Interview with Malcolm Thick

Interviewer: Dr. Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire

Date: 9 July, 2016

I= Interviewer

M= Malcolm Thick

Beginning of the interview……

I

So when did you first come to the Oxford Symposium?

M

I think it was in 1985. I was signed up for the Symposium late on after the list had closed apparently because Jane Grigson wrote three or four long articles in the colour magazine of the Observer – on meat, fruit and vegetables. She dealt with the history of vegetables in England. I commented to my wife after I had read it that her sources were a bit old. In particular, she had not quoted anything from me. So my wife encouraged me to write to her which I did. I came home a couple of weeks later and Jane was very excited because Jane Grigson had just rung her up and said “I must speak to Malcolm- I must take him out to lunch”. She was living near Swindon at the time and I was working in Swindon so we went out to lunch. She quizzed me on 16th and 17th century vegetables. She inserted some of my comments and references into the introduction to Gillian Riley’s translation of Castelvetro (The fruit herbs & vegetables of Italy by Giacomo Castelvetro, foreword by Jane Grigson, translation by Gillian Riley, Viking, 1989) which she was just finishing at the time. She said “you are the sort of person who should come to the Oxford Food Symposium. The list is closed but if you write a paper I will get you in”. So in five weeks or so I wrote a paper for the Symposium in, I think, 1985, and was in. Unfortunately, she was dying of cancer at the time and was too ill to come to the symposium. She died soon afterwards. So I only met her the once plus several telephone conversations. I remember one telephone conversation when I mentioned Gerard’s Herbal and she said – “Oh, hang on a minute”. There was a sort of thump and she said “Oh, I have just got it down from the shelf”. She had a first edition which made me feel very envious! Thereafter I was in and apart from two or three years when I
was not happy with the move to Brookes of Headington, I have been to the symposium every year.

I

Yes, it was St. Antony’s for such a long time and now it has been in Saint Cat’s for a while so it was only two years or so that it was in Headington?

M

Yes, and they really did not fit into Headington.

I

It was not as compact as it is either here or in St. Antony’s. But we will go back to yourself, where were you born and how many were in your family and how did you get into food?

M

I was born in Blandford which is in the centre of Dorset. An only child, my father was a clerk in a brewery. My mother did not work until I was about 14 when she worked part time in the brewery as well. We moved to Southampton as part of my father’s work for two or three years. Then I went off to University, Queens in Belfast. Thereafter I came to Oxford to study a D. Phil.

I

What did you study in Queens?

M

Economic history with economics. Mostly economic history since the economics in Queens was very theoretical and mathematical and I could not get on with it. Then I came to Oxford to do a D.Phil on Early Modern Market Gardening in England which I never finished. But a summary of it appears in vol. 5 of the Agrarian History of England and Wales. I subsequently wrote a book on Market Gardening around London which also used a big chunk of the research so the research has been used one way or the other.

I

What influenced you to start looking at market gardening?

M

My university supervisor Joan Thirsk who was arguably one of the pre-eminent agricultural historians of her age. She was looking at a range of new crops introduced into England in
the 16th and 17th century. Things like woad, weld and madder, dye crops and cole seed. Market gardening was just one of these new developments.

I

Did woad only come in around that time?

M

The Ancient Britons were supposed to have daubed woad all over themselves to make them look more fearsome.

I

It is a blue colour?

M

Yes, it is a fleshly plant that is processed to make a very dark blue dye. Processed in a fairly complicated way. Its leaves are harvested and it is put in piles to ferment and it stinks to high heaven! There is an Elizabethan statute that says woad cannot be processed within one or two miles of a royal highway because the queen does not want to go past these stinking piles of woad. When it is fermented it is then packed into balls, which gives a sort of paste, and put on racks to dry. When it is dry it is knocked down into a powder and it is this powder which is used for dying. Woad used to be imported in powder from France in the 15th. early 16th. century. Then we started growing it over here in the mid-16th century. It is an exhaustive crop, it takes a lot of the goodness out of the soil and it takes three years to mature. It used to be sown by specialists, itinerant woad men who would take over a lot of prime agricultural land, contract with the owner to grow woad on it and process the woad. They erected their own temporary wooden buildings for the purpose. Then after three years they would up sticks and move on somewhere else and exhaust another part of Southern England.

I

Fascinating. Tell us about Joan, history was her department?

M

Yes. She was reader in history in Oxford. She should have been professor but there were professors in her way blocking her progress as it were. One of whom she famously could not get on with namely Hugh Trevor-Roper. It is difficult to categorise Joan. If you look at her bibliography she pops up doing articles on everything. She would go to conferences at the drop of a hat. I remember one year telling her of the Leeds Symposium and asking her whether it was possible for her to do a paper and she said “Oh yes, I will do a paper”. So she
turned up and did a paper on Food Preservation in the Country House (I think). I did a paper on the Garden in the Country House at the same conference. I am constantly amazed at the number of articles that she did.

I

Yes, her work is constantly referenced. Have you been involved in Leeds as well as here?

M

Yes, I have been there not quite as many years as here. But Leeds has been at York for as long as I can remember! It is a nice one-day conference. In the last few years my wife and I have gone up to York on the Wednesday before the conference on the Saturday and made a sort of mini holiday out of it.

I

How did your career move on from the D. Phil?

M

It didn’t! (laugh) It went sideways for a bit while I took a year out to do a Cert Ed. I taught part time at the Oxford FE College for a couple of years. For almost two years I was a research assistant on volume five of the History of Criminal Law and Penal Policy specialising in 19th century juvenile delinquency. Then I became a tax inspector for something like twenty-seven years. I got early retirement ten years ago and was very pleased to retire and write history again.

I

So that explains how we are here. Were you always fascinated by Gardens in particular?

M

Yes, I have developed from production onto consumption, vegetables and meat in fact. My latest article is on the raising of rabbits intensively inside the built up area of London between the 16th and 18th centuries.

I

Yes, the Normans brought rabbits to Ireland so presumably to England as well but the idea of rabbits in a built up area is another story!
The rabbits were in hutches, in rooms, in cellars. One of my sources which is a marvellous source is the Old Bailey online. The Old Bailey was a criminal court for London and much of Middlesex. From the 1680s up until 1917 a lot of their trials were noted down by clerks in the court and noted down verbatim. What the defendant said and what witnesses said were noted down in shorthand exactly as they were spoken and then written up in manuscript books. They have all been transcribed, put online and are searchable by keyword. So if you search 1700-1800 and rabbits you get four or five hundred references. Mostly they are about people stealing rabbits which are easy to steal because they sit around in pockets and are very docile. But you find out the circumstances in which the people stole the rabbits, where they stole them from, how many rabbits the person who was producing them had. You come across interesting things like one chap in the 18th century had rented a room in a rooming house and while other people in the house had rooms they were living in he put a hundred and fifty rabbits in his room. Which of course very soon multiplied to a lot more rabbits. He came there twice a day to feed and cull them much to the annoyance of the other people in the rooming house. The stench of a hundred fifty plus rabbits in one room! This is something you would never come across normally but it came out in the evidence.

It reminds me of the modern phenomena of grow houses for Marijuana in housing estates where they are grown hydroponically. We have to finish now as the bell is ringing but from your time here in Oxford is there any highlight that stands out for you in particular?

I think the sheer fun of the early years when Alan Davidson and Theodore Zeldin were around. Alan Davidson would turn up in outrageous shirts and he was just in it for fun basically. Another amusing thing I will always remember is at Antony’s. One of the separate rooms for parallel sessions was in the senior common room and the senior common room had a lot of very long sofas with high backs to them. Half of them were facing away from the speaker. So after lunch everybody used to go into the senior common room, lie down on one of these sofas utterly invisible to the speaker. So the speaker could be speaking to an apparently empty room. When he finished a few people would rise above the backs of the sofas and give a desultory clap. If it was particularly bad, there would be the sound of snoring and no-one would clap. (laughter)

Thank you so much for talking to me.

End of interview