

## Professor Dick Ellis: American Literature

Dick Ellis on his research

Duration: 2:52 mins

I'm Dick Ellis, I'm the Head of Department of American and Canadian Studies at Birmingham. We run a very inter-disciplinary department, which I hope shows up by the pictures behind me which are prints by the artist Eduardo Paolozzi who was very active just after the war. He went to Paris to research how he would like to develop his arts and he discovered American G.I.'s clutching their comics, magazines and journals that had been sent over from American, and you can see he came across startling images, very technical. Very different from the world of black and white rationing that existed in the UK after the war. This was a very exciting experience for him and turned it into these collages that are kind of funny and ironic and kind of affectionate and sexy in a way. So we're really excited to discover these trans-Atlantic connections that link up the visual arts, writing and all these other dimensions of interaction between American and British culture.

My own research in particular focuses on The Beats and Beat writing, both in America - such figures as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, but also the way in which there's been a trans-Atlantic influence of The Beats on such poets as Roger McGough and the lively exchanges that occurred across the Atlantic which culminated in a famous reading at the Albert Hall where Allen Ginsberg attracted an audience in the thousands, which almost seems inconceivable today but it was a very exciting time.

My other main research area is in African-American writing and culture from the mid nineteenth century. I'm looking at such writers as Harriet Wilson, Frederick Douglass, and writers like that who were exploring the problems of being black in America at that particularly problematic time just before slavery would lead to the eruption of the civil war and the whole break up of the idea of what America might mean and its reconstitution with the abolition of slavery in the famous emancipation declaration by Abraham Lincoln.

So you can see that we roam across the nineteenth and twentieth century, trying to select particular areas of inter-disciplinary excitement which are looking at the ways in which certain conjunctions in history there are dramatic changes which evolve and influence the whole of the course of western history.