

**(People who have influenced me most, by Alan Macfarlane)**

**Keith Thomas ( 1933- )**

In any intellectual or creative walk of life one tends to have 'masters' or exemplars, people one both tries to emulate and to surpass, who teach, inspire and guide one. One of those who acted in this role for me is the distinguished historian, Professor Sir Keith Thomas, sometime Master of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, Chairman of the Oxford University Press, President of the British Academy etc.

I think my first encounter with Keith must have been in 1962 when I attended lectures he gave for the political philosophy paper at Oxford, probably on Aristotle, Hobbes, Rousseau and others. I have notes on these, but don't remember anything other than that they were useful lectures. Political philosophy was a subject I enjoyed very greatly and I got a 'first' in this paper. This teaching may have been one factor behind my much later return to political philosophy in my books on the 'Riddle' and 'Making' of the Modern World.

Then I remember being viva'd for a first by Keith and others, Keith looking very young and dressed as I remember, in a smart gown with scarlet. He or the others decided against the first, so I got a good 2:1 instead.

When I came to choose a research subject for a D.Phil. at Oxford it was Christopher Hill who I wanted to be my supervisor, having read his rapid flow of books on Puritanism with enormous excitement. So I remember choosing four topics in the field of social history which I thought might interest him. The first of these was popular literacy and education and for a while (a term) I hunted round for sources and a theme, though I'm not sure I saw Christopher more than once as he seemed very busy.

As it became clear that this thesis was not working, I canvassed my other three possible topics with him, namely myth, sex, witchcraft. He suggested that I should go to see his ex-student Keith Thomas who knew more about these subjects than he did, he claimed. So, with a strong sense of disappointment, I went to see Keith.

I was surprised to find he was the person who had interviewed me at the end of my exams and quite over-awed by both his austere, schoolmasterly, manner, full of nervous energy and immensely erudite. His large room at St John's College, where he had become a history fellow after a time as a prize fellow at All Soul's College, and which was very large and stuffed with books was also daunting.

Over time I pieced together his history. A boy from the Welsh border, increasingly scholarly, he had gone to Barry Grammar School which had produced other notable academics including the historian H.J.Habakkuk. A scholarship boy at Oxford he shared the top history prize in his third year with James Campbell, my tutor at Worcester College. Keith was 30 years old when I first met him. I was his first D.Phil. student. He was an omnivorous reader. He could 'gut' a book in a few minutes, a skill I tried to emulate, and already he had a large and select library, being a real bibliophile. He had not published much.

In that year (1963) he published his famous article on 'History and Anthropology' in *Past and Present* which was a huge inspiration for me and which I have read and re-read many times. Around then he also published an article for the same journal on 'Women and the Civil War Sects' and for *Hobbes Studies* a well-known article on Hobbes' social thought. I think he must have decided to make a study of witchcraft and magic just before I met him, so when I read out my list of possible topics, though sex and myth also interested him, he suggested I tried the witchcraft topic.

It is difficult to convey the immense privilege and excitement of being the first (and for some time the only) D.Phil. student of someone of Keith's brilliance at a time when he was not encumbered by his huge later administrative burdens and was gathering materials and writing his most famous book, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*.

I remember supervisions with both of us sitting on his sofa and sharing my chapter as he made both detailed and broad criticisms. I was fairly terrified as he was meticulous and fairly un-inhibited in his criticisms. (It would be interesting to look at a draft to see what he wrote). I remember he became exasperated at times because I would argue each point. But there was a constant flow of suggestions and references and although he was writing a book on the same subject, I don't remember a single instance of conflict or difficulty in this.

I don't remember particular advice in detail, except a few things. As I flagged, he warned me not to 'spoil the ship for a ha'porth of tar'. When I gave away my conclusions too early on, he likened the thesis to a strip show – it would lose its sex appeal if too much was revealed at first. But one of the most important influences was on style. Everything must be clear, unpretentious, without jargon or complication, crystal clear like his own writing. This meant that one had to have things very clear in one's mind before, or as, one wrote. In a way, one always continues to write for one's first supervisor, so whenever my sentences become over-long or I tend to verbosity I hear his crisp, schoolmasterly, voice in my ear.

A second major influence, and one that decisive on my later career, was on my choice of reading. Keith was himself at the height of his interest in the relations between anthropology and history, so he encouraged me to become immersed in anthropology. On his suggestion, I went to lectures in the social anthropology department and met many of the distinguished anthropologists then at Oxford. Foremost among them was Edward Evans-Pritchard, my future D.Phil. examiner and world leader in the study of witchcraft. There was also Needham, Beattie, Ardener, Pocock and others. And I read a number of the classics of anthropology and decided I wanted to be an anthropologist. I was totally enchanted by this new discipline.

The final influence I shall mention here is on method. It was only towards the end of writing my D.Phil., that on a visit to Keith's house, he showed me the study where he worked. There was one window, a large table with an old typewriter on it, and a cupboard behind. The cupboard, as I remember, was about two feet deep in slivers of paper. What Keith did was to take notes on books and manuscripts in his tiny hand. (Only when I came to write on myopia did I realize that this hand-writing is related to his near-sightedness, which also forced him to wear the very thick spectacles which gave him a rather owlish and severe expression). Keith would then take the sheet and

cut up each sentence, quote or whatever (on which he had written a short bibliographical reference). These slips would, in due course, be sorted into envelopes under subject.

I remember at the very exciting research seminars which he ran, and where I met a cohort of the new generation of historians such as Robin Briggs, Paul Slack, Nick Tyacke and half a dozen others, that Keith would spend time looking through the contents of an envelope related to the theme of the paper.

As for his writing method, I remember a sheet of paper in his typewriter. He would type the text of a paragraph and then clip onto it the slivers which were to illustrate or substantiate the argument. Presumably this was then handed over to a typist, or perhaps he typed it out with linking prose.

This 'one slip one fact' method, collecting materials at a very wide level on all sorts of topics, is one I have used all my life in different ways and Keith had a great influence on it. But it has in-built difficulties. I have described both his method and the difficulties, and how his method fitted alongside that of a number of other major thinkers, in my piece 'Only Connect' (q.v.)

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When Keith's book came out, at about the same time as mine on *Witchcraft*, the conjunction was undoubtedly a boost to my reputation. That we appeared together to give papers at the 1968 A.S.A. Conference on 'Witchcraft' also did me no harm.

In fact Keith's great reputation was a continuing asset. To have one of the most respected and energetic historians as one's patron and referee writer throughout life accounts for a good deal of my subsequent career. His distinction and reputation carried very great weight. There can be no doubt that his references for my Readership and Professorship must have been very important. And even my first job I owe to him. For when in 1970 I was writing up my Nepal Ph.D. I received a postcard from Keith (some 3 years after I had finished being formally supervised by him and after changing my subject) to say that there were some history research fellowships being advertised for King's College, Cambridge. I applied, he was a referee, and I got a Senior Research Fellowship at King's, where I have been since.

As for the formal influence of his books and ideas, these were also considerable. Like many others, I was bowled over by the scope, energy and erudition of *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. My views on its importance are given in a review I wrote to celebrate ten years of its publication (q.v.). I read and re-read it and regard it as a great book still. Yet it did not really solve its main problem, the reasons for the rise and then the decline in the belief in magic and witchcraft. Over the years I thought about this and in about 1995 as part of the draft for *Savage Wars*, I wrote about the subject indirectly in relation to the elimination of magic. So when I was asked to contribute to Keith's festschrift on his retirement in 2001, I revised this and published a long critique and amendments of both our arguments. (q.v.)

Apart from a number of interesting papers and published lectures, copies of which he kindly sent me and which were always invigorating, he has only published

one other book to date, namely *Man and the Natural World* which is based on his Trevelyan Lectures at Cambridge. Here his love of English literature and first-hand knowledge as a boy growing up in the farming world of the Welsh borders, inspired an elegant and brilliant book. I was asked to write a review, which was later expanded and ended up as a chapter in *The Culture of Capitalism*. (q.v.) It seemed to me that Keith, despite his brilliance, was still trapped within the older paradigm of the supposed revolution from peasant to modern which I was increasingly sceptical about.

We seldom disagreed strongly, though he clearly disapproved of my publication of the very critical review I wrote of Lawrence Stone's book on sex and marriage.(q.v) Keith was a colleague of Stone's at Oxford, sat on the board of *Past and Present* with him, and wrote admiringly of his work. He clearly thought I had made a tactical (and perhaps career detrimental) mistake.

The final influence is difficult to measure. To a certain extent one writes for a very small set of people, perhaps half a dozen. One continues to write for one's supervisors all one's life. Keith's great advantage in this respect was that he set such a high standard, acting as a voice in the back of my mind all the time, urging clarity, precision, scholarship. I sent him copies of all my books and he invariably sent me encouraging and positive comments, plus a detailed and meticulous list of mistakes. To my knowledge he never reviewed any of my books, which is probably a blessing. Altogether an impressive man and a very hard act to follow.