INTERVIEW G01: MATT BANKHEAD

Interviewer: Dr Jack Crangle
Interviewee: Matt Bankhead
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Transcriber: Naomi Wells

Textual Note: Annotations and observations appear in square brackets (e.g. [pauses], [laughs]). Partial, interrupted or unfinished utterances are denoted by a dash. False starts, filler words and non-lexical utterances (e.g. 'um', 'hmm') are not generally transcribed. Time codes appear at ten-minute intervals in square brackets in bold type.

JC: Yeah, that's going. So, just in addition to the consent form can I just get your verbal consent, Matt, to, that you're okay with this, the audio of this interview being recorded?

MB: Yes, as they say, aye, Jimmy, in this part of the world.

JC: That's great, fantastic. Okay, so can we start the interview, would you just state your full name and today's date?

MB: My full name is Matthew John Bankhead and today's date is the eighteenth of May 2020.

JC: Great, and could you start then by telling us when and where you were born?

MB: I was born, as I say, in Ireland, at a very early age in Banbridge, County Down, Northern Ireland on the fifteenth of April 1953, which was a good year, it was Coronation year and Everest was conquered and I came along, so there you are.

JC: [laughs] And what did your mother and father do?

MB: Ah well, it's first time to, coming up, mother was a local girl, her family, she was a Davidson, grandfather Davidson was a tailor in Bridge Street. Did you ever pass through Banbridge in your time in Northern Ireland?

JC: I think I might have passed through it, but I didn't, I didn't spend any time there.

MB: Well, you might've gone past it, the A1 bypass, but the main street, it's one big long street, but it's actually two streets, there's Bridge Street, the bottom bit near the, near the Bann, and Newry Street is the upper bit and joining them is this strange flyover business, we call it the cut, locally, where half the road goes through the middle, they had, they cut a bit out, and then they joined a bit to one side of the bridge cos the stagecoach couldn't make it up the hill in the old days, and I grew up right at the foot of that cut in the main street, in Bridge Street in, in Banbridge. So grandfather Davidson was a tailor, and when he died mum inherited the house, she met my father, who actually came, the Bankheads come from Ahoghill, County Antrim, and how they met, there's a wee bit of a story here because during the, the war my dad worked, what you call, in Wellington Road stores in Shorts in Belfast, dishing out bits and spare parts and bits and pieces for the aircraft, Wellington Road stores and then he went to work for one of the American aircraft manufacturers who were in Northern Ireland at the time, and Banbridge itself was actually a centre of aircraft production, strange as it may seem, and I think it was Lockheed he worked for and he then moved to Banbridge with them, my mother was there, at that time she was working for another one, Miles Aircraft, so them came together somehow or other and the rest is history and I came along eventually, so that's how, the Bankheads were just, or at least about seven generations, farming folk in Ahoghill. I'm a genealogist, so I've gone right back to, because my name is very unusual I can tell precisely where they came from, which is a very tiny old place down in Ayrshire in Scotland, so I could bore you witless with that for weeks, so that's the two family side of things. The Davidsons came from near Rathfriland, out in the, they were all farmers as well and my grandfather became a, he was a tailor, and he ran a business in Bridge Street and my mother's family all emigrated, you know, the mass emigration in the early twentieth century to Canada, the States, all the rest of it, cos there was no future in [indecipherable] they went off, but she was left behind, parents were ailing and she was the youngest, last born, so she was left holding the fort. I didn't know grandad Bankhead after whom I'm named, he died before I was born. Granny I vaguely knew, but she had dementia, and was just a doddery old lady and she died when I was about four, so I've only the vaguest memories. Bankhead grandparents were all, were dead before I came along, so I didn't know them at all, yeah, right, that was a long story for a short question.

JC: So you were saying your, your father worked in aviation and your mother, she, what was it she was doing?

MB: Well, she, one, my father I think was working for Lockheed aircraft, and they had a factory in Banbridge during World War Two and shortly after it, but not for long, and my mother and, during the war, was, was amongst other things working for Miles Aircraft corporation, the two of them were both in Banbridge and he came from Belfast with Lockheed and she was there with Miles, and obviously they were in the same settings, and they somehow got together and that was it, but they didn't get married immediately, it was a complicated story cos he, when the war production ran down there was no work, so dad had to go off to England to earn money to save up for the wedding, so he was away for a while and then he got married and I think he had to go away again for a while to earn more money and I arrived quite late in mother's life. I've got one sister four years younger and, and she's lived in the Netherlands for most of her adult life as well, so.

JC: Okay, so, so growing up it was you, your parents and, and your sister in the family.

MB: That's correct, yeah.

JC: Okay, and what kind of interests did, did your parents have, like, outside of work, what kind of things did they do to sort of socialise?

MB: My dad was, was fortunately a keen photog-, amateur photographer, so he took lots of photographs of us as kids and of the, Banbridge and holidays of us, so I've got a really wonderful collection of, most of them are slides, but I got them turned into prints and he was a great reader and that's where I got my love of books from. I'm a, I'm a bookaholic, you know, you can't see it, but the place is swimming with books, you know.

JC: Yes [laughs].

MB: And there are more over there, so and he had lots of interests, so he could, he could talk with anybody about anything. Mother was not quite, she had a very limited conversation, didn't really, just rearing the family, that was her, that was her interest really, rearing us, she didn't have much of a, she was a great knitter, sewer and things like that, but they were both self-educated, you know, they both came from humble backgrounds and I've got all their certificates from school, they both sort of advanced themselves, so they, they all went to, you know, night school, evening classes, so they were, you know, they always sought to improve life, and as I was six years, I was the first one to go to university of, you know, of that generation anyway, so.

JC: Okay, yeah, no, that, that's interesting. I'm sure that's something we'll talk about in a bit, and so growing up in Banbridge, I mean, what were your memories of, of childhood there, was it a nice place to grow up?

MB: Yeah, yes it was, it was. I mean, the Troubles didn't start till, what, I was sixteen, 1969, so it was quite uneventful, you know, it's country town, kids ran riot, you know, feral, you know, you would go off on your bike and you'd go on a, you know, a fifteen-mile bike ride without telling your parents and nobody thought anything about it, if you had a puncture, which you had a long walk home, but that was the, but no, the, this, and I'm probably pre-, pre-empting your next couple of questions here, but the street where I grew up was all, was all shops, we lived above my gran, what had been my grandfather's shop, but when we were young it had turned into, it was leased by an optician, so we lived above the shop as it, as it, as it were and there were very few other kids actually in the street, well, there were others but they were merch-, merchants' children, so they were a cut above us [laughs], so the, the best childhood friends were actually two guys, Patrick and Tony, I won't mention surnames without their permission–

JC: Sure, yeah, that's fine.

MB: But their mother owned a pub four, four doors up and they were Catholic and we were the best of buddies and our mothers were the best of buddies, went, you know, went to each other's weddings, in those days, so there was no sectarian anything, you know, but I always remember my mother telling me when I was very young, I'd come home one day and asked her, if Tony had a pope why didn't I have a pope [laughs], that was just it anyway, and it always, like, I did find it slightly odd, but not particularly odd, that we didn't go to the same school. They went to, you know, the Catholic school in, Christian Brothers whatever, in, in, up the road in Newry, and the primary schooling was separate as well, but, you know, the town used to, well, it's fairly evenly between both, and it was all mixed, there was no particular segreg-, you know, there was no housing segregation that I was aware of, so yeah, it was happy enough. The house we got was outside the, the Banbridge to Newcastle railway, **[00:10:00]** it actually ran in a cutting right beside the house, so when I was very small I would, I would, I was able to look out the window on tippy-toe, I looked down and I could see the top of the steam engine as it came out of the tunnel under the bridge, under the main street, and it went right past the house, that's my earliest memories. We had a small car, we had lots of caravan holidays all over Ireland, all over Scotland, yeah, it was, it was un-, uneventful and whatnot, so, yeah, pleasant enough, Banbridge and, you know, Northern Ireland in the sixties was, before it all kicked off, was a, was a nice place to grow up, yeah.

JC: Yeah, it sounds like a fairly sort of sleepy, but, but nice town, is, is the picture.

MB: It wouldn't've been sleepy, it was, it was a market town, so, you know, you know, you get, you know, when there's, Thursday I think was market day, you'd have cows going down the main street and causing havoc, the, the traffic and all that sort of, sort of thing and, you know, the, yeah, it was, it was, you know, then the big thing was the Twelfth of course, you just thought it was great fun, all these bands, you know, you didn't realise that other people might not appreciate it, it was just, and then you, on the thirteenth you had the thing called the sham fight, I don't know if you ever heard of the sham fight in Scarva.

JC: I haven't no.

MB: How long were you in Northern Ireland?

JC: Eight years.

MB: Well [laughs].

JC: I was obviously–

MB: Google it, sham fight, re-enactment of the Battle of the Boyne.

JC: Oh okay.

MB: Between James and King Billy, the rematch, but for some reason now Billy always wins, and, you know, we sort of, I played, played hockey, ah this is, this is, this is a story I wanted, well, a strand that'll come in later on. Banbridge is a hockey town and I played for the school and the town, not to a very high lev-, high level, but both, you know, Prods and Catholics played it, you know, there was no distinction between, there wasn't the sort of hurling and hockey, you know, and, so, and that was fine, and that came up many, many years later in the most unexpected place when somebody discovered that I played hockey and not hurling and took exception [laughs], I realised suddenly that I was a Prod, up to that they'd assumed I was one of them, and, so, it was bizarre, but anyway, that's, that's Ulster for you.

JC: It's interesting that you were saying kind of earlier that you didn't even realise when you were growing up that there was a, a distinction between Catholic and Protestant, or that you, it took you a while to become aware.

MB: Well, I, I knew it existed, but it didn't seem particularly important to me, I just wondered, you know, why, why do they go to a different school, and, but at secondary school, it was the Banbridge Academy grammar school, it was multidenominational, so there were quite a lot of Catholics there, but I think they, they didn't go to assembly, you went to sort of assembly, and this sort of religious thingy in the morning, but, and you always had fish on a Friday, for school dinners, but, you know, you just took it for granted that some of them went to a different school, but you didn't put any store by it, you know, you're all best buddies, you know, you play together, you know, my, my barber Gerry he was a Catholic, you know, used to sit there and play draughts in front of the fire in the, the barber's shop [laughs], so, I mean, there was no, there was no great, thingy, antagonism, but I often wonder, Patrick and Tony, my two friends, their mother died suddenly of pneumonia when they were quite young, so they moved away before the Troubles started, so I've often wondered if they had stayed what would have happened to our relationship when the Troubles started, it would have been interesting, but as I say they went off to England. I'm in touch with them on Facebook now, so.

JC: Oh so you're still in touch, yeah?

MB: Well, I found them on Facebook a couple of years ago. I think they did quite well for themselves, one was a wealthy stockbroker and I think Paddy, Paddy was a banker, and in fact, Tony lives in Brighton, where this project originated, didn't it, or something.

JC: Yes, it's a collaboration between–

MB: Yeah, I mentioned it at some point, Tony actually lives in Brighton, but yeah, right, okay.

JC: So on school, then, what, what primary school did you go to?

MB: Primary school was Abercorn Primary School, which was named, it was named after the person who opened it, and it was the Duke of Abercorn so it was up on Newry Road in Banbridge, so a short walk up the, up the road to school, and then after that it was Banbridge Academy, yeah, passed the eleven-plus, and went to the Academy, which I think they still have the eleven-plus in Northern Ireland if I remember correctly, or some, something similar.

JC: Yeah, it's an equivalent I think they still have. Did you, did you enjoy school, were you kind of academically minded?

MB: Oh yes, I was a bit of, bit of a a clever clogs, not quite as clever as you mind you, but–

JC: Well, I, I–

MB: You're a proper clever clogs, aren't you [laughs].

JC: Well, I, I wouldn't, I wouldn't make any comparisons or assumptions about that.

MB: I've seen, I've looked on LinkedIn, yes [laughs], yes, I liked science and mathematics, the school was very tiny and it was a very intimate place, a lot of bullying went on, I was bullied a bit, which was, you know, one thing I've always regretted, but, but yeah, you know, I'm, in fact, it was my physics, physics master who acc-, who accidentally got me started on my eventual career. He was a radio ham, radio amateur, and he got me interested and long and short of it is I, I got my radio ham's licence, you had to do a proper exam in those days, City and Guilds, started to build radios and did electrical, electronic engineering at Queen's and ended up becoming a telecoms engineer, specialising in radio, which is what I did for the better, bigger part of my subsequent career, a wee small part of it was in radar, which is similar, well, that was, that was, that was his influence that got me, and that got me round the world, which I'll come to later.

JC: Yeah, for sure. So your, your friends in school, did you socialise much with them outside of school, or was it, was it just mainly in school?

MB: Well, yeah, yes, well, the, the majority of the people at the school were country boys and girls, so they came from, you know, the outer, outer orbits shall we say, where I didn't normally go, but, you know, the ones that were in town, yes, we would socialise together and whatnot, but, there was, you know, there was a minority of the pupils actually came from the town where we were, the majority came from, they were, you know, farmers, well, farmers' sons and daughters, or came from outlying towns, yeah, but no, it wa-, it was great, you know, you just cycled and played football and, you call it progging, just stealing from orchards and things [laughs], apples and pears, you know, and I was, the house where I grew up was literally on the back banks of the Bann, river Bann, so, and, there was, you know, lots of fishing going on and, and catching spricks and all the usual things and yeah, we played all over the place, yeah, there was no, there was no, no aggro or things, yeah, normal kid's stuff.

JC: So you've mentioned your hockey, football. Do you have any other interests outside of school, any, any hobbies or youth clubs or groups that you went to, or anything like that?

MB: Well, I got into amateur radio, but when I was in my teens I, I started radio and electronics and then amateur radio, started to build radios and then fix radios and whatnot, read, I read, I was a good, I, a treat was to go down to Belfast on a weekend and there was a bookstore, right, Young Men's, YM, it wasn't YMCA, it was something similar, bookstore, it was a Christian-type bookshop, but it was just a huge book emporium and I would just get dumped in there by my parents who knew I would not absolutely budge from that shop and they could go off and go round Belfast several times and do their shopping, dad was a great one for the camera shops and I would still be there when they came back, they had no worries, you know, I wouldn't have budged, I'd be just going [makes noise; laughs], and there was, and another thing was there was a news and car-, it was a cinema called News and Cartoons which was right beside the opera house in Great Victoria Street and, you know, we were dumped there, so there was the hockey, the, the radio wireless fiddling and the books and some fishing, and lots of walking, walking around.

JC: And did you go to, did you–?

MB: And cycling, yeah, cycling as well. **[00:20:00]**

JC: Oh okay, yeah, was it sort of amateur cycling, or–?

MB: No, just fun cycling.

JC: Yeah, yeah, just fun, yeah, yeah.

MB: Well, I think I'll just go for a spin to Rathfriland, you know, just head off, you know, there was a lot less traffic in those days, so, you know.

JC: Did you go to Belfast very often, or was that just sort of, like, the occasional trip?

MB: I would say occasional trip. We had some cousins in Belfast, which we'd visit occasionally, mostly visiting was my mother's relatives who lived in Rathfriland, oh sorry, Newcastle, that's Newcastle, County Down. My dad's brother, Jimmy, lived in Carrickfergus, so occasionally we'd go to Carrickfergus, which was a bit of a trek, that was always an expedition to go to Carrickfergus, but yeah, we kind of, there was some obscure relative in Athlone, which I'm always puzzled who they, exactly they were, I don't know, no, but mostly the trips were to, say, the Mourne country, Newcastle, my aunt Bella had a B&B there just at the entrance to Donard Park. You must've been to Donard Park in your time?

JC: Yes, yes, I have.

MB: Well, just as, as you enter Donard Park there's a house on a recess on the right-hand side of the end of the terrace and that used to be her house. She ran a B&B in there and we'd go and stay there and I remember, and I've got a photograph of me on my eleventh birthday looking very sad in the bed in that house because I've gone down with the mumps, oh, ah yeah, Cubs, I was in the Cubs, but when I [indecipherable], but when time came to study for eleven-plus mother decided the Scouts had to go and we had to study, so I never, I never went up into the, into the Scouts to my chagrin, but there we are.

JC: Oh so you, you wanted, you wanted to carry on, did you, into the Scouts?

MB: Well, I quite enjoyed it, but the reason I jumped at the Cubs was that I got the mumps at Cub camp is where I caught the mumps and it was somewhere, I think it might've been Tollymore, you know, Tollymore Forest Park and, and then I was ill, so I think I was just dumped on aunt Bella to, to convalesce in, in Newcastle [laughs], I can remember that Newcastle had a, well, it maybe still has it, open air swimming pool, just the sea comes in and we used, used to swim in that, bloody freezing I'd imagine, but that, that was in the pier, oh it's, and the promenade, yes, oh it's all coming back now, yes, and yeah, we had a, there was, we, for many years there was a house in Slievena-, I think it was Slievenamaddy Avenue or something in Newcastle, and we would rent that for the Twelfth fortnight basically and we'd all go and live there in, in a house and yeah, so it was, and fish in the Shimna river, it was a happy childhood yes, you know.

JC: And you mentioned you went on, on trips outside of Northern Ireland as well, to the Republic and to, to Scotland as well.

MB: Oh yeah, caravan holidays, yes, yeah, favourite place down south was a place called Inch, which is down in, near Tralee, there's a thing called Inch Peninsula, it's a little four-mile strand, just juts out into the Atlantic and it's, you know, and that's where we went, back of beyond, and we would sometimes go to a place called Narin in Portnoo, Donegal, near Bundoran. In Scotland, we'd go all over the place, literally, east, north, south, east and west, yeah, so we had a wee, sometimes we re-, the start we just hired rented caravans there and then my dad bought a caravan and off we'd go, we'd be annoying drivers who got stuck behind us [laughs]. Later in life when I was one of those drivers I realised quite how annoying caravans can be [laughs].

JC: But you enjoyed those trips, then, when you were, when you were a kid?

MB: Yeah, and then there's another, there's another, later on there's another story coming up about the caravan and that's later on, that deals with when I, slightly, it's slightly later anyway, I'll come to that.

JC: Sure, and so growing up how important, you mentioned the church there, how important was the church in your family, was it, was it a big part of your life?

MB: It was a big part of mum's life and dad's life. Mum was very, very, religious. They went, I don't know my dad particularly, so, but mum definitely, and the, in fact, the minister who, who married, incidentally, the minister who married them, Reverend Anderson, he's actually buried on the next grave to them in the, in the cemetery in Banbridge by, by a funny coincidence, no, we started off, you know, you're hauled off to Sunday school, every morning, every Sunday morning regardless, there was no point in trying to sleep in or avoid it, get up, get dressed and then when you're slightly older you have to, you know, you go from Sunday school then you go into the big church and I really was, I couldn't really abide the big church and I was always glad if we managed to sleep in, so it was too late to go to Sunday school, yeah, so, but I never took, I never took to it. I wasn't, I wasn't baptised, you know, I always used to puzzle in the, in the church hall there was a cradle roll and, like, on a stand, and I didn't understand what this cradle roll was, like, near there and I said mum, why am I not on this roll, oh well, I don't believe in that baptism thing, so that's why I didn't appear on the cradle roll, whatever she, mum had certain opinions and beliefs, but no, she was a devoted Presbyterian all of her life and it was a long one, she lived to be eighty-two and, you know, I used to, you know, her minister would come out of the blue, unannounced, usually at the worst possible time on a Thursday when we were doing the laundry and the minister would arrive to do his, his regular visit to, to his flock [laughs]. Mum, it's the minister, it's the Reverend McCauley, help [laughs].

JC: And what did you say the name of the church was, that you went to?

MB: Bannside Presbyterian church, there are two, there are two in Banbridge, there's Scarva Street, which is the original one, and Bannside, which is on Castlewellan Road, right opposite the, what was then known as the technical school, yeah, and the minister was

Reverend McCauley, in those days, yeah, but as I say, if I could get out, if I could get out of going to church, I did.

JC: So it wasn't something you were ever, ever passionate about, then?

MB: No, not at all, not at all, no, no, in fact, the only time since I left Banbridge, since I left Banbridge the only times I went back there was for my parents' funerals, and sometimes, I have been in other churches since, there are all sorts of odd reasons, but no, my wife is a, is an evangelical lady, so she, she goes to church, Baptist church, every day, every Sunday here and to her utter horror and consternation I have always refused point blank to go, completely, in all the years we've been married, so she's given up and I'm now a lost soul as far as she's concerned.

JC: So, was there a reason do you think when you were growing up why, why you didn't take to church? Was it that you didn't believe, or you just found it boring, or, or a combination of, of those?

MB: I just think I found it boring, I mean, I think church these days is much more relaxed, a bit more lively and sociable. In those days it was very austere, very Calvinistic, you know, you all got dressed up and you all went in your pew and then there's the offering and, I think we did, I think it was the getting up on a Sunday and getting all dressed up in your Sunday best, you know [laughs]. But these days I think it's more, more relaxed, certainly my wife's church, the odd occasion when I have been there for whatever reason it's been, it's a bit, well, you have, they have, you have music, you know, music and singing and stuff. God forbid you ever had that in my day.

JC: Yeah, a bit different from the stereotypical Ulster Presbyterian church, I would imagine.

MB: Yes, exact-, I mean, the Sundays, in those days, I can always remember the, in the local play-, kiddies' playground they actually chained up the swings, all the, all the, all the toys, rather, not toys, but the entertainments, were all chained up firmly, thou shalt not enjoy yourself and, you know, the abiding memory is that on the Sunday afternoon men who had all got dressed up and nothing to do later, Prods with nothing to do, so the town was full of men in their Sunday best all walking along talking to each other. Women were doing, you know, baking or cooking or so on, you know, mending or house-cleaning or whatever, men were out walking and talking, that's all they could do, so I remember the streets being full of men in their Sunday best.

JC: So would your parents' social life have mainly revolved around church, then?

MB: Social life, well [pauses], I don't, I don't necessarily recall **[00:30:00]** that much of a social life, the church, their actual social life as it was, I remember there was a, a factory in Banbridge, it's now, now defunct, but it's a listed building called Down Shoes, which is up on the thing called the Yellow Hill and they're part of the Lotus Group, boot, boot and shoe manufacturers, and my dad ended up at some point working for them and my mother worked for them as well after we were old enough to look after ourselves she went back to work, you know, to keep, to earn money, and she worked in HR, so they both worked in there and the people that they socialised with were all people who worked with them in, in Down Shoes. It was part of the Lotus Group I think, which, I think eventually became part of Debenhams, but it was one of, it was the major, after the linen mills, Banbridge was a linen town, well, after that that was the major employer in Banbridge for a long, long time and my dad basically worked up, he studied and once he gained the staff improvement and became the *de facto* accountant for the factory, though I don't know if he actually had any formal A-level accountancy qualifications, he did the books, so, but that was, that, so it was their dances and people he worked with, you know, that he, that they socialised with. I don't think there was much of, socialising with the church, might've been the odd event, but I don't really recall very much.

JC: And were your family involved in, in any organisations like the Orange Order or anything like that?

MB: No, my grand-, my maternal grandfather, I know from my genealogy, was a mem-, was a member of the Orange Order, but there was nothing in the house whatsoever to do with any, any of that, no, I don't think my dad had anything. I mean, we hung the Union Jack out the window on the Twelfth [laughs], I still have it upstairs in the sock drawer, it's a family souvenir, but no, there was no, no, no connection with the Orange Order or the Black Preceptory or anything of that nature, no, so we weren't, we weren't, you know, it was just funny, as far as I was concerned it was just funny men in orange vests who once a year came round and banged a few drums and there was nice, some nice bands.

JC: So did you go out, you would have gone out and watched the bands on the Twelfth and, and things like that?

MB: We did, yeah, we did, well, yeah, well, if it was elsewhere, but if it was in the town they came down the main street, so we just, we didn't have to go out [laughs], we just, I mean, I've got lots of photographs of the Twelfth procession taken from our, our windows and whatnot, me in Scarva on the thirteenth, you know, that was good, but we wouldn't go out of our way to go to the Twelfth somewhere else, you know, if it was in Banbridge, well and good, but we didn't generally go and watch it, and it, it never occurred to me there might be people who didn't like this sort of thing [laughs].

JC: Yeah, cos I was going to ask, going to ask, growing up did you have much of a conception of what things like the Twelfth actually meant or, or was it more just, as you say, men in funny orange vests?

MB: Well, you had to, you knew, you knew the story, I mean, you couldn't not know the story, you know, and, you know, you'd see up, you'd see the, the banners and, you know, the relief of, the relief of Derry and all the rest of it, but there was no, but, you know, nothing was pushed on me, I don't think, you know, no, it was just mu-, it was just bands, music and a holiday, that was it, I don't, there was nothing, nothing more than that.

JC: So your, your family wasn't a particularly political family or, or anything like that, or, or were they?

MB: Not that I can recall. If they had, if mum and dad had political opinions they just generally kept them to themselves, I don't really recall [pause] anything, anything out-, outward. They didn't go to rallies, I mean, I was just a young boy, you know, had the odd rally around town and I remember one really wet day there was an organisation called, was it Ulster Vanguard or something, probably come across that at some point in, there was a guy called, I think he was a Billy Hull or some such, anyway, and I walked all the way to Scarva, which is about four miles from Banbridge, to listen to him ranting and raving and then walked home, and then I got a lift home with somebody who took pity on me, but no, there was no, they weren't, they weren't, they weren't active in any political party or whatever, no, they just were working, working folk, got on with their lives as best they could, yeah, yeah.

JC: So tell me a bit more then about, sort of going back to your schooling and your decision to pursue the subject that you were interested in and go to university. Was there, was there kind of any expectation that you would, you would go to university or was it, you mentioned you were the first one in the family who went, was, was that quite a–?

MB: Well, as common with most families of my generation of course, the previous generation had been farmers or labourers. I mean, there was technically an education in the early 1900s and whatever, so, they didn't have, there was no opportunities they had, they all had to, you know, earn a living, you know, and there was no chance for them, so, yes, I think my, my parents expectations were high. My mother was particularly keen because I mean, she would sit down and, some time, some, some way ahead of my actually being taught, I mean, I remember particularly at primary school, she would teach me some arithmetic stuff that I hadn't yet done at school and then weeks or months later we would actually start doing it and I knew the answers, so I went down, I went down as a rather clever clogs [laughs], you know, the smart-ass, that she even tried to teach me shorthand at one point and failed miserably, but she was a highly, she was a, you know, shorthand dictation secretary, she was a highly, lots and lots of qualifications, there's a whole bag full of them upstairs, so they'd both hauled themselves up and, you know, taken advantage, so they expected me to do no less and, you know, so I, I felt tremendous pressure to pass the eleven-plus, you know, and then I just found that I, I liked, I liked everything except chemistry, I couldn't abide chemistry. I enjoyed it, so, you know, I, I did well at science, that led into the career of engineering which at that point was a bit of a novel idea cos the grammar school was along very classical lines, you know, if you don't become a minister you, or you would become a doctor or a lawyer or a some sort of profession, but engineers, that's a bit strange [laughs], so I didn't have any, any role model or predecessor particularly, you know, oh and farmers as well, you know, they went, they went onto agricultural college, but I was a bit of an oddball, you know, engineering [laughs].

JC: And you said it was a particular teacher that kind of nurtured your interest in that.

MB: Yes, a chap called Ivan Gracey, who's still alive as far as I know, he was the physics master and he also taught mathematics. He was the deputy head and he was a radio ham and I got interested and then I would ride to his house and into his shack and I got interested, read up, took the City and Guilds exam, got my engineering licence at sixteen and that was a thing called the B licence and then later on at Queen's I did the Morse test, passed that and got my full licence, so I was free to go onto any of the amateur bands, so I, and that was it. I started fiddling with radios, I could earn a bit of pocket money by fixing radios for people, particularly the nurses in the local hospital and that's another story, so, you know, that's how I ended up being a telecoms engineer.

JC: And so you got into Queen's. Did you apply anywhere else or was it just Queen's that you wanted to go to?

MB: No, I applied Edinburgh and other places and, I think, yeah, I think Queen's was the safest, you know, you all tend to be, oh it's Queen's and it's handier cos it's safer and whatnot, so I don't remember exactly why I chose Queen's first, but I did, so I went down to the Ashby Institute on Stranmillis Road and did my three years.

JC: And did, did you live at home during that period in Banbridge?

MB: No, I spent two years in Queen's Elms up the Malone Road in students' halls and then the final year was in the, the university had houses in University Terrace, which was just down and past the main building, past the students' union and then first on your right was a little terrace and they had what was called Queen's University houses in there which are sort of like a hostel, with one of the senior students as a warden-type person, and that's where I did the final year, yeah, **[00:40:00]** so I was always very close to the university.

JC: Yeah, that's handy, isn't it.

MB: Yeah.

JC: So tell me a bit about your experience of student life in Belfast, you know, if you can, have any particular standout memories from that period or, or what you would've, would've done, both academically and on more of a social level?

MB: Oh academically a three-years honours course is a bit intense, so the first two years you didn't have time to do anything other than study, you didn't have any free periods or anything, so all your friends, you know, other students had two or three lectures a week, you know [laughs], and it was very intense. It wasn't until the final year when you had some free time that you could actually maybe even begin to think a bit about a social life and then it's finals and ended up with a 2:2, I'd hoped for a 2:1, but yeah, was not to be, but anyway there we are, it's never, never particularly held me back [laughs]. But the thing I remem-, I remember is that because of the Troubles and the nationalists, social life was extremely limited, nobody would go anywhere across town at night, you know, you were just, you hunkered down and, and so social life, the normal student carryings on that you would expect in any other university just did not happen, you know.

JC: Yeah, cos, cos you would have gone to Queen's in, what, '71?

MB: Yeah, it was '71, '74, the killing times, really nasty times, bodies were, people were getting killed on the streets, every night, and you got to the stage where even you're walking down the road and you hear a car behind you, you're looking over your shoulder because the next day you'd find another body had been found, duh, duh, duh, duh, duh, duh, and, you know, you had the murder squads roaming, you had the Shankill Butchers, which is this lot, you know, remember them, you know.

JC: Yes.

MB: You've crossed them, yeah, so you didn't, you didn't go anywhere, and I was, you know, I mean, you have certain, certain memories of certain events and some are quite sad and others are, are funny, and it's the funny ones that you remember more. The university radio club, it was more of a ham radio club, but we, we sort of, it'd been dormant, so we, a few of us got together and resurrected it and we had a building in Fitzwilliam Street, which is just more or less opposite the main university building, down, and we renovated it and we started getting equipment and putting up antennas and whatnot, and my most vivid memory of that particular location is one day I was up a ladder erecting some equipment and there was a boom and about a few seconds later the ladder wobbled, you know, we went, oh, oh, that was close, that one, you know, cos you get, you had bombs going off all over the place and you could sort of judge well, that's only, and that's fairly distant, you know, and that, that particular one was the Abercorn restaurant, which is one of the first atrocities where people got killed [indecipherable], people lost their legs and all sorts and then, you know, a few minutes later, nee naw, nee naw and all the sirens going, that's, that's stuck with me [pauses], and there was a, when I lived in the Crescent, one night I was coming back from somewhere, I don't know where it was, you know, and the army would seal off, you know, they'd have a suspect vehicle and they'd seal the whole thing and then they'd send a little robot in and this particular night they had forgotten there was a little back alley they hadn't sealed off, so I'm coming along with my books and all of a sudden this little robot trundles past me, you know, and I go, uh oh, don't think I should be here [laughs], you know, you remember these, you know, and then you sort of go round the corner and there's a soldier lying on the pavement with a gun covering something and you say excuse me, and you're stepping over him [laughs], you know, yeah, it just, you think back, and the other, I mean, we all had, you know, we all, you know, you couldn't be in Northern Ireland without having a narrow escape, you just couldn't. There was a birthday party going on and some of the nurses from, I knew from Banbridge days were at the City Hospital now and they were Catholic, as most, many nurses were and they were having a party, I think it was somebody's birthday party, but it was in, it was just off Lisburn Road and it was a, a Proddy area and, anyway in the middle of the party, it's all being wild, there's, you know, it's, it's a Victorian terraced house, the curtains are pulled in the front room, we're all sitting around in the front room drinking. I go off, slightly merry, upstairs to the toilet and I come back down a few minutes later and there's all this commotion downstairs and I'm wondering, what's going on here, and one of the girls is carried past me and I see her thigh and there's blood pouring out of it. Somebody had pulled up at the house and fired a revolver, blind through the, through the front window, through the blinds, where I'd actually been sitting there, like, five minutes earlier, and so we're all stuck in this house wondering, are they still out there, what are we going to do, you know, these sort of things and, oh yeah, and my twenty-, my twenty-first birthday party, held a joint one, once again it was somewhere off the Lisburn Road and one of, there were three girls in my year, only three out of what, a hundred, and two of them were very staunchly republican ladies, one from the Falls and one from Newry, Mary, and [laughs], and anyway it was the first time I met Mary and I, the story that was told to me afterwards, that Mary had got a bit pissed and had gone out the door at one point and there was a British Army patrol passing. Now normally she would have been very aggro, but she was so drunk she decided to haul them in to have a drink at my birthday party [laughs], this was, you know, it was just a crazy, crazy, crazy time, but–

JC: Yeah, it sounds like a really sort of strange contrast between normal student life and going out to parties and things–

MB: Oh it was, it was, it was completely abnormal, you didn't–

JC: And then, yeah, things like you were describing.

MB: And then the finals itself, I mean, the Ulster Workers' Council strike, 1974, I'm sure you've come across it, well, that was my finals time and we had, you had load shedding, power cuts, so we'd sit there in the student house and the power would go off, and we'd, we'd all be sitting there, studying by candlelight, I mean, you know, this is 1974 and you're studying by candlelight [laughs], you know, you know, the famous speech where Harold Wilson called us all a bunch of spongers, we never heard it because we had no power to watch him, you know, and then people were coming in to do their final examinations in, in my year, they, some of them rode motorbikes and they were coming in from Larne, whatever, and there were roadblocks everywhere, so they came across fields on their motorbike to get to the exam [laughs].

JC: [laughs] Yeah, that, that is bizarre.

MB: It was on, on, you know, and there were barricades everywhere and, oh I've, I've a funny, funny story about a rag day, I remember this. Am I talking too much here because I can–?

JC: No, no, absolutely not, these are, these are the stories we want, you know, so–

MB: [laughs] You know, rag day, on rag day you chucked flour at everybody, you know, [indecipherable], but at one point, I think it was Royal Avenue, came across a bunch of soldiers, we were just a rag parade and I had some flour my hand and this soldier came up to me and said I need some flour, I need some flour, I need some flour, and he's with his mates and I said sure, yeah, I need, give me some, give me the flour, I said are you sure you really want this flour, and he said yes, and I could, and I was looking at him, his mates could see what I was thinking, and they were going, so I went, woof [laughs]. Only time I've ever assaulted, assaulted a British soldier, I covered him in flour, and his mates were hysterically laughing [laughs], I said do you really want this, yes, okay, have it [laughs], probably got you arrested any other day [laughs].

JC: So it does sound like, obviously it's a very strange environment to, to go to university in–

MB: It was, yes.

JC: But it, it also sounds like you did have that kind of, that more typical network of friends that you went to parties with and, and things like that, as well.

MB: Well, the parties were few and far between, but yeah, we did, we did, you know, a lot, I mean, a lot of them went home at nights, there, there was, there were only the people from more distant parts or from overseas who actually lived in digs and whatnot, so other people that you saw during the day you would never, you would never socialise with because they would go home to mummy and daddy, safely home, so it, it wasn't a typical university experience that I would read about other people having, you know, parties and sleepovers and whatnot. It was just, no, I mean, there was, there was mayhem around you all night, all the time and you just got used to it as normal, and it wasn't until for whatever reason you went to the mainland, or whatever reason, that you realised just how abnormal things were. You didn't realise how stressed you were, you know, you could go into shops without people searching in handbags, there was no ring of steel round the city centre. At one point they put barriers right round and you could only go through little turnstiles and you were searched **[00:50:00]** and all that because of all the incendiaries that were being planted. You thought that was normal until you went somewhere where normal was normal [laughs], you know, it was just, yeah, I mean, now, this is another story that shows you how abnormal everything was. One Easter, the Queen's radio club had gone, we'd gone to, what do you call it, a, a field trip, we'd go out to [indecipherable], get the ferry over and we camped on a hill overlooking Stranraer or somewhere like that and we'd put a little mast up, we were mobile, a mobile station, you know, contest to try and see how far we can get, how many people we could talk to, from somewhere different, When we came back and were ready we, didn't we manage to miss two ferries, alcohol was not involved, and we got the last one back and we got back into Belfast and I was trying to get, this is holiday time, so I wasn't in Belfast, I was trying to get back to Banbridge and I got into the, you know, the GNR which is the main bus, trains terminal in Great Victoria Street and discovered that there was a bus strike and the last bus didn't exist and my parents had no phone, so I couldn't phone to say I'm stranded. So the only thing I could do was go to my cousin who lived in Pandora Street just off Donegall Road, which is not a very nice area, at that time, and at that time what I was wearing was, like, a green, it wasn't combat-type, it was a green thing with a hood and it was almost identical to what the UDA were wearing, and in those days the UDA were marching around, parading all over the place, manning barricades, you know, with the big, with the baseball bats and the masks and the rest of it, greatly un-, untouched by anybody, so I went round about, this is about half eleven at night, you know, tapping my cousin's door in Donegall, in Pandora Street and she looks out the window and what she sees is this hooded figure with a green thing up and she's there [laughs], and unbeknownst to me the previous night somebody had been shot in the street beside, so I had a bit of a job explaining to her, but it's me, it's your cousin Matt, what you doing, yoi, yoi, yoi, I'm stranded [laughs], you know, aye, no, yeah, she remembers that to this day.

JC: I bet, it must have been a fright-, bit of a frightening experience.

MB: Nothing to what I got, the earache from my parents when I finally got home the next day, you know, I think that was finally the decision to get a phone in, they were very old-fashioned, you know, phones, no, colour TV, nah, nah, black and white's fine [laughs].

JC: And what was Banbridge like at this time, was it, was it very different to Belfast, or was, were there similarities?

MB: Well, there was, the similarity was that the control zone, as they call them, you couldn't park the car just about anywhere, or, for risk of it getting blown up, but it only had three bombs in the entire Troubles and one of which I was at home for, and I'd actually just walked the dog, got into the house and was sitting down, watching TV and got bounced up and down in my chair, but there was no sectarian violence. I didn't lose any, in all the Troubles I didn't lose, not, not really lose any family on either side, anywhere, and [pauses] the trouble came in from outside, the usual, you know, the car bombs are brought in from somewhere else, supplied to stir up trouble. There was one, well, I'll tell you a story, a story in a minute, there was, well, yeah, this is how the Troubles affect you even when you're not in Northern Ireland, you're long gone, they still interfere. It was [pauses], a bomb went off in a side street just up from where my parents lived and actually killed a, a schoolboy got killed by debris, he was waiting in the jewellers' shop about five doors up from my parents and a bit of shrapnel came in and killed him, and he was the only person to die in Banbridge from that bomb and, poor boy, anyway, that, the blast bounced back and forwards across the street and it blew in the shop window down below the opticians, and I was informed of this fact by my, by my father phoning me to explain what had happened, and I'm saying are you sure there's no need for anybody to go home, you know, and meanwhile, this is here in Edinburgh and the whole office now is gripped, they're hearing my conversation and they're imagining carnage, and thinking oh they're all looking at me, I'm going to get [indecipherable], mother, apparently, the police had tried to evacuate, you know, the bomb planted, warning, and they were evacuating everybody, but mother refused to be driven out of her house by a mere bomb, so she went out the back, down the steps, into the back yard and into the garage at the back of the house and then she said right, bomb can do its worst [laughs], and it blew the window out, you know, and I'm going aaargh, you know, what was that, mother, but was mother, you know, so, so that, that, that, that kind of, when I next saw her I said what were you thinking, why didn't you just get, no, I was perfectly safe in the garage, and I've still got the, I've still got the, there was a government, city claim for bomb damage and I've still got my father's receipts for it, so there are some [indecipherable], he actually kept them as a memento, and then the, the third and final bomb was just before the Good Friday Agreement, which is 1992 or something, isn't it, I think, I did write it, I did write it down, I did my homework, wrote it down somewhere, and by that time I was in the middle of separating from my first wife and I was busy trying to buy her out of the house, and she, the house, and buy, she had, she had missed watching my parents, my mother had just died, so I was trying to sell the house to, to arrange to buy her out of this house, this house. Unfortunately, this bomb went off in the middle of it and the estate agent who was handling the sale of the house, and who was a lifelong friend of mine, his office was right beside where the bomb was, so his office was just demolished and, but he had another office somewhere [indecipherable] in Newry, so the whole business was temporarily in, in chaos for a few weeks until they got themselves organised again, and I, I had to literally phone up my, my wife's solicitors, or my solicitors, and say, explain to them, well, you'll never believe this, but somebody's just blown up my estate agent, you'll just have to wait a few more weeks for your money, what [laughs], you know, and this was 1992 and I'd been away from Banbridge for, you know, this shows you that, you know, you can't, it catches you up in the most bizarre ways, yeah, that, I think that was the last direct result of the

Troubles, but there was another incident later on which, to do with the hockey, which I'll explain, if we ever get that far, at this rate it'll be midnight.

JC: Sure [laughs], so just think-, just thinking back slightly to when the Troubles first started, I mean, did you have any particularly strong views on things like the civil rights movement, or, or did–?

MB: Or, or as James Young famously called it, the, the civil riots association.

JC: [laughs] Yeah, I mean, like, I'm just wo–

MB: You've heard of, you've heard of James Young, haven't you?

JC: Yeah, I think, yeah.

MB: The Ballymena cowboy, yeah [laughs], well, I've, I've got some wonderful tapes of him somewhere, yeah, he called, he, he christened it the civil riots association, yeah, so I can remember watching Burntollet which kicked the whole thing off, and being utterly bewildered by what was going on, you know, the whole thing, course when you're all in the unionist fraternity you're entirely oblivious of all the non-, nonsense that's going on, and why people would get so angry, and in school you're taught a very selective view of Irish history, cos of my, I'm, I'm an, I'm a history bod, I'm a genealogy man, so you're, when you start to read you realise just what nasty, horrible things went on and why people get very upset, but you're not told that, I think in, in school, in history I think we, you're taught British history, you're not really taught that much Irish history, well, probably there isn't enough time to go through it all in depth, and, you know, I have a Nigerian son-in-law and, you know, the usual story, they, they think, well, what is the problem with Northern Ireland, you go, oh God, so I said right, go away and read this, now, I assume you've seen this book.

JC: Yes, yes, I have.

MB: Yeah, and it's a very, very heavy, long, but very, very interesting read, but I actually, did you see, did you actually see that book properly, the previous one, cos I realised I was holding it down here and you probably wouldn't have seen it from the camera.

JC: No, no, I, I did see it, it's–

MB: You got it, you got it, it, alright, so, so, so you're, you're unaware of all the gerrymandering and the vote rigging and all the rest of it, and the discrimination in employment and whatnot, because in Banbridge both mixed happily together, so you weren't really aware of anything that, you know, that might have been going on in Belfast or Derry or whatever, so it's just bewilderment and what's going on and why's all this happening, and, and then **[01:00:00]** you soon realised then that your lot are portrayed as baddies, somehow, you know, the cruel oppressors and whatnot, and if you say you're Irish you're taken to be Catholic Irish, you're saying no, no, no, no, I'm the other lot, what [laughs], so, yeah, it was, it was just, you know, puzzled bewilderment and then anger and then horror and just, you know, hopelessness, and I mean, I sent you that link to the Boney

M song which sums it all up, you know, people are leaving and that's, that's, I noticed one of your things on there was reason for leaving because there was no, you saw no future, you saw no hope, you know, in '74 you saw no hope at all and if there was an opportunity to get away and make, make a life somewhere else where they weren't killing each other you took it, you got out, you went, you know, and I've always found Northern Ireland very parochial, very, very parochial, nicely sometimes, but sometimes not so nicely, yeah, DUP and all that, though [pauses], I've lost my train of thought [laughs].

JC: No, no problem.

MB: I've always had itchy, itchy feet, itchy feet, I was, you know, there's two types, there's those who just married a girl next door, settled down on the farm and had children, those who kept, clear off and never come back and I'm the latter, latter cat-, character, category, sorry, and when I'd left and my parents were still alive and I'd come back, you'd look forward, like all exiles, you think ah right, nice to go home and to get mother's cooking and after two days you've had enough, you want to come away again, this is it, because over here, I'm getting into, getting into my steam now, that, you know, you can sit detached and logically think through the whole thing, but when you're back there it doesn't take long before the poison starts to seep in, you know, you can feel this no, no, no, no, no, and you say right, I'm going, I'm away, I can't take this, you know, and that's the way I feel on trips to, I don't, my parents are both dead now, so I've no reason to go back to, the only reason I do is to go to the PRO, the record office in Belfast, and my cousin Heather, she of the Donegall Road episode, she still lives in Belfast, it's her, her nephew who's married to a Nepalese girl who's about to give birth in June, yeah, if you ever come across Yak Shat at St George's Market in Belfast, that's, that's him and his missus, Yak Shat.

JC: Okay, yeah, I don't think I've seen that, I've been to St George's a few times, but I'm not, I don't remember that, okay.

MB: That's one of the, that was one of the, oh that was one of the joys of Belfast that's not now, that's another victim of the Troubles was the old Smithfield Market, used to be a flea market, it was brilliant, you could get really nice stuff, now it's just a little sanitised half a dozen shops, not very interesting at all, no junk, you know, it burnt, it burnt down in the Troubles at some point.

JC: Yeah, I've heard that, yeah.

MB: That was, that was a treat, we'd go to, me and my dad we'd go to, to that, to the Smithfield Market and I would just, I'd head straight for the books, all these old books [laughs], so that, yeah, just, oh yeah, well, my missus is, as you've read, is from Zimbabwe, so she knows little to nothing about Northern Ireland and, you know, she does know enough to annoy me, to pronounce Ahoghill as A-hog-hill, which she knows annoys me intensely. I took her and the boy, my stepson, to, we went to a cottage in Bushmills, this was back, well, must be about eight or more years ago now, yeah, anyway that was her [pauses], I think it was, that was her first trip or second trip to Northern Ireland, well, it was his first trip, the boy [indecipherable], he heard a noise upstairs, so we were driving along and the radio's going and course it's a talk, it's, it's a phone-in, talk thingy, and everybody's going, rah, rah,

rah, rah, rah, rah, rah, rah, rah, you know, and my, the boy says dad, why are these people so angry. I said son, at least they're only shouting at each other, they're not shooting each other, so just let it be [laughs], you know, what.

JC: Progress of a sort.

MB: No, and so, and I have tried to explain to them, but, you know, where do you start, but at least, you know, they were very puzzled by the colour-coded flagstones, the red, white and the blue and the orange, yellow, green, and I'm trying to explain to them, and then in Newry of course you've got, on one hill you've got the tricolour up and on the other, the hill across the street, you've got the Union, the Union flag and they're going, hmm, you know, so I'm, like, this is Newry, just, you know [laughs], so yeah, they, they, they find it a bit bewildering and my son says well, how did such a beautiful country, why are people so nasty to each other, I said oh well, there you are–

JC: Where do you start?

MB: You know, you cannot explain it to people who, unless they've actually been there, or and then, ha, yeah, this'll, I had a plan where I was going to tell all these stories, but I seem to be in full flow now, so I'll carry on. There was one other unexpected way that the, the Troubles, well, not caught up with me, but inter-reacted with me in my later career. I'm a telecoms engineer, retired now, but I spent the last twenty years roaming the world, particularly building mobile phone networks, you know, we were sort of, what's the word, people needed to build a network by a fixed day, that's when we were going to launch all the, the publicity was all geared up, so me and a few other old buggers, experts, would be hauled in and fine, you get the thing built, you know, we would just get a, you know, a week's notice, come on we need you, right, so it was good fun, and a lot of these guys, well, not a lot, but several would be ex-army people and they would have served in the province and not only would they have served in the province, but they would have served with the regiment, you know what I'm referring to?

JC: Yes.

MB: Yeah, and, and they would tell me stories, now, you know, I had to believe them and I actually, I do know they, that they actually were in the regiment because they knew of other things that happened that proved to me that they, they weren't actually just making up some sort of grandiose thingy, they were actually, so they would tell certain stories about what they got up to there and, you know, it was un-, unbelievable [laughs], you know, obviously I won't name them, but they know who they are, yeah, so, you know, it was, but there was no, there was no, we were just colleagues in the job and I think they, they, obviously, it didn't take them long to figure out my background, so they were quite happy that I wasn't the other lot [laughs].

JC: Yeah, that–

MB: So, yeah, that was, that was a kind of bizarre thing. In fact, I was working with one of them just for my last job before I retired, yeah, so, it was, yes, just bizarre, yeah.

JC: So let's talk a bit about when you finished at Queen's in, that would've been in '74?

MB: '74, yeah.

JC: Yeah, so, so what happened next, what, what was your next step?

MB: Well, I went, I came immediately to Scotland and I did a joint, a thing called the Scottish Electrical Training Scheme they were doing, SETS, it no longer exists, it's, it's defunct and it was a consortium of about five or six different engineering companies across the whole spectrum of engineering and the idea being that the graduates got placed with three or four of them, about three or four months at a time and to see where best you fitted in because it meant, you know, when you graduate you may think you want to do this, then realise that in fact you want to do that, this was a chance to get you to find your actual niche, and you did a three months training course, how to operate a lathe, do a bit of fabricating and all the rest of it. That was in Paisley and the reason I went to them was because they were very good and they offered you a job even before you sat your finals on the basis of what you're likely to be doing, so that was, you know, that saved you any worry, you could say yes, sit the exams knowing you had a job, and, and course my affinity with Scotland, and we're going to come to nationality in a minute I can tell, that's going to be one of the questions, isn't it?

JC: Oh yes, of course.

MB: I'm ready for that one [laughs]. So I, I came post-haste over to Scotland and spent that year in various locations, but I came to Edinburgh first of all and then I went through to Glasgow and stayed in East Kilbride and I stayed in Pollokshields, which is south Glasgow. I went up into Perth, gateway to the Highlands, and went down to, did a couple of months down in Hackbridge in Surrey, London, with the office of Balfour Kilpatrick, Scottish out-, outfit, and at the end of that year they joined one of the companies, Ferranti, who had a, **[01:10:00]** they're the biggest engineering man-, biggest engineering employer in Edinburgh, one of the biggest employers in Edinburgh at the time, so I took a permanent job with them. Well, I'll pause there because then it gets more complicated. Right, okay, but that's, that gets me to Scotland.

JC: Yeah, and I just wanted to quickly ask, like, how long had you been thinking of leaving Northern Ireland? Had it been in your head for a long time that you wanted to leave?

MB: Oh I think since I was about eleven years old [laughs].

JC: Oh really?

MB: Yeah, I just, I just, I just didn't feel, I felt restless, you know, you know, like all young children, you think I want to run away, where can we go, hmm, you know, but yeah, I was just, I'd itchy feet and I spent the rest of my life getting rid of that itch, of which I'll tell you in due course if we don't run out of time.

JC: And how did, how, how did your parents feel about you leaving?

MB: I think they were quite happy, yeah, they could see, you know, that there was no future, you know, mothers don't like their little sons to run away, mother was always worrying if I was sleeping somewhere in a ditch just because I didn't phone her every other, every other night to say mum, I'm safe and I'm here, you know, I would just, I would just ring her, you know, as you're young, you're oblivious to anybody worrying about where you are, you know, I'm finding the same problem with my stepson, you know, you do your thing, you run around and you don't even worry about telling people that you're okay, you're fine, you're here, you're there, no, actually they were fine and, as I say, I, at the end of that year I settled, I settled briefly in Edinburgh and then I started off on my first overseas adventure, and I think mum and dad were quite happy as long as I was somewhere they could visualise, like, the UK, but the first big adventure took me to Africa, in the bush for a year.

JC: So, upon moving to Scotland what were your first impressions of it? I mean, you'd obviously been there as a child, but–

MB: Yes, well, I hated, I hated Edinburgh the first time because Edinburgh in those days was not the cosmopolitan place it was today, it was wor-, it was almost as bad as Ulster on a Sunday, you know, dour, Calvinistic, couldn't get a drink anywhere unless you were having a meal, blah, blah, you know, and [pauses], but I moved around all over the place and I, I had great times, and this is where I had, had a couple of the only nasty experiences because of my origins that I experienced in life. At one point I had a girlfriend who'd actually studied, who was actually a nurse in Banbridge, but she was studying midwifery here in Edinburgh, the local hospital was just about half a mile that way, and we were coming back from a match at Murrayfield and wearing our rosettes, our green rosettes and we got near her flat and we were rowdily abused and I think possibly spat at by some posh gent who took exception to the fact that we were Irish and I'm sure it was the rosettes cos we weren't saying anything, but we got a verbal tirade of abuse which kind of stunned us because we'd been there with the Scottish rugby fans and there was no problem at all, but this chap, maybe he'd had a bit of whiskey or something, but he, he gave us a torrent of abuse, so that was a bit upsetting, and, what was the other thing, oh God, I've forgotten, oh yeah [pauses], Birmingham bomb, everybody who was an Ulster exile will remember where they were that day. I, well, I actually was oblivious because I was on a train, when all this was going on I was on a train coming up from London or somewhere and I was working at [indecipherable] in Glasgow, and I spent all day Sunday on the train and I hadn't seen, hadn't seen or heard the news, I hadn't bought a paper or anything, so I got in the next morning and I started speaking and everybody was glaring and staring at me and I'm going hi guys, what, and I was completely oblivious, and they said a bomb, and I said what bomb, and they thought I was joking, but I genuinely had not listened to the news, read a paper, as I say, I'd been on a train all day the previous day, so I knew nothing about it, and these were guys who up till then had been quite friendly, but suddenly, you know, I could feel the, the aggression was, you know, excuse me, you know [laughs], yeah, so, you know, that's, always remember that.

JC: And this was in Glasgow.

MB: Yes, that was in Glasgow, yeah, and I've just, I've just remembered another story, but I'll come onto that later on, but there's another story about Glasgow, yeah, much later.

JC: Yeah, no, I'm, I'm kind of interested cos one of the particular sites of focus for this project is Glasgow and I'm wondering what, what your impressions of that city specifically were when you moved there cos ob–

MB: Right.

JC: Yeah.

MB: Right, ah ha, okay, well, also on my bookshelf, something I hadn't read for a long time, was this thing, so I've done a lot of reading over the years and this is about the Irish emigration into the west of Scotland, famine and all the rest of it, so it gives the background, so I, I, doing my genealogy I do a lot of, lot of background reading and any-, anyway, when I stayed in Glasgow I stayed in Portshields, which was affluent and a largely Asian area, so I wasn't in with what you would call the Celtic or the Rangers fraternity area at all, so I wasn't involved in any, any of that and people I stayed with, Nancy, Nancy was an accountant and actually the next door, and you ever come across an old TV series called *Para Handy*?

JC: No, I haven't.

MB: Yeah, it's a comedy, black and white days, about a puffer, little steamer on the Clyde, you know, with the actor Roddy McMillan, he's a quite famous Scottish actor, he lived next door, it was quite a posh area, but no we didn't get any aggro from that, but what you're really talking about is the large Irish community [indecipherable] in Glasgow and the Celtic-Rangers thing, well, my wife who's BA-, BA-, this thing called BAME or barmy as I call it, that B-A-M-E, had a meeting, oh quite a few years ago, five years ago now, was participating in the meeting in the Scottish parliament and, you know, the usual Africans, Asians, Chinese are, all the commu-, all the minority communities are there, and there's also a few guys from Glasgow who were of the green persuasion and they, they considered themselves a minority ethnic community, so that's why they were there, and we got chatting, obviously I'm from Ireland, blah, blah, blah, and I happened to mention something and they seemed to get very upset by this. Now can you guess what that was?

JC: I think you're going to tell me.

MB: I am, I'm going to show you.

JC: Oh so the passports, just for the, for the benefit of the recording, so you've got–

MB: Two passports.

JC: You've got two passports, the Irish and the, the British, yeah, mm hmm.

MB: Yeah [laughs].

JC: And they weren’t too happy about that.

MB: No, they said why did I have an Irish passport. Well, I said why not, and there was total incomprehension and they glared at me and I, you know, it was quite threatening and I thought for goodness sake, you know, they, they, you know, you know, these people that think you can be black or white, but you can’t be grey, and I said well, under the Good Friday Agreement we can be whatever we want to be, grrrr [laughs]. But no, the, the Brit one is my original one, the other one I acquired in one of my spells in Dublin, as I say, I’ve been all over the place, I worked in Dublin several times and that, they can be a bit funny, odd about Northern Ireland as well, yeah, how many days’ve you got, so, that’s the only time that that particular element impinged on my life and it wasn’t, it wasn’t a very friendly experience, but they were most aggrieved and upset that I had an Irish passport as well as a British one, I couldn’t be both, according to them, you know.

JC: So, yeah, no, it’s interesting you saying that you kind of didn’t really experience the whole Old Firm type of, of sectarianism that existed in, in Glasgow, we–

MB: Well, I was ne-, was never living in Glasgow long enough. I am a Hearts supporter, which is, you know, the Edinburgh side, so, you know, I, I like Glasgow, it’s a lovely city, it’s completely different from, vibe from, from Edinburgh, and if you’re in trouble anywhere in the world it’s a Glaswegian that will come to your rescue first, absolutely guaranteed, and, but I’ve never been in a situation where I, I was ensconced in either camp or whatever, you know, I’ve been, I’ve been to Ibrox and I’ve been to Celtic Park for, for different reasons, but not in the footballing context, so I have had no, but I am, you know, you can’t be in Scotland without being aware of the, you know, this, the, this, the, the overspill from Ireland is there, and the other thing is of course that people rea-, **[01:20:00]** don’t realise is that during the Troubles there were no bombings in Scotland because both sides were using it as a supply base, you know, or, you know, both sides were running guns and ammunition from Scotland into Ir-, into Ireland, and, you know, in recent years there’s been trouble in Glasgow with the Orange walk that got, went past their church and somebody gets battered or assaulted and they had try to ban it or reroute it or something, it’s a, it’s a, Drumcree all over again, you know, but [pauses], no, I think the, the, the, the, the Orange segment keep a low profile, I think, in Glasgow, they’re regarded, they’re regarded as villains of the peace by the media in, in, in Scotland, you know, and whereas the James Connolly lot, they parade around, you know, parade here in Edinburgh and nobody makes too much of a fuss about it, but north Lanarkshire, particularly, Lanarkshire is the, is the, is the Proddy country and you have, you know, the influx to Ireland for the Famine when all the people from, poor people from Ireland to the, to the mines in West, West Lothian and all the rest of it, and one of my neighbours, I’m just doing her family tree investigations, and that’s where both her grand-, sets of grandparents came from, one from Mayo, one from Sligo and they were poor immigrants into that part of the world, whatever.

JC: And how did, how did people react to you as an Irish person in, in Scotland? Were there ever any assumptions made about your background or anything like that?

MB: No, funnily enough the, the main problem, in fact the main problem anywhere, is for about the first fifteen years, on leaving Northern Ireland I had to keep repeating myself about three times before people understand me, and slow right down, and finally I've realised I had to speak very slowly and speak proper, like, speak civilised, cos I got fed up repeating myself and on one occasion somewhere somebody turned to a colleague and said, what language is he speaking, you know, it was, that was the major problem was the linguistics, you know, we, in Northern Ireland we speak about a million miles a minute, million words a minute, and I didn't think I had a particularly strong accent even then until I hear a recording of myself and I go oh, so, but nobody, apart from that rugby episode and these people in the parliament, I never had, took the aggro. What I had was bafflement as to what was going on and could I explain it, and why had I come over here, you know, and I got fed up, you know, I got so fed up, you get the question, well, what brought you to Scotland, and I'd say, well, I think she was called the *Caledonian Princess*, you know, the ferry, they'd go, hmm, or well, how often do you go home, well, the forty-one bus is quite frequent, cos I have been based in Edinburgh now, in Scotland nearly all of my adult life, you know, so where, you know, here is home, it's not, not, not Banbridge, not Northern Ireland, it's here.

JC: Well, you've pre-empted another one of my questions there.

MB: Yes, yes, yes, I know, and also when people say oh you're Irish and I go, well, that's not quite so easy to define, you know, and when it comes to census forms, or you can get these, you know, you're doing something and they have this survey and you, now this has got, this ethnic minority, it's got ethnic grouping thing you're meant, you can tick and it's got the, you know, used to have British, Irish, Other or whatever and I, you know, sometimes I thought of just sort of writing in confused, at which point that wouldn't keep them happy, so I'd just write in, if it was on a census I'd write in Ulster Scot, I'd say well, make of that what you will [laughs], you know, cos that's what I am, that's my ethnicity, Ulster Scot, and I can show you documents to prove it going back to 1527 [laughs], it was my great, great, great, great, great, great, great-grandfather, so yeah, yeah, they don't, you know [pauses]. When, Northern Ire-, Northern Ireland's long since disappeared, after the Good Friday there was no mainland bombs, if they weren't bombing the mainland the media weren't interested, people weren't, you know, thinking about Northern Ireland and as you learn earlier on, early on in life that people in the rest of the, in the mainland UK care diddly squat about Ireland, Northern Ireland and that's of course why the bombing was switched to the mainland because they could bomb and kill as many as they liked in, back home, nobody paid any attention, oh they're just stupid Paddies killing each other, but when it, when they hit the mainland, that's when people woke up and started to pay attention and, you know, and it worked, didn't it, so, you know, when that was going on, you know, you'd get people that looked at you, well, what's going on, and then they'd have all the simplistic solutions in the world, you know, just put, put all the Catholics down south and all the Proddies up north or just split it down the middle and oh, you know, all this sort of, you know, simplistic thing and, you know, but, there was a kind of standard procedure went on, they'd say oh, you know, and I remember once in a pub in Switzerland, I worked in Switzerland at one point, I've been all over the place, but I'll come to that, and there were some young people there, for work, there's intelligent, young people and we're having a drink after work or something and the standard question, oh where are you from, oh I'm from, from Ireland, from Northern Ireland, oh is that where all the bombing and things, yes, it is, oh and then you could see a pause and you could just see the brain going tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick,

tick and you knew, you knew, absolutely knew the next question that was coming, oh what religion are you, and I would say I'm a staunch pedestrian, and they'd go, huh [laughs], I said it's none of your business, and that's my polite way of saying it, I'm a staunch pedestrian.

JC: And did that question get asked, did you get asked that question in Scotland or all over the world?

MB: Not so much, but I would get asked it everywhere else, all round the world, however obscure or remote where I was, when the bo-, when the Troubles were going on it would always make the news, you know, if there was a big bomb or lots of casualties it would be in the news, and people, and they'd meet me and they'd, oh you come from that, yes, and then, you know, I said because you're trying to classify me and I won't be classified, if you want to ask me a question ask me a question, but don't ask me about religion because that's, that's prejudging me, you know, oh hmm, aah, you know, aah, you know, but you can just see the wheels turning every time, you know, when you told them where you're from, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, and you'd just think, like, any second now, bing, what religion are you [laughs].

JC: So can you, can you talk me through a bit more that, that first year in Scotland before you went to Africa, what, what did it in involve in terms of–?

MB: Oh I didn't, well, no, I didn't go directly from Scotland to Africa.

JC: Okay.

MB: I went, hang on, alright, okay, quick, after I joined the firm in Edinburgh on a full-time basis I spent a couple of years living in Edinburgh and travelled all around the UK, installing telecoms equipment, then that got boring after about two years, I have, I've got it, I have got it down here somewhere, anyway, but I, we-, I have trouble now remembering where I was when I was because I've been so many places over twenty years, so I had to get [indecipherable], right, figured it all out, but I went off to Nigeria, northern Nigeria for a year with an English company, TEC, based in Coventry, but before I could go there there was a delay, so I ended up running around the UK down to Bristol and then they sent me up to Orkney in winter and then finally in the middle of a snowstorm in Orkney, there was a snowdrift up to the window they said, would you like to go to Nigeria, on the phone, oh yes please, sun, ah ha, so off I went for a year and four days, I remember it, counting the days at the end, and that's when mum I think thought that was a step too far and her son was just not quite in reach anymore, yeah.

JC: So with all this moving around was there much–?

MB: Oh that's only the start of it.

JC: Yeah, was there, did you have much of a, sort of network of friends in, in Scotland or any, any girlfriends and things like that?

MB: I initially had friends from the [indecipherable] training year, but as time went on you kind of lost touch, I still, I'm in contact with one or, one or two of them, in fact they, my landlord who I stayed with, Graham, still lives in the same building down the road with his wife, works at the supermarket down the road, so I still see him, so I've known him now for forty odd years and other people, a radio amateur that I met, he lives, Melvyn, so I still visit him occasionally, but you lose touch, I mean, when you're, when you're at university you think these are your best mates and you're going to be friends forever, but then you all, you just diverse like that, and for the first couple of years as I, as I fumbled all round the UK, I would occasionally bump into some of them, **[01:30:00]** particularly, in fact, the two girls, Mary and Lydia, who I mentioned previously, one from the Falls and one from Newry, they worked in London at one point and I would, I would visit them occasionally, but then you lose touch and your life moves on, you get married, so I don't have any close friends from uni days now or those, apart, apart from the two guys I've just mentioned, any friends from those days because basically my close friends over the past twenty years are abroad. I, I spent so much time there that my, certain people I built up are international, are not really here, yeah, I have, I have a son and daughter here now and a stepson and grandchildren and some, and I've lived in this street now for, is it eighty-, '83 or so, and one of my neighbours is still here, so we have a little, it's like a little village I live in here, and they've looked after my house when I've been on my travels, but–

JC: I suppose I was just thinking when, when you first moved over, obviously you were quite young, it was a new place that you hadn't lived before, how easy it was to sort of settle in to, to living there.

MB: Well, actually I, yeah, when this, yeah, this is, this is where the, sort of the cringe factor comes in, when the trainee scheme that I was part of that year, when it folded years later, they had all these files on people who passed through and they were trying to give the files to the, their owners, if they could trace them, so I got mine and there were some highly unflattering remarks from some of the employers, which were put down to me being so higgledy-piggledy all over the place and away from home for that year, they put it down to that, they were being very kind, but yes, I thought well, I could, I could shred that and my, my children'll never know, but no, it's warts and all, so they can have it [laughs], so I think I was very, I'd come from this terrible, you know, artificial existence and then I was shuttled all over the place, so I was very I think unsettled and not very calm about life, you know, in a hurry to go God knows where, so it took me a while I think to, to mature, shall we say, I think, is the word.

JC: Yeah, it must have been difficult just not having a proper place to sort of call home for a while and just being all over the place, as you say.

MB: Yeah, well, yeah, well, I've been all over the place for most of my life, so [laughs], just, yes, I know, but that's, well, these comments when I read them and I got that thing, oh is that what they thought, well, I suppose I was a bit of a pain in the arse.

JC: What, what did they say about you, if you, if you'd be happy to talk about it, if not then that's, that's fine.

MB: Oh I can't remember, it was something, like, in some respects very mature, other respects very immature, and then sort of something about, well, applies to any young man in his early twenties, doesn't it.

JC: Absolutely.

MB: And, some comment about this, possibly due to his not being home for a year, you know [laughs], yeah, but I was living, I lived out of a suitcase, so, yes, it can be a bit, you know, it's, it's, it's, it's a strange life, you know, other people are settling down, finding girlfriends, having babies, getting married and I'm running around, like, blue-arsed, you know.

JC: So there wasn't, was there really any time for romantic interests as this point then?

MB: Oh there was romantic interest, but, but, this is another thing, you try persuading them to come back to Northern Ireland for a holiday, just even a visit, for a weekend, they were all convinced the whole place was a seething mass of rioting, bombing and shooting, and I'm just saying no, no, no, no, most of it is extremely quiet and you'll be fine, no, it's all dis-, I see it on the telly, duh, duh, duh, oh, you know, so you couldn't, no, you know, only the girlfriends I had from Northern Ireland understood the situation, but all the others refused point blank to come across.

JC: So you didn't, you didn't bring any of them over, then?

MB: Well, I offered, but none of them, none of them would, none of them would, none of them would come.

JC: Were these Scottish girls or, or English girls or–?

MB: Yes, one was English, or Scottish, sort of half and half, one was Australian, if I recall, that's another story, met on the train, but, no, there weren't, they were just, you know, they were, anything, anything other than Northern Irish [laughs].

JC: So they were united in their, in their fear of, of Northern Ireland.

MB: They were, yeah, they were, they were feartie, they were scared to come across, they were convinced that they were going to get shot and bombed the minute they set foot on the, on the thing.

JC: So, you went to, did you say Nigeria?

MB: I did, yes.

JC: In what year was that?

MB: 1977ish.

JC: And it, it was work that took you over there?

MB: Yes, I, I, I, yes, 1977, Nigeria, right, here we are, I've got it [laughs], well, it was work, yes, and I'd, I'd got bored of what I was doing in Scotland and itchy feet, started to itch again and I thought it would be, as you do when you're young and innocent, you think, oh working abroad is glamorous, must be, so, and I said well, Nigeria, yeah, I'll go, and it was, project was a year, one year, no leave, and northern Nigeria, so the next thing you know I end up in the middle of the bush, yeah, that was an experience.

JC: I was going to say, yeah, that must have been–

MB: That was my first ever trip abroad.

JC: Really, yeah, was it your first time on a plane as well?

MB: No, almost, but not quite, ah, you know, the, well, I already had a passport, but only because I'd had to go at one point onto North Sea oil rigs, just, forty-, Forties field, which at that point was just being developed in Scotland, this is the boom years, the early years in Scottish, and I had to go onto an oil rig to commission some equipment with, with my colleague and it was outside territorial waters, so I didn't need a passport to get there, but I needed a passport to come back cos you had to go through customs on the way back, so that's why I got my first passport, cos I had to go on to a North Sea oil rig, and, then off I went to Nigeria, and that was a shock to the system, interesting, and even then they'd heard about Northern Ireland cos, you know, it was–

JC: Really, yeah?

MB: Oh yeah, yeah, no matter where it was, so long as it was in the headlines I would, you know, they knew about it, I mean, Nigeria's got its own problems, but, you know, they knew about Northern Ireland, yeah, and oh I had a romance with a young lady from Dublin there, Colette, she was a VSO, but, I did try to trace her a few years ago, but with no luck, anyway, so then I came back to Edinburgh and despite having hated it first time round I now realised it was quite a nice place really, so I had some cash, tax free, and I bought my first flat in Edinburgh, just about a mile down the road and about two hundred yards from where I'd been living before I left Edinburgh, so, yeah, and then I went back to my old company, but to a different department and I worked in radars for about twelve years, so that was the one, that was the longest stable point in my life as I worked for these twelve years and I married the girl upstairs. It was a tenement and they were always having parties, so they got fed up of me complaining about the noise of the parties, so they invited me to the party and next thing you know I'm married to one of them.

JC: [laughs] And was she a Scottish girl?

MB: Yeah, she was from Ayrshire, from Maybole, and then babies came along and we moved a mile up the road to this present address, so for most of my adult life I have been based within about a mile-and-a-half radius of this particular part of Edinburgh.

JC: And when were your children born?

MB: [indecipherable] Son ’83 and Christine ’86, I think, I'm always, I remember the day, the da-, the, the day and the date, the year is always a problem [laughs].

JC: And did you, did you manage to convince your first wife to come back to Northern Ireland with you?

MB: She went a few times, but it wasn’t an overwhelming success because basically she couldn’t understand a word my dad said, he had a very broad Antrim accent and she couldn’t make out a word he said, she would just go hmm, hmm, hmm, smiling at him, and mum was a bit pernickety, so my mum I don’t think approved, but anyway, and there was always a, you know, you have, when you’re exiled, you have, at Christmases you have this conflict, whose folks are you going to go to, yeah, so, yeah, we went to your folks last year, so it’s my, and going to Northern Ireland in those days was a bit of an expedition with [indecipherable], and Tam, my wife’s father, he lived in Prestwich in Ayrshire, so sometimes we’d go to him and sometimes we’d carry on to, to Northern Ireland and then one year my, my youngest, who was only a baby, caught a cold as we passed through [indecipherable] onto Banbridge and then on New Year’s Day we had to take her to hospital with pneumonia and that I think just finished my wife off with **[01:40:00]** going to Northern Ireland after that experience because she had to stay behind and the, the girl was out of hospital and I had to come back to work in Scotland, so she was left alone with my parents [laughs], trying to look after a sick baby, so that was the, that was the ultimate height of what, her experience, and I took the kids later on by myself, back a few times, but they were still quite tiny and I asked them yesterday did they remember anything about it, and they went no, apart from the, the main street, the big wide street where I told them where I grew up, but they’d no other memories and nobody’s ever given them hassle about their dad being from Ireland, though they did get a funny look [laughs].

JC: I was going to ask if your, if your kids felt in touch with the Irish or the Ulster side of their identity at all?

MB: None whats-, none whatsoever. The, the boy has expressed a desire to go back there, especially take his new wife Alicja, who’s Polish, to go back, he just never had the time and now with this thingy it’ll be quite some time before we go anywhere, anyone can go anywhere.

JC: Absolutely, yeah.

MB: Yeah, well, I’ve taken, you know, my present wife back there a couple of times and, you know, shown her the house where I grew up, and then, well, here’s another, here’s another funny story [laughs], you know, this is Ulster folk at their best. I’m standing in the middle of the street and saying, well, this, this is the house where I grew up and that there was my bedroom window and that’s the living room there, and then the, I’d never been in the house since my dad, my parents downsized and I happened to be home when they down-, when they moved, finally, and my dad and I went to do the house by ourselves and it was completely stripped empty, and this was the house where I’d grown up in, but stripped of all furniture it meant nothing, I had no feelings of belonging at all, and that was it, so I hadn't been back in it and since then it had been turned into two separate flats. I'd never been inside, I'd always wondered what it was like inside, but there was a new door and gating and all the rest of it, I'd never seen anyone. The window opens, I'm standing there with my wife in the street and a man's head comes out and hi, how you doing, so I'm explaining that this, my, he says oh come on in, what [laughs], so, so he lets us in and up the stairs and I, you know, it'd been completely gutted inside, so there was nothing to recognise, nothing, you know, to feel, to feel, you know, the memory of, he says oh come in here, so he goes in and it's the bedroom and his wife's on the bed combing her hair at the dressing table [laughs], and I sort of sniffed and, I think he had a little bit of alcohol taken, this was only half eleven in the morning [laughs], so I got a grand tour of the house that I grew up in, but, you know, it was, it was, it was really changed, it meant, it meant nothing to me, so there was no, there was no, there was no sort of romantic homecoming at all, whatever, and there's nobody in the town that my, that, the guy whose business got blown up when he was trying to sell, sell my mother's house, the house they moved to, not, not the one I grew up in, and he died of cancer a few years back, so there's nobody in the town that I actually know, well, there might be, but I don't know where they live or anything about them, so I can go there and I look around for about ten seconds, right, that's it, fine, nothing here, anymore, it's, it's not home anymore, home's here.

JC: Thinking back to sort of the earlier period, when you would have gone back to, like, visit your parents and stuff, how did it feel going back to Northern Ireland at that time, when the, when the Troubles were still happening and things? Did it, did it feel strange at all, or, or was there any emotion associated?

MB: Yeah, it was [pauses], well, it would normally just be at Christmas or maybe at Easter and would be a very short trip and you would have all the security on the, on the ferry, which you still have today because of other reasons, and, you know, you would have all the army and the U-, and the UDR patrols and whatnot and, you know, which you suddenly realised weren't normal [laughs], anywhere else, but of course you just went with it. The police, the old RUC, were always armed, even before the Troubles, they always had sidearms, so armed policemen is what you grew up with, it was the kind of soldiers bit that, you know, was slightly odd, the odd thing, but, and you would see the, you know, the, the no, the no-parking zones, right before on Main Street you'd just park anywhere, but now it was all, you know, a controlled zone, and [pauses] yeah, well, yeah, well, you know, you thought I'm only here for a few days, there might be a few shootings and thingies, but it didn't, you know, you just, you just thought, this is the way it is and I'll be away in a couple of days, so [laughs], whatever, and you might hear a story about somebody being shot somewhere, somebody you knew, but it wasn't particularly, they were just, they were just security, carry-on was the hassle and, oh I remember, annoying thing, at one point if you flew, or, or in fact, if you travelled at all you had to fill in a, like, you know when you're arriving today in a foreign country you have to fill in a disembarkation card, you know, name, address, sort of thing, reason for visit, you had to actually fill one of those in if you were flying from mainland UK to Belfast.

JC: Really, I didn't, I didn't know that.

MB: I always found very insult-, very insulting, you know, and I just took to writing the reason for visit, earning a living, you know, when you're going the other way obviously, but that always annoyed me, you know, as if you're going to say reason for visit, oh I plan to blow up something, you know, you know, it's like the American visa says have you ever been a terrorist, you know [laughs], you know, you know, that, that, that used to annoy me, you know, you had to fill in, you know, you know, and this is written, why should I fill in a thing on a plane that's flying from Edinburgh to Belfast. I don't know if they actually ever read them, you know, cos you could put anything in and just hand it to the guy and he'd take it, I suppose that afterwards they might have chased you up, but you actually had to, had to fill in the reason for visit and where you were going, yeah.

JC: And did you follow events in Northern Ireland closely whilst you were living elsewhere, either through watching the news or through conversations with your parents or anything like that?

MB: No, well, you'd, it was, I mean, you, it was a, you'd follow the news and, you know, you, there was things, like, you know, the Omagh, the Omagh bombing and that thing which made headlines, you know, you'd think oh God, here we go, but what you realised and what you knew, cos it was true then as it was ever was, that for everything that was reported in the news, that was big enough to actually bother reporting, there was hundreds of other incidents going on and what you were seeing was just the tip of the iceberg, but, you know, beneath all that there were still people getting mugged, beaten, shot, kneecapped, whatever, all over the place, but it was just so numerous and so minor that it wouldn't get reported, so you just sighed and you knew that what was going on was a lot more than that and you'd tell people that, you know, and they'd go hmm, what, and that was the year following the Good Friday Agreement, but there were, I mean, there was the Sunningdale, acknowledged other attempts and then direct rule and whatnot, so you kind of followed it, but you thought, well, I'm away from all that and parents never discussed it with me or anything, I mean, my sister had gone as well, she's, you know, she followed me to Queen's and then she'd went to, she worked for the OU for a while in Milton Keynes and then she met this Dutchman and he whisked her off, lived in Brighton, and then they got married in Brighton, then he whisked her off to the Netherlands and she never came back, and she has now had to get her Irish passport because with Brexit, the Dutch don't allow dual nationality, so she would be a Brit in the EU, with all the uncertainty about that, so she got the Irish passport just a couple of, just, you know, over a year there, so now she's an EU national in the Netherlands again, you know, whereas I got my Irish passport quite a few years ago when I was in Dublin in one of my tri-, one of my work trips, working experience there, and it was quite funny because to get the ID for the passport I just showed them my British passport and the Garda who signed the form smiled and just [laughs], yeah, but I, but, you know, oh the original question was did I follow the news, not particularly, but, you know, sort of you had all these, I long lost track of the, all the various shades of unionism, you know, I got really confused, there used to be the Ulster Unionist Party and the Official Unionist Party and the, and the Alliance Party and the SDLP, and that was it. Now you've got forty shades of unionism, but, you know, I, I, I, I, I, what really gets on my nerves is the evangelical element of it all, you know, the holy Willies as Robbie Burns would say, you know, the intolerance that this breeds, you know, that's the cancer of, the cancer of Ulster. If they'd just get rid of all the priests and ministers we'd be a lot better off, that's my opinion, **[01:50:00]** wife's not here, I can say that, but it's the, it's the curse of, you know, and then people would always try and say ah, but it's a religious problem too, not quite, you know, but trying explain the whole thing to somebody is just, you know, they don't want you to explain it, they want a simple story, so that they can come up with a brilliant answer and it's just a waste of time trying to explain it to them, you know.

JC: So did you notice when you moved to Scotland or, or elsewhere perhaps, that religion was perhaps less, slightly less prominent in society, or did, was it not something you really thought about?

MB: Well, yeah, I noticed it was a lot, a lot less, a lot less prominent. I mean, [indecipherable] the kirk here, the general assembly and thingy, but, they, they, they don't take their religion so fiercely here, well, some of them do, but it doesn't have, it doesn't have the same political overtones, so people take it or leave it and nobody bothers really what, what you are, except in blood [laughs], you know. As I said, my wife is evangelical, Africans tend to be very old-fashioned, religious and, you know, so there's been a lot of hallelujahs everywhere, and, so, but she gave up a long time ago trying to get me to go to church, so she knows it's a waste of time, no, it doesn't, it's not, it doesn't have, you know, when I first arrived they were still very Calvinistic, the laws and the rules about enjoying yourself, thou shall not have fun, especially on a Sunday, but now it's, you know, the church's influence is not what it once was, that's, that's true of anywhere, especially in Ireland, cos I think, you know, here we go, what one lot feared was not so much unity with the other twenty-six, but it was the, the church's dominance of that society, and now with all the abuse scandals and, what did they call it, that was now, that's all shot to pot and, and in the South, so it's a different ballgame now, you know, but old, old, old attitudes die hard.

JC: This next question that I have, we've kind of touched on it already, but I'm kind of wondering how you felt when, when the really big events of the Troubles happened, so you mentioned the Birmingham bombs and, and, you know, some of the, the other incidents.

MB: Yeah, Bloody, Bloody Sunday was a particular one. I was in the Elms at that point, I remember that because the, it polarised the whole student accommodation because the way it was reported at the time was of course that everybody thought the Paras had been fired at and that they'd fired back, so the two elements, you know, just immediately polarised in the halls and there was a lot of, a lot of pent up anger that day, I remember that, of course later events proved that it wasn't quite what we had thought it was.

JC: And then in, and then in Scotland did, how did people–?

MB: The Birm-, Birmingham bomb thing, yeah, obviously we've already gone through.

JC: And people, people were sort of suspicious of you at that point when those things happened, do you think, or they were hostile to you?

MB: Well, I don't know if they were suspicious, it's, well, it's, like, as I point out, it's like these days if you're in Muslim attire people look at you, especially a woman with a hijab, they assume you're a terrorist, you know, cos that's the, the media, you know, brainwashing you and in those, in those days it wasn't the dress, it was an Ulster accent, you know, which got, got you attitude. I don't think it was anger at me, it was just anger at people with my sort of accent who had done this, but, you know, you were wise to keep your mouth shut [pauses], and another wee story which, on that subject, when I, I was still at Queen's and I had a summer job at Courtaulds factory in Grimsby, which is on the east coast of England, fishing port. There was a big, there was a big Courtaulds factory there and I had a summer job there, and my parents came passing by sort of in the caravan and they, they stayed in a little caravan park for the whole summer just down, down the coast and I came down for the weekend to visit and we went off somewhere and we came back to the caravan and we found a little note slipped under the caravan door, and it was anonymous, but it was from some-, somebody who was staying in a nearby caravan had heard the accents, recognised the accents and wasn't, contrary to what you might think was hostile and aggressive, was saying how very sorry they were for what was happening in our country and hoping we were enjoying our holiday and hoped that things would improve. It was very touching, but it was anonymous, so we had no idea who, but I can remember that, you know, vividly, just staring at this note from a complete stranger, you know, sympathising with the, the state, you know, of our home country as it were, yeah, it was very touching that.

JC: Yeah, so you'd li–, you'd worked in England for, for a little while before you even moved to Scotland, then, just holiday jobs?

MB: Ah ha, well, I had, I had, I mean, I was three years in uni, so maybe two summers were holidays, one was in Courtaulds and, when this incident happened, and also I was staying in a, in a B&B at that point and I got a, I remember now, I got a, they'd had a previous tenant who was an Orangeman and who'd probably, apparently shown them his Orange sash and I got a long tirade from the landlady about ah we weren't interested in his Orange nonsense, duh duh, I said, well, look, that's not me, you know, so, but the, the other one was in Portadown, you know Portadown, County Armagh?

JC: Yes.

MB: Right, okay, well, I got a summer job as a receptionist on a switchboard for the engineers in the telephone exchange and, so because the telephone exchange, regular as clockwork, there'd be a bomb alert and the, the bell would go drrrr, and the fire bell was just above my desk and it happened so often, you know, you'd all have to evacuate and get out and one day I was in the middle of a conversation with somebody and the bell went off, drrrraaaah, and the siren went off and, and the guy says on, on the end of the phone, what's that, and I said och it's just a bomb scare, carry on, it happens all the time, you know, and he just went don't you think you ought to get out, no, no, no, no, no, just drrrraaaah [laughs] in my ear, so I mean, and that's actually, I only ever saw one body as a direct result of, a dead body, as a result of the Troubles and that was a murder victim who'd been beaten up and chucked in the, in the Bann and he was floating in the river, and my job on a Friday was to get all the engineers' timesheets in a bag and I had to walk them down to the train station to put on a train to go to Belfast so they'd all get paid, and I had to, and, you know, on one occasion had to sort of navigate the, the UDA street barricades and say excuse me guys, if I don't get this through to the station engineers we won't get paid and you won't get your phones fixed, you know [laughs], so that was, and there was a commotion one day and they're all looking over the bridge in, into the, and there was this body, I couldn't quite see it properly, but that was the only victim of the Troubles I ever actually personally saw, and then about a year or so later I wanted to go back to visit the guys I worked with in the exchange and, it was the holiday period, and at that point the guard on the gate was Par-, was the Paras, so here's me, young man, you know, scruffy, whatever, I walk up and I, I explain to them, you know, that I used to work here, blah, blah, blah, blah, and amazingly, I mean, you know, they, they let me in. I went in, and I walked into the exchange and I was chatting to everybody and then the boss man says how d'you get in here, I said oh well, I just talked to the Paras and explained, they let me in, and he went ballistic because, you know, they're meant to be high security and I had just walked in, saying rah, rah, rah, I used to work here, you know [laughs], he was very upset [laughs], yeah, but yeah, how did we get, how did we get onto that [laughs], another tangent.

JC: I'm not even sure [laughs].

MB: It's another tangent [laughs].

JC: Yeah, so did you, did you meet many other people from Northern Ireland then during your time in, in Scotland and in England and other places?

MB: Oh they, well, nowadays the place is full of them, yeah, there's always been a lot here, but recently, in the last ten years they just, awful lot of them and, and, you know, you're sitting there somewhere having a cof-, having a coffee and they open their mouth and your Ulster accent detector goes off, anywhere, they could be in a room full of hundreds of people and all blah, blah, blah, away and the minute somebody from Ulster opens up you go, aah, eee, lock on, you know, and, you know, you have this little game you play, ah, you know, they're beside you, ah, hello, what part of Ulster are you from, you know, oh County Armagh, what part of County Armagh, what, you know, oh Lurgan, well, what part of Lurgan, and so on, **[02:00:00]** they get very discombobulated, but yeah, there's always been plenty, plenty in, in Edinburgh, in, in Scotland generally, you know, we're just next-door neighbours, not so much England and certainly not abroad, though I did bump into, at a firm in Newry, from Newry when I was in Switzerland, in a lift [laughs], one day, but it's generally the, the Southern Irish, there's a lot more of them spread in the diaspora, you bump into them everywhere.

JC: And were you ever involved in any sort of Irish community organisations or, or anything like that, or, it wasn't something on your–?

MB: No, no, no, not sort of any sort of expatriate thing, no, no, my, as I say, my [pauses] circle of friends and acquaintances are all people I met abroad, worked with colleagues who were all foreigners, basically, so my circle of friends is of all nationalities, it's, I, I never got, well, I, I actually tend to avoid other Brits like the plague. I'm most at home in Africa, my extended family is African, so I have a lot of extended African family and that's where I'm happiest, with them.

JC: Great.

MB: It must sound very strange, but that, you know, cos they, they don't have any of the baggage that other, that Irish folk might have, you know.

JC: Yeah, that's understandable.

MB: They have their own baggage, you know, but I'm just, you know, I'm, I'm accepted, you know, they accept me, no problem, whereas they're a black face in a white society, they're not so easily accepted, but that's another story and not quite on, that's a bit off topic, but that's the way I, I find it, and they don't care what part of the, the white world I'm from really, as long as I'm buying my beer.

JC: So just sort of piecing together your, your life story a bit more, so you were in Edinburgh for twelve years straight, I think you said?

MB: Yeah, worked in rad-, in radars, twelve years, married, kids came along, moved here, and then the Cold War thawed, this is 1991, Cold War thawed, Ronald and Gorby got all pally, and we then made all these aircraft and radars and things, so some massive layoffs, so I went back, by sheer good fortune I went back into telecoms, which I hadn't been in for twelve years, so technology had moved on, so I had to do a very rapid catch up and did a lot of studying and calling up people and learning fast and pretend I knew what, what was going on, and that's when the, you know, so the, my father died at the same time, lost my job and marriage was breaking up, so that wasn't happy times at all, and then I started contracting and it went [pauses], well, I'll tell you exactly a story [laughs], yes, where were we, right, the dates are a bit [pauses], right, 1991 redundancy, yeah, okay [pauses] and then I'd a couple of years, I think British Gas Scotland and hydroelectric and I toured the Highlands and Islands and Scotland, having a whale of a time all over these wonderfully beautiful places entirely on my own, the boss, there was no, no mobile phones, so he couldn't contact me and I could do my own thing, or not, and it was the happiest time of my professional life, running, running around the Scottish Highlands and Islands in summer with nobody to bother you, and watching all these tourists who'd paid a fortune to be there [laughs].

JC: [laughs] And did you do, did you do a lot of international travel around that time as well?

MB: I'm coming to that.

JC: Okay, yeah, sure.

MB: Coming to that [laughs], I haven't got started yet, this is only chapter one. Right, and so that was, and then that, that dried up and then a, a bit of a lean spell, as you do when you're a contractor because there's good times, there's bad times, sure as there's chalk and cheese, then I went down to Weybridge in Surrey to work for two years for a company there, and I was only there about two weeks when they sent me off to Turkey, you know, for a while, and that was fun, and then later on I went off to Ghana for a short spell, but these were just short, short trips, nothing like what was to come and I didn't have any [pauses] adverse thing down there at all, they were ni-, they were, people I was staying were actually quite religious sort of folk and they were welcoming, they never said, you know, I didn't have any, any, any hassle at all down there strangely enough, you'd think they might have, but no, it was, it was fun and then after two years the work dried up and I came back to Edinburgh to join, rejoin a company I'd worked with before, I think at some point, no, am I getting ahead of myself. Anyway, so that took me to Glasgow, worked in Waterloo Street for Scottish Telecommunications, which later became Thus, and, that took me to Switzerland and that's where I remember having asked, asked these questions, what religion are you, you know, whatever, when I met them, and I went, so I had, I had, and I went to, I had seven spells in Dublin, yeah, so that was interesting, yeah, yeah, the, the work attitudes [indecipherable] in the South, maybe not the right word but, you know, there's the old cliché that the, the Ulster folk are blunt-speaking and tell you as it is and the Southerners just kind of shilly-shally round it and sort of, act the, sort of, you know, the, the gift of the gab and all this, ah it's true, well, I find it to be true anyway, so, and the two don't get on very well, sometimes, and also, so I went, I worked in Dublin a couple of times, and you know, got a girlfriend there and I was, found it strange that they, all the people in Dublin have never been to the Nort, as they call it, the Nort, they think we're all horned devils and tails, you know, it's all a terrible place, you know, it's worse than hell, no, I wouldn't go there, you know, which I found a bit strange, but that's, that's the way, you know, they wouldn't have dreamt of going to the North, or the Nort as they called it, and the other thing I found it was that, you know, it's, they're very, and I told them this to their face, was that they're a very homogeneous society, they haven't got many other inputs to it, so they all have the same background, the same interests, the same education type thingy and haven't travelled very far, so they don't have a lot of experience of talking to other cultures and people, they all stick to each other and I guess the common outsider, which was me, you know, as it were. Well, my blunt-speaking Ulster didn't go down very well sometimes, so that's where I got the Irish passport because my landlady said, you know, you can get an Irish passport, I'm, like, ah right, and so I read the Good Friday Agreement and went yeah, okay, and [pauses] I thought well, this is a good idea because if I'm travelling somewhere and I need to apply for a visa and the passport goes off to some embassy for weeks to get stamped, then I need to fly, I need another ID, so second passport apart from anything else would be handy and, you know, I had no particular ideological objection to it and as I got it I can hear my father spinning in his grave, you know, dad, don't get, you know, calm down [laughs], so I've had that passport for quite a long time, long before the Brexit nonsense started, I've only ever actually used it once, but that's another story, so [pauses] then from Ireland I went off to Bolivia next, you know, why not, as you do, so I went off to Bolivia and [pauses] that was interesting and in, that's a, that point we were, my colleague was asked by somebody that was working for us what language was I speaking and that was, he was told it was English and he went hmm [laughs], but I had to, I had to, I had, I mean, you had to learn Spanish there because hardly anybody spoke English, so that was one benefit to the foreign travel, you learn, you learn and I had to really learn and became fluent in Spanish, it's long since gone, so, did I get any, don't think I met any **[02:10:00]** other Irish folk out there, but it's a strange, something strange, yes, I went, took, I tried to bring my Dublin girlfriend at the time over, but for some bizarre reason the Brits could get into Bolivia no problem, you just got your passport stamped, that was it, but the Irish, who must have upset the Bolivians at some point, they had to get a special visa, so they had to get a visa before they travelled and this proved altogether too difficult for her in Dublin and it never happened, but I've always wondered what the Irish did to upset the Bolivians.

JC: Hmm, that's interesting.

MB: Anyway.

JC: So how, how long were you in Bolivia for, then?

MB: About nine months, about nine, nine months, and this might seem a bit, a little bit odd, but I really have been so many places, I can't remember [laughs]–

JC: Yeah, no, I'm sure.

MB: Exactly where I was and for how long and [pauses] right, oh right, oh there's loads of comments here about hunger strikers, no, that was another, that was another episode, I was at Queen's when the hunger strikes were on, even some of the lecturers would make very political comments about them, so there was a lot of divisiveness in the university.

JC: Republican and unionist comment, did they make comments from both sides or was it, was it usually one?

MB: Well, I do recall one, one particular professor who shall remain nameless, but he had, he, he didn't beat about the bush in his political views and he, he, he, his opinion was more or less, well, let them rot and he told us all this in the lecture theatre, you know, and dared anybody to argue with him, and we went oh right, what's the second law of thermodynamics and [pauses] right, right, oh right, yeah, okay, oh I, I give up [laughs], ah dear, I, I, I really [pauses], I [pauses], what's that, ah it's gone off it [pauses], ah right, ah okay, yeah [laughs], I was from February 2000 to December 2000, so it was about ten months, yes, yeah [laughs].

JC: And then did, did you come straight back to Edinburgh, then, after that?

MB: Yes, and then I hit another, another, this is going to sound a travelogue, but I'll try and, you know, I came back to Edinburgh, but it was another lean spell where I couldn't get work for love nor money and I temporarily worked for, this is when 3G network way back in those days was being, was being rolled out and this American company wanted to get a toe-hold in Europe and they needed European engineers because of the visa work permit requirements, so they hired me, amongst others, to be ready to do their projects in Europe, but they never materialised, so I sat here for three months getting fully paid, and handsomely, doing nothing, and then eventually I got fed up saying I can't just sit here and be prepared to go at a moment's notice, week in, week out, you know, so I went off to Atlanta and we parted company, and then what happened [pauses], right, ah okay, next stop, Sweden. I was there for about thirteen months, yeah, I don't remember, there was nothing particularly, no, it doesn't involve any particular involvement with Northern Ireland, or, or in fact, oh I did meet somebody from Newry, yeah, I was in this tiny little place in the back of beyond called Karlskrona, down in the very bottom corner, and there was a pizzeria there and it was, the guy was Italian, but his wife was Bronagh from Newry, and we actually knew somebody in common, so, you know, small world [laughs].

JC: I do find that people from Northern Ireland when they meet someone else from Northern Ireland they always have someone in common that they know.

MB: Can be, but–

JC: A lot of the time, anyway.

MB: Can be, but the funny thing about Bronagh was that, this is Sweden and there's a, [indecipherable] they don't do tea, tea is a Brit thing, or an Irish thing, everybody else does coffee, so I wanted tea, she went we don't do tea, so she went out and bought a special teapot for me and teabags, so when I came in the teapot was put on [laughs], I had my own special, unique teapot [laughs], so we had tea and blether, tea and craic, you know, oh talking about craic, rewind to about twelve years when I was working in Edinburgh, we had a trip to a subcontractor in an American outfit, part of Westinghouse, and we had a, a plant in, near Shannon, it was one of these free, industrial, international free trade tariff thingies, and they had an office there and we all went over there, about six of us, to do a course on some new equipment the Americans were giving to the Brits and the guy said, that we ended up meeting, he says now is this your first time in Ireland [laughs], I just looked at him cos we'd been talking away, I said I'm as Irish as you are, mate, you know, he went what [laughs], yeah, I mean, that's, that's, that's happened a few times, they don't, you know, they don't recognise the accent so, you know, for a while, I thought just as well, you know, I've been called Welsh before that, but–

JC: No, I couldn't see that.

MB: That I'm used to be, no end, yeah, yeah, sometimes I feel like I have to start talking like this all the time, you know, like you've a cold in your nose, you know, sort of, tell them you've got a, a nose cold and you'll be alright, so, so that was Sweden, the main, what happened then, yeah, right, I'll, I'll have to just, I'll just run, right [pauses]. Then I worked in England for a year, then I went back to Ireland to work for Ericsson in Dun Laoghaire and they promptly sent me to Ethiopia, as you do, and, but we then, we then kind of fell out because as I forementioned, different attitude to, to work, you know, and they would, you know, they would, I'm kind of, I've spent my life investigating problems and why things go wrong and try and fix them, and they'd some sloppy going on and they didn't like me highlighting what had gone wrong and what they should do to fix it in, in a forthright manner, they actually sent me at one point on a how-to-be-nice course, which didn't work, so eventually we [laughs], you know, and this is when I told them that, you know, they needed a bit more of a mix in their workforce, so we parted company and I came back once again to, to England, and then I went off to, yes, 2006 and I'm now in Ukraine, which is a funny old place. I think I got asked about Northern Ireland then, but I think purely out of curiosity cos there was nothing, there was nothing, you know, the violence had stopped by then, most of it, Good Friday had long since been signed, so [pauses], but that was fun, yeah [pauses], right, and then in rapid succession, where did, where did we go, ah right, yeah, this is, this is, it was too good to last. When I was sitting here with my wife one day and the phone rings and we'd been, consumed the better part, the better part of a bottle of red wine and there was this guy saying, he says if you can get there by week, next week or so I'll give you, mentioning this job in Papua New Guinea, which is down under, right, off the islands of Indonesia, the other half's Papua New Guinea, it's just north of Australia and it was for an Irish company, Digicel, the famous Mr O'Brien and, who start up, started up in the Caribbean, exploiting weakness in bigger operators, Denis O'Brien, that's it, Denis O'Brien, Sir Denis O'Brien, and so that's what, and so I said right, and I didn't actually know where Papua New Guinea was, but I went off anyway, and this was fine, it was, it was, it's what I do best, building stuff in the middle of nowhere, in the back of beyond, with nothing, with people who look funny, so, however, all had been going swimmingly and one of the chaps there, he was from Cork, and we used to play five-a-side football regularly, once or, once or twice a week and he knew where I was from, but I think he just assumed that I was one of his lot, **[02:20:00]** and then one day I revealed that I had actually played hockey as a youth, not hurling, hockey, and he looked at me and said but that's a Protestant sport, I said no, it isn't, but he then knew that I wasn't what he thought I was and he became immensely hostile.

JC: Really?

MB: And we, henceforth physical contact in these five-a-side games was rather violent and rather annoying.

JC: And this was, this was not too long ago, was it?

MB: This was 2007, yeah, it was, it was mid-, mid-2007, I was flabbergasted, I thought, you know, what's your beef, you know [laughs].

JC: Yeah, these attitudes have, have clearly persisted, then, as well, like, through the peace process and–

MB: Well, I think Cork is a very republican area by tradition, isn't it, very militant republican area I think, I don't know, but I was absolutely, you know, you know, here was I, we were halfway round the world and, but the, you know, it was an Irish company, but there were, the engineers were Filipinos, there was a couple of Brits, you know, and they were all over, and the manager, Vinnie, he, he was, he was from the South, but he was a, you know, I can remember we, we were given an exercise, we had to, we had to do a lecture or something to the, to the local staff he'd recruited, so Vinnie and I decided to do a history of Ireland, of all things, under a palm tree, so we'd drawn up a whiteboard, we did it in a very satirical, funny fashion about, you know, this was, this was all green then we fell, we fell out and then we drew a border and this bit was orange and then this, they couldn't fight the orange anymore, so they fought each other and all this sort of nonsense, you know, simple, you know, idiots-are-us history and, but, so Vinnie, you know [laughs], he was good fun until this chap discovered I was a Prod, or well, of Prod origin, and I was absolutely, you know, the first time, it was the only time in my professional career that, that religion ever, ever came into it, and I was just, I didn't know what to say, you know, attitude was one thing, but actually because they knew what religion you were, to take, to take exception to it was unbelievable. I mean, I've worked with all cultures and religions and ethnic beliefs all over the place and it's never been a problem, you all get on with the job, you know, you know, we drink, we have a few drinks and, you know, we eat together and we have fun, so, but I was, I was absolutely flabbergasted, yeah. I could name him, but I won't, he's on, he's on, he's on LinkedIn.

JC: Probably best not.

MB: No, he, later on was another unpleasant episode and I decided to leave cos I needed to be back here, my, my, as you can imagine, my African wife came to experience immigration issues when trying to join me in the UK and I needed to be back here for a court hearing and the boss man was coming in, Denis himself, and all of a sudden the previous year's leave was cancelled and I said I need to be there because otherwise I won't have a wife and he said tough, stay or go, so I went, so I went.

JC: And where did you meet your wife, did you meet her–?

MB: Oh I met her here, on the internet, I didn't meet her Africa, no, no, no, I met her here on the internet, and we had an argument, so we decided we might as well spend the rest of our life arguing.

JC: Well, if it, if it works for you it works and–

MB: I had, I had to go to Zimbabwe to marry her.

JC: Oh really, yeah.

MB: Yeah, but yeah, that's another story, that's another story that has nothing to do with this. If I tell you that story, we'll never get this interview finished, will we.

JC: [laughs] Well, I've got a few sort of questions that are kind of, like, in the, the rounding up phase of the interview. So I suppose the first one of those is, when you look at Northern Ireland now and you think about the peace process and things, how do you feel about, about Northern Ireland now maybe compared to when you left, have your views evolved or changed?

MB: Well, my last, my last trip was about two years ago, and every time I go I'm still mentally stuck in the seventies, you know, I go to Belfast and it's so much changed and I don't, I don't know where I am, I'm, I'm lost and the last time I had, you know, I had to go into the city centre and I found the City Hall, right, now I know where I am, there's City Hall, there's Inst., right, now I know where I am, okay [laughs], and I went up to the, to the university and, you know, the Ashby's still there, the bus, the transport system is completely changed, I've no idea about anything and I, I went, you know, I stay with my cousin Heather usually, who hasn't changed at all, and I went off to see my cousins who live in the back of beyond near Whitehead, sort of, like, it's, it's a wee farm, just a little farm. I find it all very strange and especially I'm bemused by the bilingual street signs, you know, that would have been unimaginable in, in, in my day, but, you know, the pea-, the peace walls are also there, in fact, there's a lot more of them, apparently, you know, they're still there, so you think, and once upon a time I actually went on the tour, I took my, the first time my wife went to, my present wife went to Belfast with me I took her on the tourist bus, which takes you up and down the Falls and the Shankill and does all the murals, and the tour guide gave us a brutally honest account of, you know, this is still a troubled land, don't be fooled, it looks peaceful, but it's still very troubled, and that's still true, you know, it's, it's all bubbling underneath the surface and I don't think it's going to go away for at least another couple of generations, until all those who have a memory of the Troubles have gone, and, you know, there's always going to be someone there, you know, it's like pimples, it's not going to, it'll never go back to the way it was before it all started and [pauses] I would never, I could never go back, I could never live there and, I couldn't, I, just because the, the, the, the , the attitudes are just so [pauses], what's the word, so, so thin and, you know, it's okay for a wee trip, but I find the whole [pauses], particularly the fundamental ones, you know, the DUP, Sammy Wilson nonsense that Covid, Covid-19 is what, due to single-sex marriage, you know, what, I read that somewhere, but I don't know that it's true, but I read that somewhere that he's blaming, he's blaming the plague on this, you know, you know, I mean, Arlene, come on, smile Arlene, give us a smile, but no, and then when, when bonkers Boris, that bonkers Boris said, Theresa had to rely on her, the DUP for support I thought oh God, the world's gone mad now, you know, and of course the thing that hasn't been solved, it's the elephant in the room, the minute the referendum result was announced, Brexit, what are you going to do about the border now, Mrs May, and they hadn't solved it and they just ignored it and that's, that's, it's just im-, you know, imponderable and, and, you know, and I'm hap-, I mean, I'm happy, glad I have my second passport, but my wife hasn't, so we're going to be in different queues when we go somewhere in mai-, in Europe now, but it just points to the fact that, as I said before at the start, the rest of the mainland UK doesn't care anything about Ireland and its troubles, they know nothing of the history, they care less, you know, they think, they think, they think Dublin's the capital of Northern Ireland and all this sort of nonsense. I despair basically, you know, and the people are wonderful and it's a lovely country, but if you could take the people out of the country it'd be better, and just leave the country, you know.

JC: Yeah, and I think, cos Northern Ireland, the, the whole border question has only been in the news in sort of, in the, in the past year or two after the referendum result has happened and–

MB: Yeah, well, well, anybody exiled from Northern Ireland, immediately, immediately the referendum was announced, we all went what about the border, you know [laughs], you know, and now you've got a border down the Irish Sea and then you've got a tunnel, no it's a bridge, no it's a tunnel, you know, bonkers Boris, ah, you know, and, and there is, you know, it's a, it's a, it's an insoluble problem, there is no answer to it that would keep anybody, that would keep everybody happy, but, you know, and then you've got Keira getting shot in Derry and, you know, I think the Troubles taught you that, you know, people are, beneath this veneer, there's a very thin veneer of civilisation, when you get below that people are really quite, can be really quite nasty, and, I mean, not, you know, not just Northern Ireland, but, you know, you've got all these ethnic killings all over the world, you know, it doesn't take much to turn us into monsters, and, you know, and even, you know, people, if we're finishing it off here, today, when I do my genealogical research, this lady in Banbridge who I accidentally met on a forum, and she sent me a photograph of a tombstone of some member of her family or relation or friend and say who's this or what do you know about it, and of course, you know, **[00:02:30]** I go online and I'm quite expert at finding things, and she sent me the other week this tombstone and there's a name on it, it meant nothing to me and I'm doing a bit of research, duh, duh, duh, duh, duh, duh, and then I discover, you know the Kingsmill massacre, have you heard of it?

JC: Yes, yes.

MB: Yeah, well, this tombstone was one of the victims and it was one of her relatives and it, you know, typically in Northern Ireland you're a victim of one side or the other, it'll actually say on the tombstone murdered by whatever, this family stone doesn't say anything, it just says died, and you can see it's quite young, but there's a separate memorial in Bessbrook from which these men came from, and his name, and that says murdered by IRA, duh, duh, duh, duh, duh, so, you know, and when I was researching this, it was an online newspaper archive, but it threw up a picture of the page of the *Belfast Telegraph* of I think the day or so after the massacre and there was one survivor and there's a picture of him, I think he's, he'd been shot thirteen times, but he survived, and on the same page there was another column which had a story about the killing of the brothers for which the Kingsmill massacre was the retaliation, so that was the, you know, you had the original victims there, the retaliation there, then another was the army helicopter gone down near Crossmaglen, killing two soldiers, and this brought it all back and I thought, you know, horrible memories.

JC: So, I mean, again sort of rounding up, do you think your decision to leave Northern Ireland and, and travel the world and, and live in all these different places, has that changed who you are as a person or changed your outlook on, on life, or your outlook on, on Northern Ireland, on politics and things like that? I know it's a very broad question.

MB: Well, I mean, I don't think I would have, even if it hadn't been the Troubles, I wouldn't have stayed in Northern Ireland because I just wanted to roam and I had no interest whatsoever in staying in a small country town. I used to joke that I couldn't stay in Banbridge because it, you know, it didn't have a decent bookshop, the only bookshop it had for years was a little Christian bookshop and I couldn't, I can't live in a town without access to a bookshop [laughs], and I mean, I'm not joking, and so it did briefly for a couple of years, but it didn't, you know, I thought, you know, the people, the people are very intimate, they're very parochial, they're very friendly, but they're ever so parochial and I just couldn't, I couldn't, couldn't take that at all, and, you know, your, your previous project about them immigrants and all the rest of it, and you know, you know, I wasn't joking when, my parents wouldn't have, wouldn't have been phased if I'd come home with an African wife, they were long since dead before I met Hosanna, but they would have been very con-, very concerned if she was a Catholic African, you know, so [laughs], you know, I just can't be doing with this nonsense anymore, but, you know, I have, I have nostalgia, but I've no, I've no, nothing, nothing, wild horses would not drag me, drag me back, and if, if my cousins pass on there'd be absolutely, before me, there'd be absolutely no reason, the only reason I go back now is to go to PRONI and do family research. I intend at some point to take my wife and do the whole of Ireland and show her, because she's only, she'd only seen Belfast, Bushmills, Londonderry, Ahoghill, a bit of Lough Neagh, and that's it, so, but I do, I do enjoy chatting to people from there, but no, go back, never. I'm afraid that's, that's, like, I do have a, a lair, there is a family grave that I've told my missus if I kick the bucket before her just to engrave my name, I don't want to be carted all the way back there and buried in Banbridge, thank you very much, even though we have the deeds to the lair in my drawer, yeah. I didn't, I didn't even get halfway through my travelogue, but anyway [laughs].

JC: [laughs] Well, you've obviously, you're so well travelled that it's–

MB: Well, after, after PNG, Dominican Republic, Uganda, Kenya, where was I at, and then, then it was Kenya, that was, that was, hang on, after Kenya and there was South Africa somewhere in the middle of all that, Cape Town, that was the last one, the last, the last adventure.

JC: I think, yeah, I think we'd need a whole extra interview to, to get through all of that as well.

MB: Oh Vietnam, Vietnam, yeah, Hanoi, Hanoi for a while, yeah, Bristol, Bristol, Reading, Banbridge [laughs], so.

JC: So you've got the two passports. If someone asked you, what are you, what's your nationality, what would you say to them, do you say–?

MB: Well, initially I'd just say confused, but if they, if they insist, I'd go, oh I'd go for British, probably, probably, the only, ah the only time I've ever actually used the Irish one in earnest is when, the first time I went to Zimbabwe, I, I didn't know very much about the country, but, you know, it was the last country in Africa to get independence and there was a very bitter guerrilla warfare and, you know, the, the, the Brits had supported the apartheid regime in, in Zimbabwe, which was every bit as bad as the one in South Africa, so I thought they might be a bit anti-Brit, so I decided to go as Irish, so that was the only, the only stamp I have, well, it's not even in this one, it's the old Irish passport, the one before this, for a foreign country, was a Zimbabwean visa, but [pauses] now with Brexit I might, well, I might use it if I'm on my own, with herself, she might object to me being in a different queue from her, and she said oh can I get one, I said no, no, you have to go and live in Ireland, so a commitment to be in Ireland for, for you to get one, but my children are entitled and I've been urging them for years to get the Irish passport, but they haven't done anything about it.

JC: They haven't yet, no.

MB: No, so they better do it before I kick the bucket, but my sister has, for reasons I've previously explained, and, you know, it's a very mixed feeling when people, you know, nationality of people, you know, there are these people from Glasgow took objection to the fact that I have two passports, and you have to explain to people why, so, you know, I wouldn't, I don't, I wouldn't, I wouldn't go back to any part of Ireland, but, you know, I'm quite happy to visit and blether and talk and drink and all the rest of it, but, as I say I think it's a, it's a sad country and, anyway, there we are.

JC: So I guess, yeah, the, the final question is just for me to ask, obviously we've covered a lot, if there's anything that you think's particularly important that we haven't discussed or talked about that you wanted to add?

MB: I'll, I'll probably think of something after we've finished, but, no.

JC: Sure, well, you can always, you can always send me an email.

MB: Yeah, yeah, no, nothing, no, it's just the, the main thing I found was this book, I thought, oh he needs to read this book because it's exactly what you're on, everything you've talked about is covered in here.

JC: Sure.

MB: Yeah, and oh and thankfully, as I said in the initial conversation, we're not going through this nonsense [laughs].

JC: [laughs] Yeah, alright, I'll stop the recorder there.

INTERVIEW ENDS