

L14: JIM O'HARA INTERVIEW SUMMARY

Interviewee: Jim O'Hara
Interviewer: Dr Fearghus Roulston
Interview summariser: Prof Liam Harte
The interview was recorded as a single audio file with no section breaks

L14: Jim O'Hara	Start time: 00:00:00	Finish time: 01:52:54	Duration: 01:52:54	Brief description of content:
00:00–09:59	Born in 1943 in Ardoyne in Belfast, where his parents owned a pub and where his family home was located in 'a very vulnerable place during the Troubles'. He was educated by the Christian Brothers from a young age and attended St Mary's grammar school on the Falls Road. States that Ardoyne 'was a tough place to grow up' and that social and domestic violence was commonplace there even in the pre-Troubles era. As a child of nationalist parents he was keenly aware that his was 'an identity which was antagonistic to the establishment' and that 'the state was not your state, or the police were not your police, the government was not your government'. His parents stressed the importance of education and he became the first of his extended family to obtain a university degree. Discusses the social and occupational networks of Catholics in the Belfast of his youth.			
10:00–19:59	States that many of his university contemporaries stayed in Belfast and 'became dentists, doctors, engineers, lawyers'. Characterises his family as 'very religious'. Discusses the GAA prohibition on its members playing 'foreign games' up until the early 1970s. Explains how he came to join Bangor rugby club in the early 1960s, becoming one of the first Catholics to do so, and 'was received so well in a very Protestant environment'. Recalls his time at Queen's as very enjoyable.			
20:00–29:59	Describes the 'brutal' regime of his grammar school, which included corporal punishment in his first three years there. Feels that, in the main, the beatings 'didn't do us any damage, psychologically or mentally'. He also had some very good teachers, who set high academic standards. Queen's was seen as the obvious university destination by his peers and it was there that he went to study history, and where his friendship and social networks expanded. After the strict discipline of the Christian Brothers, the freedom of Queen's 'was heaven'.			
30:00–39:59	Recalls being involved in forming the New Ireland Society at Queen's and notes the traditional and sexist nature of the university culture he encountered there. Discusses how the burgeoning civil rights movement in the US and student protests in mainland Europe fuelled a determination among many in NI to take direct action to change 'an unjust system'. Mentions going to civil rights meetings and marches before moving to England in 1968. Explains that he was taught 'a very conservative type of Irish history' at Queen's, epitomised by the approach of J.C. Beckett, a 'moderate unionist' who was one of several conservative historians who 'dominated Irish history teaching for a long time'.			
40:00–49:59	Describes the 'very thriving' folk music scene in 1960s Belfast, which he says had a political as well as a cultural importance. Speaks of the 'growing tension and growing violence' in areas such as Ardoyne in the period leading up to the putative start of the Troubles in late 1968. After graduating from Queen's he and a friend spent some months driving through Europe, after which he moved to London for a year to do postgraduate research. Initially he was unhappy in a city he found 'very impersonal', but his decision to join London Irish rugby club 'changed everything' and ultimately led to him settling in London.			

50:00–59:59	States that his decision to leave Belfast ‘had nothing to do with the Troubles’ and recalls how much he enjoyed the all-Ireland camaraderie of London Irish, where he forged many lifelong friendships. Explains how he ended up lecturing in history at St Mary’s University in Twickenham, having earlier completed an MA in Irish history at Queen Mary College. Discusses how the popularity of the Irish history courses he taught at St Mary’s motivated him to set up an Irish studies degree and department there in 1989. Recalls the disrupted lives of his parents back in Belfast and the deaths of friends in the conflict. Details the routine devastation caused by British Army house searches.
01:00:00–01:09:59	States that he generally avoided discussing the Troubles, even with people from the ROI, because ‘they didn’t really understand’. Claims that most people in Britain were uninformed about and uninterested in NI, which ‘could’ve been a thousand miles away rather than an hour’s [...] journey by plane’. Notes that his two sons, born and raised in England, ‘didn’t do any Irish history whatsoever at school, which is tragic’. Says that ‘there was definitely an anti-Irish feeling at times’ in England, particularly in the aftermath of IRA bombings. Reveals that the band he played in for twenty years would tailor its repertoire so as not to offend audiences during the Troubles. Notes the political conservatism of Irish community organisations in Britain during the conflict and their aversion to involvement in campaigns centred on miscarriages of justice and related issues.
01:10:00–01:19:59	Discusses the Birmingham Six and Guildford Four campaigns, observing that by becoming involved ‘you almost became tainted with a terrorism brush’. Voices his frustration that ‘most people from the South didn’t want to know about the North’ during the Troubles and that most British-based Irish organisations ‘wanted the Irish community to be respectable’. Notes that the Irish government disapproved of the Troops Out movement, although it did have some community support, particularly among ‘working-class Irishmen’. Reveals that he would describe himself as a republican and that his wife is a Protestant from Kilkenny. Mentions holidays in Brittany, Belfast and Kilkenny with their two sons, one of whom recently wrote a play about the 1981 H-Block hunger strike.
01:20:00–01:29:59	Recalls being stopped at security checkpoints on visits to Ardoyne and being ‘subjected to all sorts of questions’ and ‘slapped around occasionally’ by British soldiers. On ‘two or three occasions’ he was threatened with detention under the Prevention of Terrorism Act and the phone in his father’s Belfast pub was tapped. Says the Irish community in Britain was fractured and quiescent in the 1970s, but became more self-assertive and politically outspoken in the 1980s, aided by the readiness of newspapers such as the <i>Irish Post</i> and politicians such as Jeremy Corbyn to highlight injustices. He followed the peace process ‘very closely’ from London and was ‘a very big supporter’ of John Hume and his political strategy of speaking to Sinn Féin in an effort to bring an end to the conflict.
01:30:00–01:39:59	Discusses the influx of young Irish people into 1980s London, who were better educated and more politically aware than their 1960s predecessors, and the latest generation of migrants, ‘for whom the Troubles mean nothing’ and who do not regard Sinn Féin as electorally ‘toxic’. Reflects with sadness on how, despite the political changes in NI, Ardoyne remains a very deprived area with ‘major social issues’. Believes that ‘the DUP are on their way out’ and that many NI Protestants would have ‘no difficulties’ with a non-sectarian united Ireland that respected their unionist heritage. Speaks of hardline loyalists in parts of Belfast making vast sums of money from prostitution involving ‘east European women’.
01:40:00–01:49:59	Comments on the lack of a visible associational culture among working-class NI loyalists in London or elsewhere in Britain. Provides a detailed account of his

	<p>extensive, hands-on role in overseeing the redevelopment of the Irish Cultural Centre in Hammersmith, which included obtaining a substantial contribution from the Irish government. Affirms his deep lifelong commitment to Irish culture, which has always been an 'inspiration' to him.</p>
01:50:00–01:52:54	<p>Cites some 'poignant' memories of neighbours and friends who were killed during the conflict and points out that his own mother 'died indirectly as a result of the Troubles', yet 'she doesn't appear in the statistics'. Offers the summative reflection that 'there's a whole history, if you like, you know, a layer of personal involvement that would actually take too long to go into' [...]. I think everybody's been marked by the Troubles, you know, in one way or another'.</p>