That all the materials are freely available on the web, can be downloaded for free anywhere in the world and used in teaching and research, all adds to the trust and spirit of altruistic collaboration.
9. The absence of any bureaucracy is important. We enter into an implicit contract. I have no paper for them to sign, assigning copyright, intellectual property rights etc. It is all agreed verbally and informally in the act itself. And hence the bond of friendship is not broken.
10. One of the things that has developed over the years and has greatly increased the interest and usability of the interviews is the possibility of putting up a summary with some time codes to help viewers navigate to an area that particularly interests them. The summaries are often very detailed and the development of the web has again made them more interesting and reliable since one can check names, theories, and connections. They also summarize much of the essence and flow of the interview. It is an art form in itself, combining considerable synthetic skills, a jigsaw ability and great concentration. It is not easy, but the website gives many examples of highly professional examples which have won high praise from the interview subjects who are often amazed at how accurate and complete they are. The obvious comprehension shown in the summary further adds to the sense of trust.

11. Before the interview it is important to explain that anything that is said can be retracted or glossed later. People should not censor themselves too much. Candour and a relaxed flow of ideas are important and trying to avoid things detracts from this. I explain that while filming – before or after saying something – the interviewee can easily say 'this is not for public dissemination', 'this is confidential' or whatever. Any such passage is then excised from the version that becomes publicly available – but the original tapes are kept for posterity. I also explain that we will send them the full summary which needs to be checked for accuracy (especially names and technical terms), interpretations of statements, and also gives the person a chance to withdraw any section or passage if they wish. They may, as has sometimes happened, feel that they want to add something – some more autobiography, a clearer exposition of something technical. It is not difficult to put this into the summary either in square brackets or as an appendix.
12. The duration of time people can concentrate varies. Most people can manage an hour, and then, with a break, another hour. When the tape ends I allow a few minutes for revival – but it is important not to lose the momentum. Some people prefer to do an hour, go away and come back some days later. This is alright, but can lead to repetition. But for older subjects (and many of mine are in their later eighties and older) it may be necessary. The older subjects also often feel more comfortable in their own homes amongst their books and belongings. This often gives an added dimension to the interviews.

If the subjects do reveal things which should be kept private for some years or even decades, these are edited out of the versions that go on the web, but the original tapes and full interviews will be preserved for posterity. Meanwhile the edited versions are put up on DSpace at Cambridge and on other websites, including YouTube, and now increasingly on websites all over the world – Scandinavia, America, China and elsewhere. The value of the interviews is enormously enhanced by the excellent and thorough summaries

which Sarah Harrison has made of most of them, taking much more time and skill to do than the interviews themselves.

What has been created, through a set of accidents, is a resource for the study of a number of academic disciplines, from anthropology to molecular biology, from history to astronomy, from sociology to mathematics. It also provides rich material for the study of British academic life and institutions in the 20th century. Furthermore, for those interested in the conditions of creativity and discovery, it is a unique archive.

The project has developed as a result of a set of accidents and through the help and support of many people, in particular Sarah Harrison, Mark Turin, Jack Goody, Gerry Martin and many others. However, this project to publish the full interviews of selected individuals was the idea of Esha Béteille, whose support and advice have been indispensable. I would particularly like to thank Radha Béteille who it has been a great pleasure to work with. Her transcripts and editing have been extraordinarily well done and I am deeply impressed and grateful for her contribution. Institutions such as Cambridge University (DSpace and the Streaming Media Service in particular) and King's College, as well as the British Academy, the Leverhulme Trust, the Firebird Foundation and others have also made all this possible. It is hoped that others will take the task on through the 21st century.

PART one

Sir Frank Kermode. Photograph courtesy Alan Macfarlane.

Sir Frank Kermode

Sir John Frank Kermode, FBA (29 November 1919 – 17 August 2010) was a British literary critic. Born on the Isle of Man, Kermode was educated at Douglas High School for Boys and the University of Liverpool. He served in the Royal Navy during the Second World War, for six years in total, much of it in Iceland.

Kermode began his academic career as a lecturer at Durham University in 1947. He later taught at the University of Reading, then the University of Bristol. He was named Lord Northcliffe Professor of Modern English Literature at University College London (UCL) from 1967 to 1974. Under Kermode, the UCL English Department chaired a series of graduate seminars which broke new ground by introducing for the first time contemporary French critical theory to Britain. In 1974, Kermode took the position of King Edward VII Professor of English Literature at Cambridge University. He resigned the post in 1982, at least in part because of the acrimonious tenure debate surrounding Colin MacCabe. He then moved to Columbia University, where he was Julian Clarence Levi Professor Emeritus in the Humanities. In 1975–76 he held the Norton Lectureship at Harvard University.

Kermode was a contributor for several years to the literary and political magazine Encounter *and in 1965 became co-editor. He resigned within two years, once it became clear that the magazine was funded by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).*

Kermode was first married to Maureen Eccles, from 1947 to 1970. The couple had twins. His second marriage was to the American scholar Anita Van Vactor. The couple co-edited The Oxford Book of Letters *(1995). In September 1996 he had boxes containing valuable books and manuscripts removed and destroyed in a dustcart by a Cambridge City Council refuse collection team*

(instead of the removal company employed to move them to another house). He sued CCC for £20,000; the Council denied responsibility.

He was best known for his 1967 work The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction *and for his extensive book-reviewing and editing. Kermode was known for many works of criticism, and also as editor of the popular Fontana Modern Masters series of introductions to modern thinkers. He was a regular contributor to the* London Review of Books *and* The New York Review of Books.

Some of Sir Frank Kermode's other works include: Romantic Image *(1957)*, The Genesis of Secrecy *(1979)*, An Appetite for Poetry *(1989), and the best-selling* Shakespeare's Language *(2000), as well as the collected essays in* Pieces of My Mind: Essays and Criticism 1958–2002 *(2003)*.

He was knighted in 1991. A few months before Kermode's death the scholar James Shapiro described him as 'the best living reader of Shakespeare anywhere, hands down'.[1]