

Q&A

Prof. Robert Gildea
Professor of Modern History,
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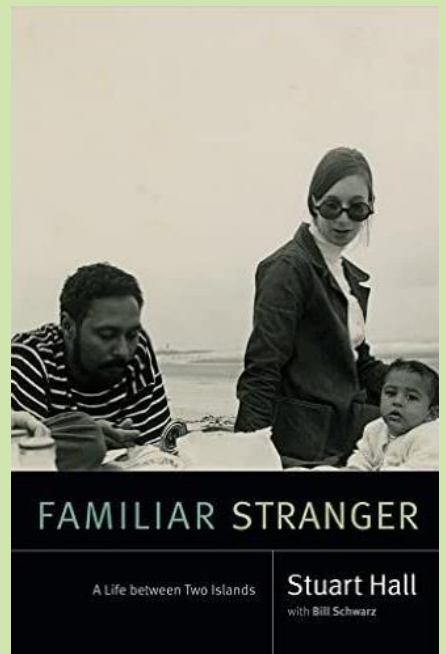


What area of research do you focus on and why?

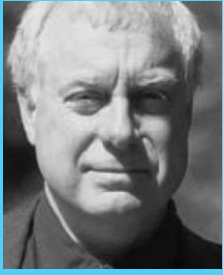
I work on French history because I was sent to France on a schoolboy exchange when I was 14 and fell in love with my penfriend's cousin. Nothing happened but we are still friends. I then went back in my gap year to study at the Sorbonne and discovered French literature as well as history. As an undergraduate I took all the options I could in French history and have since spent five years of my life researching there. This is like being on holiday. I am attracted by two things about France: its revolutionary tradition and deep provincial France, *la France profonde*. My PhD was on education in nineteenth-century Brittany. More recently I became interested in France's colonial past and what has been called the 'colonial fracture' in France between immigrants from France's colonies and the 'indigenous' French. I decided that I could only fully understand this by comparing the French experience with the British. Hence my latest book, *Empires of the mind*.

What book in your field should everyone read?

The book that struck me most while researching *Empires of the mind* was Stuart Hall's *Familiar Stranger: a life between two islands*, published in 2017, three years after his death. Hall was an academic and activist who came to Britain from Jamaica as a student and was the father of cultural studies. His reflections on the persistence of colonial attitudes and reflexes in British society are extraordinary. His widow, the historian Catherine Hall, who has researched how far modern British fortunes were derived from the slave plantations, kindly agreed to be 'in conversation' with me when my book was launched.



For more information about Historic-All
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Which book inspired you to study History?

The Gauntlet, by Ronald Welch, which I read this when I was 10 or 11. It is a magical story of a boy who discovers a rusty gauntlet while on holiday in Wales and is transported back to the Middle Ages. For me it was a brilliant way of bringing history 'to life'. I went on to read a series of historical novels written by Welch about the Carey family, most of whose heroes (there were no heroines) fought in Britain's great battles. They are incredibly dated and politically incorrect but I recently sent *The Gauntlet* to my great-nephews, just to see.

What book are you currently reading?

I am currently reading *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann. I began it before the current pandemic got a grip but – set in a sanatorium in the Alps where Europe's idle TB sufferers reflect on life – it is curiously relevant.

Which historian has had the greatest influence on you?

Richard Cobb (1917-96). He was a great historian of the French Revolution who got round all the French archives in the 1950s because his first wife was the daughter of an SNCF official and he could travel free. He did 'bottom up' history, and brought to life (it's a theme) marginal people in society – soldiers, smugglers, servants, prostitutes. He encouraged all his students to work in the French provincial archives. I dedicated *Marianne in chains* - my book on the Loire Valley under the German occupation – to his memory.

What is the best museum you have ever been to?

The Musée d'Orsay in Paris. A feast of nineteenth-century art in a converted railway terminal. Get there at opening time and whizz up to the top floor to have the Impressionists all to yourself before the crowds catch up with you. Then decant to the beautiful, intimate Delacroix museum in the shadow of the church of Saint-Germain des Prés. The artist's studio, plus a small garden to relax in. Sorry, that's two.

We look forward to welcoming you to CamVC soon!



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