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JOHN H. ELLIOTT

Oral History Project

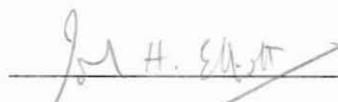
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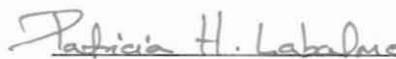
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One cassette (2 sides) and a transcript of an interview
on May 15, 1990.

INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY

PREFACE

The following manuscript contains the edited transcript of an interview with Professor John H. Elliott. The interview was recorded at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, on May 15, 1990, and was conducted by Patricia H. Labalme. Professor Elliott was resigning his position as Professor in the School of Historical Studies to accept the Regius Chair in Modern History at Oxford University.

No biographical sketch was prepared at that time.

The reader should be aware that the following is essentially a transcript of the spoken word and attempts to preserve the spontaneity and informality of the original tape and that the views expressed therein are those of the narrator.

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN ELLIOTT

Date: May 15, 1990

Place: Princeton, New Jersey

Interviewer: Patricia H. Labalme

CASSETTE ONE, SIDE ONE:

LABALME: All right, now we can begin our conversation. And as I said, I have a few notes here but we can simply go wherever conversation leads. What first brought you to the Institute?

ELLIOTT: Well, at the time I was Professor of History at King's College at the University of London, and I really knew nothing about the Institute. I'd never been here as a Visiting Member, and the invitation to join the Faculty really came completely out of the blue. I'd been not only the Professor of History at King's, but also I was permanent head of the department, and I had six years there, and while I greatly enjoyed it, I felt that this was a marvelous opportunity to get on with the sort of writing I'd always hoped to do. And when I came and looked around the Institute, I also saw the tremendous possibilities in the Institute itself for encouraging international scholarship, and I glimpsed there were real possibilities at that moment, at a time when it seemed to me that the university world generally--across the world--was under enormous pressure, and that one could do something to encourage scholars and particularly younger scholars by giving them time off. And

I thought that my presence in the field of early modern European history, which was one of the most lively fields in historical studies, could be of help particularly at that moment, and that there were enormous possibilities if I joined the Faculty. So that both for personal reasons, a chance to do my own thing at last after many years of teaching first at Cambridge and then at London, and then the possibility of doing something for global historical scholarship, seemed to me to make this an irresistible opportunity.

LABALME: Who was your first contact? Who raised the whole subject?

ELLIOTT: Well, I always--Felix Gilbert, his sister, by coincidence, was a member of the German department at Kings College, London, and he came to visit her, I would think probably the year before I was appointed, and he obviously was looking me over at the same time, and so I met him then and he asked me if I would like to apply to come as a Visiting Member--it may have been two years before my appointment to the Institute--and I said I couldn't possibly get away from my job. But he presumably was casing the joint at that time.

LABALME: Yes. And then you came over for a preliminary visit in March of '73?

ELLIOTT: It was March of '73, it would have been, that's right, and just to look around and meet my future colleagues and look into the housing situation. Carl Kaysen had paid me a visit, too, when he was in London at the time when the

appointment was just about to start getting into the works with the Faculty here.

LABALME: Of course, that was also in the middle of his problems but you were not aware of--?

ELLIOTT: I was terribly aware because they had even reached the English press, so that once people knew that I had accepted, I was constantly being sent press cuttings, both from this side of the Atlantic and the other, warning me of the terrible thing I was about to do and the awful place I was about to find myself in.

LABALME: Had you hesitations about coming, beyond Kaysen's problems, I mean in terms of the difference of existence here with that you'd led?

ELLIOTT: I knew it was the right thing for me. Oonah was a bit reluctant, I think, at first to come, but when she saw the place, she, like me, really fell in love with it, in terms of the sheer beauty, and she saw the opportunities, she saw that it made absolute sense. I must say, a lot of my English colleagues were extremely distressed and thought it was both a grave defection and had very strong feelings about research institutes, negative feelings about research institutes. They thought really that it was extremely unwise to cut oneself off from teaching in this way, and they envisaged a sort of career pattern for me in England which I didn't necessarily share myself.

LABALME: Did you once, you arrived, feel cut off?

ELLIOTT: Not in the least. I felt myself very much at the center of things, and I think this is one of the striking things about Princeton, that the contacts both with the University and with the whole intellectual world are so great that it was a perpetual whirl really, and everyone sooner or later passes through, or passed through Princeton, so that in a sense I was at much more at the center of the world than I was in London.

LABALME: Yes. And did you feel that over these years, these sixteen years, you were able to do something for the early European field, which is, I think, one of the reasons you came?

ELLIOTT: Very much so. Fortunately, in a way, all I had to do was follow in the steps of Felix Gilbert who was absolutely marvelous about finding bright young scholars in early modern European history, bringing them to the Institute, looking after them and so on, so that I had an absolute perfect role model there, and in a sense I felt I was continuing work that Felix had already begun and begun in a spectacular fashion, and I'm enormously grateful to Felix. You know, one of the great attractions about coming to the Institute, once I met him, was the presence of Felix Gilbert. And the other great attraction, I think it's fair to say, was the presence of the Social Science School. I think I wouldn't have come here if there hadn't been a Social Science School. I felt that the History School with one or two exceptions tended much too much to the

antiquarian for my tastes, and I was worried about the possibility of both continued intellectual vitality in the School and about the possibilities of renovation of the School. But I think that the presence of the Social Science School which at that stage really consisted of Clifford Geertz, in fact he was the sole member of the Faculty and the first Faculty job I had when I got here was to be on the search committee for a colleague of Clifford, and we chose Albert Hirschman which was a great choice as it proved, and the fact there was a Social Science School with a totally different point of view seemed to me to be extremely important and really was a great incentive, and I got on well with Clifford Geertz from the first, and I remember very much that Carl Kaysen wanted to put me in--I suppose it was building B--and I absolutely said I very much wanted to be on a corridor with social scientists so that there was the possibility of mixing up. So that from the first, I was concerned to break down these artificial barriers and really get some dialogue going between the two Schools in so far as that was possible and as you know many of the colleagues in my School had absolutely no use for the Social Sciences here at all, in fact would have gladly seen them out.

LABALME: Yes. Well, you had developed this interest in social science from your own work? From your readings?

ELLIOTT: That's right. Yes. Well, it was something, it seemed to me that history was changing in such a way, it was, at that

point the influence of anthropology in particular, even more I think than sociology, was becoming very strong indeed in the historical world, and I'd done a bit of my own background reading in this and realized there were ways in which it could be used and saw the possibility here of continuing that dialogue with the social sciences and particularly with anthropologists.

LABALME: And have you felt that's been an ongoing success, this working together of the two Schools?

ELLIOTT: I think on the whole it has, yes. Some years--particularly as far as Members are concerned. But even if the formal relations between the two Schools have not been particularly close, I think in terms of the interaction between Members, they've often been extremely close. It varies according to the temperaments and interests of the Members, year by year, in both Schools. Some years the social scientists have been much too ahistorical and abstract to be of great interest to many of the historians here and some years, I think it's fair to say, the interests of the historians have been too textual or too antiquarian to be of interest to social scientists, but usually there's been quite a lot of crossing of the lines. I think the Social Science lunches, although I don't particularly like the format of them, have been very helpful in bringing members of the two Schools together and creating this interaction which is what, after all, what Flexner always wanted for the Institute.

LABALME: How would you change the format?

ELLIOTT: I think a discussion over lunch with the clattering of the trays and such a large number of people attending really makes dialogue virtually impossible. And I think there's a certain amount of grandstanding so that questions tend to be performances very often. And I personally think that seminars should be confined to about twelve or fifteen people. And in some ways, some of the nicest occasions I've had here have been in, for instance, the Mellon seminars, a small group of social scientists and historians, perhaps a dozen of us, and we had those seminars over three or four years very informally in Clifford Geertz's house. And they were splendid for real exchange of ideas, and I believe that's the way to do it. But I think it is quite helpful that people should have an occasion like the Social Science luncheon in which to present their wares, and one therefore discovers what's going on. But I don't think it's very good for actual intellectual exchange as distinct from listening to a performance.

LABALME: It does serve to at least introduce the communities to each other.

ELLIOTT: Absolutely. And it brings in University people too, so from that point of view it has been very useful, especially as the History School has not gone for, you know, general meetings of this type. Partly because our School is so fragmented, and we've never had programs the way that the

Social Science School has. And our School is so disparate in its concerns and interests that we simply haven't very much, I think, until the last year or two, acted as a very cohesive group.

LABALME: Is that the nature of the discipline?

ELLIOTT: It's partly the nature of the discipline. I think very much the nature of the discipline where, on the whole, one is much more of an isolated scholar than one is in the social sciences where you expect a great deal more interchange and dialogue, it seems to me. I think it also reflects the temperament of my colleagues in the early years--the balance of the School which was so heavily tilted to the classics at the time I came here. I mean, I just couldn't believe that the History School was so heavily oriented to Greece and Rome, and that was one of my great concerns. The first time I saw my new colleagues, I realized that this, as far as I was concerned, was going to be a difficulty in the future. I mean, not that I have anything against the classics, and I think they too are beginning and were beginning rather belatedly to feel the winds of change that were blowing through other branches of the discipline, but I was very concerned when I saw its impact on the selection of visiting members, where it seemed to me that in a School of seven or eight the voting was so heavily weighted towards the classics, and I felt that pretty boring scholars were being let in as members in classical studies at the expense of

much livelier people in modern history. Felix and I were really constantly being marginalized and isolated, and of course when Felix retired from the Faculty, I was the only modernist. George Kennan only overlapped with me very briefly. Felix and I had a slightly longer time together.¹ But then the School was reduced to one modernist for the whole period from 1500 onwards, and since ultimately one is carving up a rather limited cake, it's clear that if you've got three votes in the classics and you've got one modernist, well when the chips are down, the modernist is likely to lose out.

LABALME: You and Irving Lavin prepared a proposal which is in the archives on the choice of Visiting Members in 1973. Do you remember that? On selection procedures?

ELLIOTT: On selection procedures. Well, there were various ways in which we wanted to galvanize the School, and we were very concerned about not getting in candidates who we thought were at least as strong as some of those who were routinely getting in. And we also wanted to galvanize those of our colleagues who really weren't doing much in the way of actively selecting people, as we saw it, and we wanted to try to make the School more cohesive, so we devised a scheme with the not very good name of "presumptive members," with an expectation that each of us would have two people who

¹ George Kennan retired in 1974 and Felix Gilbert in 1975.

unless they were really firmly shot down by the School as a whole, would be at the top of our list and could be expected to get in. One or two, I might say, were shot down and I think that was right, but the idea was to get everybody participating actively in a way and also to get in one or two younger people, because we were very concerned about the age distribution of the membership. It was so much older than other Schools, and we felt that brighter younger people were not getting in simply because their publications necessarily were slender by comparison. So it was also a way of opening up and changing the age distribution, and I think that did serve a purpose. I'm glad that it's now been abolished because it began to give the impression that people could get in here by being well-known to or on good terms with the members of the Faculty, and we didn't want that impression to get around. It was already too strongly entrenched in outside perceptions of the School as a whole: that it was too nepotistic, that there were a certain number of people who were constantly returning here year after year as members, and I think what we really wanted to do was to shake up the whole thing and this served its turn and was then abolished, and rightly so in my view, but I think for a number of years it did work. It did enable us to get in some brighter younger people who might not have made it otherwise.

LABALME: You feel now that the situation as far as visiting members goes, the selection of visiting members, works?

ELLIOTT: I think it's working very well. I think the whole School has changed enormously. And the reasons for this--I think when I came here, that there were really two very different perceptions of what the Institute as a whole was about, let alone the School of Historical Studies. There was an older generation which really thought that the Institute existed for the sake of the Faculty, and then one or two younger members, Irving and myself in our School, and obviously Clifford Geertz in the Social Science School, and I'm sure there were others in Mathematics and Natural Sciences, who really saw that this place, given the nature of the transformation of international scholarship, ought to be primarily as a place of refuge for younger people to get on with their own work as visiting members. So that in a sense, one approach was to treat the Institute as a club. The other was to see it as having an international mission which, in our School at least, I don't think we were fulfilling as well as we could have done and as well indeed as I believe we are now. And this caused an enormous amount of trouble with my colleagues in the early years. I mean life was one long battle the first five or six years in my School, and it was very difficult because--not only battles over memberships but also obviously over appointments, because this was critical for the whole future of the

School. And in our School, I think not in other Schools, there was still a tradition effectively, although this wasn't spelled out in so many words, of choosing your own successor, which seemed to me the road to disaster because inevitably there is a tendency to perpetuate a discipline in which you have been a great figure. And some of those disciplines were frankly going dead, as always happens with branches of study, and it seems to me one of the great problems about this Institute is how you renovate it intellectually, so that you don't get stuck in ruts. And I believe that our School had got stuck into its rut of having three or four classicists or whatever it may be, irrespective of what was happening in other fields, and I felt that it was absolutely essential from the first to fight this and we had tremendous fights over appointments. And going back to that sense of--are we a club or are we an international center with an international mission? I remember being told by one of my senior colleagues, I suppose after the first term or two, "we invited you into our club and the first thing you did was to start moving the furniture around." Well, I came here partly because I thought the furniture needed moving around, and I knew I was in for trouble, as a matter of fact, and I knew I would just have to fight for the things I felt to be right, and I'm sure I was wrong sometimes. But there was a real need, it seemed to me, to shake up the place and this could only be

done by challenging traditional positions both on the choice of members and on the selection of new Faculty. And we had battle after battle over Faculty appointments. And on the whole, I would like to think we've got a much better balanced School now than we used to have. I think we have a Faculty which is much more outward looking than it was when I got here, which really has a concern for the members. And in order to underline my point of what I've really been trying to do here, I absolutely refused to participate at all, once I knew I was leaving this place, I refused to have anything to do with the selection process of a new member of the Faculty. I felt that this was the last bequest that I could make to the School, and I hope that the lesson will be learned. This seems to me an improper way of doing things, the virtual nomination of a successor.

LABALME: You are, I think, the first to have declined that.

ELLIOTT: I'm the first I think to have left our School. I mean there people who have left other Schools. Michael Atiyah went from Mathematics and various of the Natural Scientists have left.

LABALME: What was the reputation of the Institute in England before you came?

ELLIOTT: Well, it wasn't really very well known, I mean apart from the classics. It's always been a mecca for the classicists. Still, it's better known now than it was. Particularly modern history, partly I suppose because I've been here and

we've had a number of my compatriots coming over. But it didn't, outside the classics, have a particularly strong reputation. It did in mathematics, of course, as always. Mathematics really has held the banner aloft, I think consistently, and given the Institute its reputation. And I felt that we could do much more on the side of humanities, and I like to think that we have over these seventeen years. There have been big changes in the perception of the Institute both internationally and in this country.

LABALME: You mention in one of your early letters before you'd come that you talked to Michael Atiyah at Oxford, and he filled you in.

ELLIOTT: Yes. Well, Michael and I have known each other since the first week as undergraduates at Trinity College, Cambridge, when we were chosen together, we entered the college together as scholars, so we've always had that contact. And I did try to find out from him, and of course at that time he was about to leave for family reasons essentially--but I got some idea of the place from him, and also he was aware of the problems about the History School to some extent, and he was much more aware of the traumatic occurrences over Carl Kaysen, the sort of impact that was having. I wanted to come in with my eyes relatively open as regards these things and so I can't remember the details of that conversation, but I certainly did sound him out.

LABALME: One of the things you've really done for the Institute is bring in Hispanicists and people in a totally new field.

ELLIOTT: Yes. That's right. I personally have always hated being labeled in any way, and I tend to get labeled as a Hispanist and obviously Spanish studies have been at the center of my intellectual interests over the years, and I have very much tried to get a number of Spaniards here, partly because no Spaniards ever came to the Institute, and this is a marvelous moment--Spain had been enclosed, cut off from the world under the Franco years, and was just beginning to open up at the time I arrived here. And so I made a deliberate attempt to get over the best Spanish historians I could find and begin a tradition of getting them to think in terms of applying to the Institute which they are now beginning to do, and on the whole the best Spanish historians in the 1970s have been economic historians. So I very much went for the economic historians and economic history. I mean I did it partly, not only for Spanish history but also because economic history was something that on the whole wasn't an area much encouraged by the Institute at that time. And I thought of them both as economic historians and as historians of Spain and saw the possibilities for bringing these people into touch with international scholarship and giving them some lively opportunities and research opportunities they simply didn't have at home. And that's worked out very well, and they are beginning now to apply of

their own initiative. We've had some very distinguished Spaniards here. But I also went very much for early modern European historians in general, as Felix did. Felix was particularly interested in the Renaissance. My interests were a bit later, so perhaps I've been less good as regards the Renaissance. But given only five or six places open to modernists--going right up to 1900 and contemporary history --I could only do so much, and I regret having neglected, when I was the sole modernist on the Faculty, nineteenth- and twentieth-century historians. We always had one or two but not as many as I would have liked, but I didn't feel at that time it was the strongest area as compared with early modern European history. I also felt they'd had quite a good run for their money under Felix and George Kennan. Once Peter Paret came, then we could readjust the balance and divide up the centuries a bit more equally between us, so that modern modern history is really getting a better chance now than it had in the middle years, the 1970s, when I was under siege. And also, I should say that in addition to Spanish history and sixteenth-, seventeenth-, eighteenth-century European history, the other thing that we never had, or had very little of here, was early American history. Felix and Morton White had always had one or two nineteenth-century American historians of one sort or another, particularly intellectual historians. During my last few years here I've been trying to get in a number of colonial

American historians, people like Rick [Richard] Beeman or Steve Innes who was surprised to find himself recycled as an early modernist. He'd always thought himself as a colonial Americanist, but it was very good for these people because it made them see themselves as part of a worldwide, a trans-Atlantic civilization of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Again, I think to find themselves in that kind of situation has been intellectually stimulating for these people.

LABALME: Before you came, Felix and George Kennan in their statement of support for you said "his presence in the States should bring historians working in the European and in the Latin American fields closer together. These two things had always been seen too separately."

ELLIOTT: Oh, yes! Well, that is indeed what I have tried to do in exactly that way that I have been telling you. And I have also been bringing in Latin Americanists. I'd like to have brought more Latin Americans. I've perhaps failed there, but on the whole the Social Science School has been bringing them, thanks to Albert Hirschman, so I felt less need there. He's also been having Mexican historians or Brazilian historians as well as economists so that I concentrated rather on the Latin Americanists in this country or in Europe, and that's been splendid. We've had some of the best colonial Latin American historians here over the years. And again this was an area, oddly enough, if I remember

rightly, Oppenheimer I think it was, it may even have been Flexner, made an approach to Louis Hanke at one stage and brought him down to the Institute to look him over and went no further, Hanke tells me. But had Louis Hanke come here, then no doubt Latin American studies would have been encouraged much earlier. He of course was the doyen of Latin American studies in this country for a long time. But I'm glad to have been able to do that. But as I say, I always wanted to avoid labels, and I've tried to mix up these people and give them a sense of belonging to a wider culture, so in that sense I hope--I didn't know about that statement by Felix and George--but I hope I have fulfilled the mission I hoped I would fulfill.

LABALME: Well, it wasn't your only mission, but it was an interesting comment. Tell me about your sense of connection with the University. You mentioned when you arrived that this community was a vital one.

ELLIOTT: Yes. The history department was extremely vital, thanks to Lawrence Stone's direction and Felix of course again had made a point of maintaining and nourishing his contacts at the University, and I already knew Lawrence Stone. He was an old friend, and we were both on the board of Past and Present together since 1958 where we'd fought many battles together, so that that was another of the attractions of coming here, and I've always suspected, although I don't know it, that Lawrence may have played a part in suggesting

my name to Felix at an early stage, but I have no reason necessarily to believe this. But the presence of Lawrence and other members of the history faculty like Ted Rabb, Bob Darnton, did make it, it was another attraction in coming here, and I've done my best to maintain those contacts with the History Department and many of the members of the History Department are up here eating lunches with visiting members. We go down to the Davis Center a lot, many of us, and indeed my last public function here was the final Davis Center session under Lawrence Stone's direction, so we had a tremendous occasion two weeks ago for the last session on "power" which had been the two-year program there, and I was doing my attempt at comparative history of British and Spanish America which opened a lot of questions of the sort that can be debated in a seminar. And that was the kind of function where the Institute and the Princeton History Department simply through informal arrangements have worked marvelously well together, and it's been a great attraction for visiting members. It's helped keep me intellectually alive, and over the years when people have gone on leave from the Princeton History Department, which they do sometimes all too frequently it seems to me, I've stood in and had graduate seminars in my office for a term. I must have done that three or four times over my years here and I've enormously enjoyed it, and it's enabled me to select one or two of the brighter graduate students and invite them

to come as my research assistants for a time. And on that point of research assistants, I think it is worth saying, I think this is marvelous. One of the best things about the Institute is the opportunity to invite somebody for a year or more to come here who wouldn't necessarily get in as a Member because he or she is too junior at that stage, and I've been deliberately picking either graduate students from the University who impressed me and who needed another year to write their thesis up as a book, or young Spaniards. And that's been absolutely tremendous, because I've been able, in a sense, to begin to train a new generation of Spanish historians, giving them a chance to see what Anglo-American historical scholarship is like. And it's been quite a tough experience for them, but on the whole they've managed extremely well, I think. They're very well read; the standard of their theses has proved to be infinitely higher than that of the standard Spanish theses at home very often. And I think that these characters will really make an impact on the Spanish scene, so that I'm particularly grateful for that. But the University affiliation has been enormously important. I mean, had this place been stuck in the wilds of New Jersey, I think it would have never taken off. But's it's right as it is now. I would hate to see any more formal connection, and it can only be done through temperamental affinities of one sort or another, I think, and I'm a little bit concerned about the future as Lawrence

Stone steps out of the arena, although I think he'll still be very much of a presence in the community. But I would hope that my colleagues in the future will maintain those connections. And there are connections obviously between art history at the University and here.

LABALME: It's best not legislated?

ELLIOTT: It's best not legislated. Obviously not. I think that's the road to disaster.

LABALME: What about relations with the other Schools at the Institute? In addition to Social Science.

ELLIOTT: Well, that's where Flexner's vision failed, there's no doubt about it. I think informal relations with Faculty, as far as I'm concerned, have always been very good. But we're all very busy looking after our own people. At lunch, which is the great time of intellectual exchange, you tend to talk to your own members. You're so busy with them, and there's not much interchange between the Schools, I'm afraid. Obviously personal friendships spring up among members as a result of the housing project. I think History and Natural Sciences have had some contacts over the years, but now of course we haven't had the history of science represented since the retirement of Marshall Clagett. So that's something which has somewhat declined in our School, in our membership recently. It's not dead by any means. We are still making an effort to try and get one or two historians of science but it's not quite as strong as it was. I don't see how you

remedy this situation, though. I think we've all become so specialist and it's a problem of international scholarship which is just reflected in the Institute and is likely to go on this way. But some of my closest friends in the past have been mathematicians and you know we've had good personal relationships at Faculty meetings and so on.

LABALME: And the languages are so different.

ELLIOTT: The languages are very different.

LABALME: I asked Babar [Otto Neugebauer] at one point, did he see any possibility of connection between these two worlds and he said, no.

ELLIOTT: Well, they can hardly talk to each other let alone to us. And we have the same problems talking to them.

LABALME: For the governance of the Institute, these four Schools working together, how do you feel that has gone?

ELLIOTT: So so. I think that I didn't realize until I'd spent, say, a year here what a traumatic experience for my older colleagues the Kaysen affair had been. And it seems to me that they were so traumatized that they saw everything, my colleagues in the History School, in terms of a kind of conspiracy theory. I think they thought that I myself was part of a plot by Kaysen to change the School in ways that they found unattractive, and so I think that added to my difficulties at the beginning. And yet coming here and getting to know Carl Kaysen who I think in many ways was a great Director, may in fact have saved the Institute, a) by

bringing in the Social Science School and b) doing this building². But in terms of his personal relationships, he had absolutely no diplomatic sense or skills at all. He was an extremely abrasive personality who I think couldn't even keep his friends and I saw why, I mean, when I saw the way he talked to people, which I found tragic, and I think it was the end of my first year, one of the more pathetic occasions of my life, Carl came round to my office and said could he talk to me, and he asked me how I saw his personal situation at that moment.

LABALME: What era are we in?

ELLIOTT: Well, I think it must have been '74 probably.

LABALME: In the spring?

ELLIOTT: I think it was the spring or summer of '74. And I said, frankly, I thought his position was completely untenable, that he simply couldn't carry enough of the Faculty with him to go on doing things. And I've never seen a man look so downcast. But I'm sure I was telling the truth. This was about the time of Nixon, you know, and I felt terrible similarities between Nixon's position which was becoming impossible and Kaysen's position. And in fact he'd done all he could do. It was quite clear. And his presence just created new tensions so that it was right that he should have gone. But I regret it because I think that he was a

² Carl Kaysen was responsible for the addition to the Institute campus, in 1969, of the Dining Hall and the West Building.

great man who in some ways misfired and just hadn't got enough sensitivity, I think. But he had a very difficult job to perform, and he performed the essentials of it and I think the [later] generations will reassess his directorship in a much more positive light. I really do think he put the place on the map, for all his faults which were enormous.

LABALME: That's a very nice and generous statement.

ELLIOTT: I think he deserves it and I think he won't get it in many of the interviews you have.

LABALME: Yes. Why were people so traumatized?

ELLIOTT: I think it was partly the introduction of Social Sciences. Of course, it all happened before my time so that I don't know. It was partly the introduction of Social Sciences and partly the way in which Carl did it. Partly it was, I think, connected to the building program. My colleagues hated the new cafeteria, I realized when I came here.

LABALME: Really?

ELLIOTT: Absolutely hated it, yes. I think they felt it had broken down the intimacy of the Institute. He'd spent money in what they saw as a profligate way, etc. and it had ceased to be the cozy club that they remembered and loved.

END OF CASSETTE ONE, SIDE ONE

CASSETTE ONE, SIDE TWO

LABALME: Let's continue.

ELLIOTT: Well, then I think that the appointment of Harry Woolf--in a way, the great thing he did was to lower the temperature, there's no doubt about it. But in a sense I feel in a way that we have been without direction since the departure of Carl Kaysen. Personally, I would like to see a much stronger directorship. I think the Schools are, in a way, too autonomous and too powerful. Judging from the experience of my own School, it would have been terribly helpful to have had an arbiter in some ways. I understand that in the old days Oppenheimer used to sit in on School meetings, and while I don't think that's necessarily a good idea all the time, I think it's absurd that the Director should not be able to attend a school meeting.

LABALME: Didn't Carl Kaysen attend?

ELLIOTT: He may have done. He may well have done. Certainly probably in the beginning, but certainly not by my time. He was absolute anathema to my colleagues. But I believe you do need a strong Director here, both to make the Schools interact and think in terms of the Institute as a whole and not simply in their parochial School terms, and also to keep the balance within Schools themselves and to try and see that they don't get bogged down etc. It's very difficult.

It needs enormous diplomatic gifts, and it's a position in which the power of the Director is now so limited by the Rules of Governance that nobody worth his or her salt would take on the job, in my view, and you become a glorified hotel keeper. And I think sooner or later the time has to come when the Faculty may have to adjust itself to the need for a stronger directorship. I don't see it happening yet. But I think it may be necessary depending on the sort of challenges that come from the outside world in particular. But at present the Director's wings are so clipped. I believe that, speaking quite frankly, that all the Directors since Carl have not used to the best of their ability the kind of influence that a Director, even with his formal powers clipped, might have been able to exercise. I think there were more opportunities for negotiation, etc., than have been deployed and displayed and I would hope that they will go for a Director who is prepared to build up confidence, use his or her influence to change, to keep the Institute alive, should I say, to preserve the balance between the Schools, to see that nobody gets too much, too big a share of the funding, to see that we do think as a group. And I think the Faculty itself is moving more [in] that direction. It's a very different Faculty from the one I remember when I first came here, when there were a lot of extremely live volcanoes all shooting off in their own particular ways. It's a much easier Faculty to manage

seventeen years on. I was chairing a few sessions of the Faculty in February and March of this year, perhaps as the honest man on his way out, and it couldn't have been a nicer body to deal with. And I believe that the right appointment next time round, somebody could as Director have a lot of influence, and I think the central administration really does need strengthening. I've too often felt there's been a vacuum at the center and I think there are ways in which-- Carl was very good at getting things done. I mean if you asked for something to be done, it would be done. And over the years I think since then, there hasn't been enough executive action of one sort or another, and so one's felt a sort of porous sponge in the administration buildings, and I hope improvements can and will come in the next decade here. It's very difficult, though, because you don't want this place overloaded with administrators. It's too small an outfit really, and it should be kept small and intimate, but this I think does need an active Director who knows his or her way around both among the disciplines and the outside world. Approaching corporations is demanding a lot of anybody, and I think perhaps the best people are not likely to be attracted because of the smallness of the job.

LABALME: Have you discussed this idea with your colleagues, of strengthening the directorship?

ELLIOTT: Not particularly, no. And I don't think that my mathematical colleagues would probably agree about that. I

think that some of my historical colleagues would. But nobody likes to see their own powers and area trespassed upon too much. But I'm used to the Oxbridge tradition in England where the head of a college is a constitutional monarch but can exercise quite a lot of influence and authority, and here I think the directorship has become a cypher.

LABALME: Well, it would be an interesting conversation to have before you leave.

ELLIOTT: It might well be.

LABALME: How do you feel about the Institute vis à vis the general academic community today? Do you think it plays a significant role?

ELLIOTT: I think it's played an enormously important role precisely because of the pressure on the universities, as I was suggesting earlier. I think that simply by letting people have a year to do their own thing, and that's why I think it's so important that we shouldn't have more formal seminars, lectures, etc., etc.. People are over-seminared in our universities, now. They want to get away from all this, certainly among the historians, and I think it therefore vital to give them this year, and they're enormously appreciative, almost all of them. And I think it's raised the standards of their work by bringing them into contact with fellow scholars. And here the European-American relationship has been tremendously important for

our School. The National Endowment for the Humanities, while it's generously supported us over the years, has I think a basic phobia about the presence of non-Americans here. In fact they've virtually said so out loud in one visitation and were asking, to my horror, they were asking American NEH members effectively whether they found the presence of non-Americans here threatening, whether they wouldn't prefer the place without it. Now this seems to me an absolute abnegation of what scholarship is all about, and the mix of Europeans and Americans has been, I think, enormously important for American scholarship. I think that American historians who often by force of circumstances have not had many contacts with Europe have been shaken up in some ways and have taken back different views about opportunities and standards to their own universities. So I feel we have fulfilled and are fulfilling an enormously important mission, both as regards American scholarship and giving Europeans an insight into the nature of American scholarship, and they need that just as much as the Americans need the Europeans. So that sort of bridging function, I believe, has been tremendously significant in my time here. How much of a wider impact we make on the American scene, I don't know. I think we do have greater prestige among the humanities than any other research institute. We still have that. We have the great advantage of our housing project which gives us a head start over the

Carolina center for the Humanities,³ because people know that we are a real community, and that is enormously welcomed if housing is provided. It's given us an advantage over the national, the Carolina center, it's given us an advantage over CASVA [the Center for Advanced Study of the Visual Arts] in Washington, over the Woodrow Wilson Center and so on, and I firmly believe that we're easily the best, remain the best of the research centers in the States, and we have this great advantage and we should build on that and give the sense that we really are a community and a very live community which lays on these marvelous facilities and amenities for visiting members, so that there's really no obstacle in getting on with your own work. And I would hate to see that change. I think we've got the balance right.

LABALME: And the size is--?

ELLIOTT: The size is the optimum size. I would hate to see us getting any larger. I really would.

LABALME: Are you apprehensive about the new Math building in that respect?

ELLIOTT: I am a little bit, although I think if it doesn't add to the number of mathematicians--I don't want to see more big buildings going up on this attractive site--but I do see a need for congregating among them. I'm a bit torn here. I'm not sure about the need for an enormous auditorium when

³ National Center for the Humanities in Triangle Park, North Carolina.

there are so few lectures given in the course of the year. One doesn't want the place to get, you know--. It is, it still has a kind of intimacy. It's a face to face society and as long as it preserves that, it won't go too far wrong. But when that sense of a manageable community breaks down, we're in real trouble. So I think we shouldn't add to our numbers, but if we can congregate and give better amenities for those who are at present somewhat dispersed from the main center and do it without creating a vast monumental building, then I'm in general in favor of it.

LABALME: We've talked about the Directorship and a bit about the Schools. Have you any thoughts about the Trustees? The relationship between the Institute and its Board of Trustees?

ELLIOTT: Well, such personal contacts as I've had with the Trustees over the years have been pleasant and friendly. I feel it's a constant education process trying to get over to the Trustees what we're all about, and one works terribly hard to give them a sense of this, and they enjoy our lectures and so on. I'm not sure how much really sinks in. These are busy people. The image of our School was so bad with the Trustees in the early years, and I think now we've got that right. I think they realize there is something serious going on here, and that we are much livelier than we were and so on. So I think that we are gradually effacing that image which has been terrible. But it has been very hard

work, getting it over to them and I think it's partly our fault, but I think also these are busy people and it's perhaps difficult for them, it's easier for them to understand what a scientist is about with space exploration than it is what a humanist is about, and that's always going to be a problem. But I would like to think that they could learn to appreciate a bit better what the humanities are doing here and why this is important. And this means a constant process of mutual education, really. I also think that quite frankly they could have been more personally generous. The tendency's been always to go seeking money from corporations in this place but corporations are always going to attach strings, and they're going to demand programs and the Mellon have done this and every other foundation we approach. They want a program; they want seminars, something to show. I believe the hope of this place in the humanities is for the individual donor who likes individual scholarship, and I do believe firmly that somewhere out there, there is the really rich individual donor who would like to contribute to a place like this precisely because he or she appreciates individual scholarship. And I think it's tremendous, for instance, that my School stood up to the new restrictions being imposed by the National Endowment for the Humanities, even

at the price of sacrificing our NEH funding.⁴ And I think this was a great opportunity for publicity, saying, look, we refuse to accept these restrictions on scholarship. And out there I am quite sure there are libertarians in this society who, I think, with this pitch might be willing to come in. I think we may have missed this opportunity. I don't see that it's been exploited in the way it could have been. But I would like individual Trustees to be appointed who would expect to support our scholarship without making restrictions on what we do, and I hope and believe that when we have a funding campaign we shan't simply just go to corporations. I hope the Trustees will dig deep into their pockets, much deeper than most of them have in the past. We have had one or two very generous givers it should be said for which I'm enormously grateful. I mean we have the Dilworth memberships in our School, and it's marvelous to have those. And I would like more people, if they want

⁴ During 1989, the National Endowment for the Humanities, responding to a congressional directive to increase its oversight of "subgrants," that is, awards made by the Endowment's grantees with the Endowment's funds, issued new guidelines. Among these was the requirement that subgranting institutions submit a list of awardees and their projects to the NEH for final review and approval before extending offers to NEH fellows. The guidelines also proposed that an NEH representative occasionally sit in on the Faculty selection committees. In December 1989, the Director of the Institute, Dr. Marvin Goldberger, informed Dr. Lynne V. Cheyney, Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, that the Faculties of the Schools of Historical Studies and Social Science rejected these new guidelines as political interference in their academic freedom of action. Dr. Goldberger subsequently informed the NEH that the School of Historical Studies and the School of Social Science were prepared immediately to forgo two grants, totaling about \$220,000, and future grants totaling about \$550,000, rather than comply.

their names attached to something, well, let them fund memberships which is where the money is really needed. Our stipends have been painfully low in the History School. I was sometimes ashamed to approach people about applying for memberships here, because I'd say all we can offer you is x amount of money, and this will hardly keep you going. And the great need now is money for memberships in our School, and I believe in the Social Science School too, probably. And that, I think, won't finally come from foundations. It's going to come from the individual patron.

LABALME: I certainly think you helped a lot in your lecture to the Trustees, "Why Spain?"

ELLIOTT: I tried to do that, and there were a lot of political subtexts in that lecture, and we did circulate it, and I hope that they got the message. They're very bright people, but then I hope they act on the message if they got it.

LABALME: Yes. Tell me a bit what you think about your future now, where you're heading.

ELLIOTT: Well, it was a very difficult decision to make. I mean, I'd always expected, Oonah and I'd always expected, to spend the rest of our lives at the Institute and what better way to spend one's life. You don't retire here until 70, you keep your office, you still have this interaction with the members, if you want it. I mean, Felix Gilbert's been a paragon of how a retired member can remain influential without ever once, I may say, interfering in the life of the

School, since his retirement, and yet his presence has been enormously important both to the University and for visiting members. And, you know, this is what I envisaged. I would have retired here, had I stayed, in the year 2000, and you know what better existence could be imagined? And I'd really turned down all approaches and jobs in England up to this point and felt that I really would stay here and then I got this rather surprising message in the form of a letter, an envelope inside an envelope inside an envelope with the third envelope saying 10 Downing Street on the back, asking if I would allow my name to go forward to the Queen as Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, and I really had to make up my mind extremely quickly. I actually had about 24 hours to think, and I weighed up the pros and the cons, and the cons had it, so I decided to accept, and I decided to accept precisely because I saw it as such a tremendous challenge and opportunity. I wanted very much to reverse the brain drain, because everyone was coming, all the brightest and best of my compatriots had been coming over to this country in a flood the last few years. There was a marvelous headline when I was appointed, in England, in the Daily Telegraph, reading "Brain Drain Don Given Oxford Post". So in a sense I was making a statement there by deciding to accept this and to go back against the trend. And the other thing that I thought was very important, apart from trying to restore morale in British academic life in

the humanities in particular where it's been very low, as you know, were the great opportunities coming in 1990-92 in the European community, and it seemed to me that as a European historian with now really very extensive knowledge of the American world, I could play a kind of pivotal role in the life of the humanities and obviously particularly in the life of history in England in the next seven or eight years through my connections, etc., through my European interests at a time when there's a real danger of a renewed parochialism in England. So I felt that both those made a strong case. I hate the thought of leaving our friends here, of sacrificing the kind of secretarial amenities, facilities, leaving such a wonderful community as Princeton has been, and my wife feels the same about it, but I felt there was a very important job to be done, that I was well placed to do that job and that it was right to accept under the circumstances. So I go with a broken heart but with high hopes for the future.

LABALME: When you came you had a certain program of things you wanted to write and you completed some of that. Have you another program?

ELLIOTT: Well, both in personal as well as professional terms, if I was going to go at all, this, I think, was the moment to go. I really completed a big agenda of work on seventeenth century Spain, not only writing my biography of the Count Duke of Olivares, but trying to approach seventeenth century

Spain from a whole variety of standpoints. From the point of view of cultural history, by writing a book with Jonathan Brown on the Palace of the Buen Retiro, A Palace for a King, and the presence of the art historians was of great importance for this I should add in parentheses. I also did some textual work, the kind of work the classicists were doing on editing documents. I tried to do some narrative history, I tried to do some comparative history in comparing Richelieu and Olivares. So I was trying to adopt different methodological approaches and seeing what could be done and in a sense I've done all that. My last exercise before I published The Count Duke of Olivares was my little comparative study of Richelieu and Olivares. This opened my eyes as to the possibilities as well as the difficulties of comparative history and I decided that my next big project was going to be a comparative study of British and Spanish America in the colonial periods, which is an enormously ambitious project, probably impossible to complete in a satisfactory way. While I knew a certain amount about Spanish America and had developed this interest over the years, I knew nothing about British America so that the last two to three years I've been reading very extensively in North American history, the colonial period, and have therefore collected a vast amount of information and ideas. So my next big project will be this comparative study, and had I stayed here I would probably have started writing in

the course of the next academic year. This is bound to go onto the back burner now because of Oxford. But on the whole I've got enough material here to go on thinking about it. I hope to do some teaching along those lines in Oxford, so if I survive the book will come out I hope in the course of the 1990s and I'm enormously grateful to the Institute for having had those final two years for these reading opportunities. So that I have a real project ahead of me which I think will help to keep me going, and even if it's delayed, I think it will come. And after all, I retire in Oxford at the age of 67 which is 1997, so that there'll be opportunities either after that to sit and write or I'll come back to the States, you know, to give seminars, to spend a term lecturing one place or another. I'm sure I shall get invitations. I hope I might even be invited back to the Institute occasionally by my former colleagues and would look forward to that. But in terms of my own career, of what I hoped to do for the Institute, and of my own writing, if I was to go, I'm quite sure this was the right moment on both fronts. I feel a big agenda has been completed and while I would like to have done some things better, I feel I've got through an enormous amount in those seventeen years. And I could never have done it if I hadn't come here. I couldn't have written half the books I've written, and it's given me a marvelous opportunity, an opportunity people would have given their eye teeth for, and

so I can't sufficiently express my gratitude to the Institute for what it's been and for all it's done for me.

LABALME: Are you sanguine about history as a discipline in the future? Not just at the Institute, but in general?

ELLIOTT: Yes. I think it has great possibilities. I think one gets a slightly jaundiced view of history by sitting in this country, because everything here tends to be trendy and people flock like lemmings to the latest subjects and the latest approach, and I've found that by staying still, I'm now almost in the vanguard of fashion again. Narrative history is back, biography is coming back, political history is coming back and so on. So I'm quite encouraged about that, and I think one of the striking things, one of the ironical things in a way, is that at a moment when Eastern Europe is opening up and Eastern European historians are dying for facts and figures and dates, facts and dates have become four letter words in the American historical world. And I am disturbed about a society in which Martin Guerre looms larger than Martin Luther when all's said and done. But I think this is a passing fashion. I believe there are enough people of common sense to save the subject in this country. I believe it's undergoing a renovation in Europe. With the realization that nationalism, for instance, is not dead, that political history does matter. There has been a danger in the last few years of modern society becoming deeply ahistorical, and there's always been a danger of the

United States being too ahistorical. In many ways it is, and the same modernization process, I think, has created declining interest in history in many parts of Western Europe. But I think that the events in Eastern Europe of the last twelve months are going to shake up the whole mental world, both of Europe and America, and will bring us back to the importance of not forgetting the past. Who remembered about Slovenia or Lithuania? Now you have to know these things again, and this, I think, will be an enormous boost for historical studies and historical thinking in the next decade or two. So I'm on the whole sanguine.

LABALME: That's a very interesting view of the contribution of events in Eastern Europe.

ELLIOTT: Yes. We're living in tremendous times.

LABALME: Yes. You've always had a wonderful style. I was going to read you something Lawrence Stone wrote in an early review, 1963, about you. "He can write narrative as gracefully"-- you can see why I love this--"as our lady amateurs--"

ELLIOTT: Thinking of Veronica Wedgwood, I suspect!

LABALME: --"without losing sight of the deeper undercurrent of history."

ELLIOTT: I'd forgotten that review. It must have been my very first book that Lawrence reviewed.

LABALME: But I wondered just about this reference to "amateur" and also something you said about Martin Hume, was it?

ELLIOTT: Martin Hume was an English amateur historian in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, working on Spain, yes.

LABALME: Yes. He mattered to you in your own work.

ELLIOTT: That's right.

LABALME: Have you any thoughts on the connection between so called professional and amateur historians?

ELLIOTT: Well, amateurs go their own way and sometimes because their own way is unfashionable, as it was with Martin Hume who got interested in writing about Spain, you know, however inadequately they do it as Martin Hume did, and he wrote in a very melodramatic prose, and he was not really a terribly good historian, but he began to root out some documents which people hadn't paid any attention to, and I, in a later generation, hitting by chance upon one of his articles, found him a useful lead into the kind of things that finally interested me, so that amateurs sometimes see some things where the professionals are too myopic to see them. And they also can teach us a lot. They needn't be lady amateurs, but they can teach us a lot in terms of stylistic grace, and I've always been enormously seized of the need to appeal to a wider public. I work very hard on writing in such a way that I can be understood. I do tend, when I write, to speak what I'm saying as I work on the typewriter or now the word processor, to say it aloud so that I get some rhythm to the sentences, and then I work a lot on

second, third and fourth drafts to try and get the maximum clarity, the maximum elegance while not losing the complexity of what I'm trying to say, which seems to be the greatest and the most difficult art of all. And I'd like to think that I've achieved that sometimes, and that I do get read by a wider public than the mere professionals. One of the troubles about working on Spain is that in the Anglo-American world, it's traditionally been regarded as a marginal subject, so I've always had this uphill struggle to try to get this over as an important subject. And at last I think that I and some of my former pupils and others of my historical colleagues are getting people aware again of the importance of the Spanish contribution to world civilization. So I hope it'll be less of a struggle in the future; I think we have now made something of an impact, and I'm glad to have done that but I think we've got to continue writing extra well in order to make sure that the message gets over.

LABALME: I think you certainly have accomplished this, and the reviews of your books would indicate so.

ELLIOTT: Well, it's kind of you to say so. On the whole people I think have been appreciative and are aware. And there's so much turgid prose being produced now both by historians, by social scientists, that anyone who writes slightly better than average may well continue to get a readership and deserves to do so.

LABALME: Let's hope.

ELLIOTT: Let's hope, yes.

LABALME: John, is there anything I haven't asked you that you would like to address?

ELLIOTT: I think we've covered most of the ground really.

LABALME: Or something that you'd like to return to?

ELLIOTT: Is there anything you would feel that we have left out particularly?

LABALME: No, I think we've covered almost everything in my notes. What I'll do is give you a transcript of this as soon as possible, and you can enlarge or amend, and then if we think it warrants it, and if you have time and energy, we can meet again.

ELLIOTT: Right. Well, let's break off at this point and then if you feel that something should be elaborated upon or if you'd like to know more about me personally or whatever, we can arrange for that.

LABALME: Good. Well, thank you very much. This has been wonderful.

[The tape recorder was turned off and then, as John Elliott began talking again, we returned to the interview.]

ELLIOTT: One thing I was remembering about the structure and relationship of the Schools was that at one moment I found life in my School so difficult and thought the future of the School was so dark--this was after Felix's retirement--that

I seriously did begin to think about the possibility of breaking away from the School and joining the Social Science School. And in fact I put it to the School that it might be a more satisfactory solution for all of us if modern history or at least my part of it and more modern was attached to the Social Science School. And they began to think about that. Irving also wanted to move out and join the Social Science School, and they said they were not prepared to let art history go. They were prepared to consider about the possibility of modern history. My social science colleagues would have welcomed me and were prepared to accept. But I felt on the whole as I thought about the nature of the two disciplines that there was too much difference between the social science approach and the historical approach to allow a long term and happy union between modern history and the social sciences, and it seemed better to fight my battles in the History School, and if possible reform it from within than to break away from it. And I think that was the right decision. But it was quite a temptation at that time when I got on so much better with Geertz and Hirschman than with my own colleagues, and I believe the future will say that my decision to stay with the History School was the right one and that we are better this way. But it was a possibility at that time that we would have had a new School of Social Science and Modern History and that the History School would

have been classics and medieval history, and I think if that had happened it would have withered on the bough.

LABALME: That's interesting, because that's very much along the lines that George Kennan was thinking. He saw how much there was in common between modern history and some of the social scientists.

ELLIOTT: But now, seeing what's happened, I would prefer the informal relationship. We don't know where the social sciences will go. I mean, Clifford Geertz has been very good in the sense that he's always had a historical approach to the social sciences. But who knows after Cliff if it might be someone who is totally ahistorical there which would make it a very different kind of Social Science School. So that perhaps things did work out for the best. I can't remember the date when Felix retired, but it would have been just the year after that, I would think, when we had these quite serious discussions in our School. I think my colleagues wouldn't have been sad to have got rid of me at that moment.

LABALME: I think they're glad you stayed now, all told. Good, I'm glad we included that.

END OF CASSETTE ONE, SIDE TWO

END OF INTERVIEW