

L05 GARETH RUSSELL INTERVIEW SUMMARY

Interviewee: Gareth Russell [pseudonym]
Interviewer: Dr Fearghus Roulston
Interview summarisers: Dr Fearghus Roulston and Prof Liam Harte
The interview was recorded as a single audio file with no section breaks

L05 Gareth Russell	Start time: 00:00:00	Finish time: 02:12:40	Duration: 02:12:40	Brief description of content:
00:00–09:59	Explains why he took part in this oral history project, saying that he remembers ‘visiting London in the seventies and they still had signs on some digs that said something like no dogs, no Irish, no blacks’. Describes growing up in a Protestant working-class district of east Belfast and forming friendships that were later strained when he alone passed the eleven-plus and went to an all-Protestant grammar school. Recalls his sense of class unease when mixing with his new, middle-class school friends.			
10:00–19:59	At grammar school he discovered a sense of himself as ‘creative’ and enjoyed writing. Notes that relations between Protestants and Catholics on his street were harmonious during his youth and that he himself belonged to a ‘mixed’ family, with Catholic cousins. Recalls Bernadette Devlin visiting his school in the late 1960s, when he was studying for his A-levels. Discusses his activities in the Boys’ Brigade and the Cubs, through which he developed an interest in football. States that most of his friends from this period remained in NI.			
20:00–29:59	Discusses his youthful difficulties in understanding the growing sectarian conflict in NI and the role of religion in fuelling it. Although he attended a Presbyterian church, the gulf between the inflammatory sectarian rhetoric of some ministers and the peaceable teachings of Jesus Christ troubled him. Recalls acting in a play about Long Kesh ‘about ten years ago’ and meeting an old school friend after a performance who had served time in the prison. States that he is ‘anti-violence’, but witnessed violent incidents among young people in the Belfast of his youth.			
30:00–39:59	Relates more stories of teenage gang rivalries and skirmishes when he was young. Describes the aleatory path that led to his becoming a professional actor, despite his initial aversion to performing. Explains that throughout this time he continued to play football to a ‘highish level’ with friends from the Boys’ Brigade.			
40:00–49:59	Recalls playing for Glentoran’s youth team at the age of sixteen, then for Ballymena United reserves, until a serious knee injury caused him to stop. Not wishing to go to university, he joined the advertising department of the <i>Belfast Telegraph</i> . Through his work he became friends with Catholics in the Smithfield market area of the city, which gave him greater insight into the Catholic experience of NI and its history. Explains how his growing disillusionment with his job eventually led him to quit.			
50:00–59:59	Remembers being prevented from going to work one day by striking Protestant workers in the early 1970. Speaks of the increasing constraints on social interaction in Belfast as the conflict intensified. Recalls how his brother-in-law, a policeman, narrowly escaped being killed by a lone gunman, and how a Catholic footballer who played for a predominantly Protestant team was equally fortunate to avoid death when he was chased by two loyalist assailants.			
01:00:00–01:09:59	Tells of a young Protestant man he knew who, on being ordered by loyalist paramilitaries to kill a Catholic workmate or face death himself, committed suicide. Explains that he spent much of 1974 travelling in Britain and mainland			

	Europe with a friend. On his return to Belfast he joined a new drama workshop launched by Sam McCready at the Lyric Theatre in 1978, which led to Gareth being cast in the lead role in a play there, thus beginning his professional acting career. It was around this time, the early 1980s, that he moved to London to get away from Belfast after breaking up with a Catholic girlfriend.
01:10:00–01:19:59	He regarded his London move as a temporary one, but the work opportunities it afforded him led to him settling there, yet he still thinks of himself as ‘a Belfast boy. I never think of London as home, I always think of Belfast as home’. Recalls his early days in London, finding lodgings in Chiswick, his first role at the Hammersmith Lyric Studio and doing casual work in between acting jobs. His ‘sort of breakthrough’ came when he was cast in a play about Belfast that was staged at the Theatre Royal Stratford East.
01:20:00–01:29:59	Provides more details about seeing anti-Irish signs in Romford and Tufnell Park in 1974, as well as an Irish-run lodging-house that catered only for Irish migrants. States that being Northern Irish in London in the 1980s ‘wasn’t an issue because London is so multicultural’. Discusses adjusting to the social conventions of the city, including the unwritten rule of avoiding interaction with strangers in public spaces. Says that he would visit his parents in NI once or twice a year during this period and would sometimes accept acting parts there.
01:30:00–01:39:59	The deaths of his parents and eldest sister in the early 1990s meant that his return visits to Belfast became more infrequent. Prior to that, he took great pleasure in journeys home and in hearing Belfast accents again: ‘I felt warm all over just hearing the accent’. Returns to memories of his youth and the birth of the Troubles, describing how a neighbour who was in the B-Specials ‘organised a vigilante group to protect the Catholic families in the street’.
01:40:00–01:49:59	Recalls hoax bomb scares in London in the 1980s. Speaks of having friends in NI who were killed in the Troubles, and of later discovering that he knew some of those who perpetrated such acts. His passion for acting and personal relationships are what keep him in London, even though he feels ‘so much at home and so much happier’ in Belfast. Reiterates how his working-class origins inhibited him from entering the theatre world in his youth, but find that ‘lots more working-class people go to the theatre’ in London. Discusses auditioning for parts in London and the camaraderie of the acting fraternity there.
01:50:00–01:59:59	Discusses how NI has changed for the better in recent years, based partly on the lifestyles of his nieces and nephews who live there. Expresses his dislike of those who sensationalise their experiences of the Troubles for ‘self-serving’ reasons. Comments on how NI is perceived from Britain, suggesting that the Brexit debate has led some to conclude that NI people are ‘always complaining’. Reflects on his own reluctance to speak about his NI past when he first moved to London, only to find that doing so helped him to make friends and ‘feel worthwhile’. Notes how common it has been for him to be cast in Irish roles in London-staged plays.
02:00:00–02:09:59	Reflects that English perceptions of NI, shaped by the Troubles, meant that ‘people were scared of you because you came from Belfast’. Says he sometimes used this to his advantage, but concedes that ‘people don’t think in those terms anymore’. Tells a story from his childhood about one of his friends being knocked unconscious accidentally and the ensuing attempts to get him home.
02:10:00–02:12:40	Explains that he has recently begun to reconnect with friends in Belfast who were an important part of his life ‘from the age of eleven to the age of eighteen’, and that he has also promised to visit his family in NI at least once a year.