INTERVIEW L16: NICHOLA BROWN

Interviewer: Dr Fearghus Roulston
Interviewee: Nichola Brown [pseudonym]
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Location: Virtual
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.

NB: Hello.

FR: Hello [laughs].

NB: Hello again, should I say.

FR: Hello again, yeah, it's nice to see you again, can you hear me?

NB: Yeah, I can, yeah.

FR: Okay, good.

NB: Yeah, okay, how are you doing?

FR: Not too bad, not too bad. How are you?

NB: I'm alright, I've just, I've just, I've just been on a different Zoom meeting in Brighton to our daughter and children.

FR: Oh really [laughs], we're all–

NB: So I, I said I was coming to Brighton again, so.

FR: [laughs] Yeah, we're all getting used to travelling on Zoom nowadays.

NB: Zoom, yeah, yeah, yes, yeah, yeah, so yeah, it's strange times.

FR: It is strange times, but thank you very much for agreeing to do this under these slightly strange circumstances [laughs].

NB: Okay [laughs].

FR: So just before we get started, do you have any questions first of all about, about the process or–?

NB: Not really, because with you having interviewed John, you know, before, and he talked about it and said, you know, what, what you'd done and, and everything and what it was about, yeah, no, not really. I mean, it's your research project for what, MSc or something.

FR: It's not for a qualification for me actually, no, it's just a, it's a research project that's been funded by the Humanities Research Council.

NB: Right, right, yeah, yeah, and, and what, what will it be used for? I'm not, this isn't, this isn't because it bothers me, I'm just curious.

FR: No, it's okay, so it'll be, a book is the main thing, we're hoping to–

NB: Oh right, oh right, yeah.

FR: We're hoping to publish a book in the next couple of years.

NB: Terrific.

FR: And then maybe some articles and things like that as well, but, but a, a book is kind of the, the big thing.

NB: Right, right, yeah. I just finished for the second time, it's, it's not, it's not to do with the Irish, it's to do with climate change injustice, it's by Mary Robinson.

FR: Oh really.

NB: And it's just, it's called *Climate Justice*.

FR: *Climate Justice*.

NB: And it's really good, what's different about it is that it's, it's a very easy read and she, you know, she was commissioner of some humanities or something, you know, some international thing and in that time she met people from like, small communities who were really struggling already because of climate change, and so each of the chapters focuses on one of these people, mostly women because very often in small communities or developing communities it's the women who are having to walk further for their water or whatever it is. The only one that isn't that sort of community is a woman from when New Orleans was flooded, the hurricane and, you know, just how money was made available for big business to get back up again and all this sort of thing, but the people who'd lost, the poor people who'd lost their houses weren't, and basically most of those women, and there are a couple of guys, felt they had no voice, but then they began to gather, I think the one in New Orleans was a hairdresser, and they began to gather people and then quite, I think most of them then went to talk at big climate change, like the Paris agreement and stuff, even

though they were just, you know, really, they would have said, very ordinary women, but in fact, they were extraordinary women, anyway, that's, yeah–

FR: That sounds fascinating.

NB: Maybe it'll be that sort of a book.

FR: *Climate Justice*.

NB: *Climate Justice* and it's definitely Mary Robinson.

FR: Mary Robinson, I've written it down, I'll check that out, that sounds really interesting and kind of a bit like what, oral history, which is what we're doing in this, in this book as well.

NB: Exactly, yeah.

FR: So just a tiny little bit of like, technical housekeeping before we start. I know you've sent me through the consent form, but could you just give me, hold on actually [laughs], this is the first time I've done one of these on Zoom [laughs].

NB: Oh is it, okay.

FR: Yeah, so I'm just getting used to, maybe first of all could you say your name and today's date?

NB: Alright, Nichola Brown, yeah, and today's date I do believe is the eleventh, eleventh of June.

FR: That's right, perfect, thank you very much, and then the second thing is, could you just give your verbal consent to the, this, that this is being recorded?

NB: I'm very happy for this to be recorded.

FR: Fantastic [laughs], thank you.

NB: That's fine, that's grand.

FR: I think that's the, I think that's the kind of housekeeping out of the way [laughs].

NB: Okay, okay.

FR: Okay, so it's going to be kind of a life history interview, so we're going to start from your childhood and kind of work through.

NB: Yeah, yeah, I'm very old, so I hope I can remember.

FR: [laughs] Well, we'll have lots to talk about hopefully [laughs].

NB: Yeah, in the last three months my hair's gone white cos I haven't had a hairdresser.

FR: Oh [laughs] I've been having to cut mine, I've been having to cut mine at home as well [laughs].

NB: Oh my goodness [laughs]. Okay, just a reminder, I wasn't actually born in Ireland.

FR: Oh really, well, okay, well, let's start with–

NB: I'm Scottish.

FR: Okay, well, let's start with that, so where were you born?

NB: Okay, so I was born in Edinburgh, my parents both Scottish, and then my father, my father had been in the army. They were actually quite working-class, but he was, he was called up when he was twenty-two, right at the beginning of the Second World War, and it definitely changed his, his, I mean, he hated it, he was, he was a long time away from my elder, my mother and my, I had two brothers by then and he didn't see them for five years, and he was in the army for seven, so, but he had time to think, so when he came back instead of going back to the job that he'd had before, he did forestry, he was trained as a forester, so he hadn't had, he'd left school when he was fourteen because that's what you did, but he and my mother both did evening school and stuff, they were both actually I think quite bright, but, you know, that's the way things were then, so he did forestry. So he was in a forest in Aberfoyle in Perthshire and, and that was the first forest park in Scotland, it might've been the first for, did you see who that was, it might have been the first, the first forest park in Great Britain as well, I'm not sure, but what he found was he was a junior assistant forester and he wasn't sure that it was going anywhere, so he started looking around for other jobs and got a job in Tollymore Park in Newcastle, County Down, because Tollymore Park had just been bought in '46, '47, '48, I'm not sure, from the Earl of Roden and it was to be made into the first forest park in Northern Ireland, and that was my father's job, I mean, and basically it was, it was a work, an employment scheme, cos there were a lot of men who had had other skills doing, doing things that were no longer able, you know, that they just, that technology I suppose, or whatever it was then, had taken over, so that's, that's what he did and in 1953 Tollymore Park opened. So I went with my three brothers and we all moved to Newcastle to the, to live in the forest, we, it was a house in the forest, a forester's house, but it was Newcastle, so it wasn't the town, the town was about a mile and a half away, and then my younger sister and brother were born in Ireland and, and we were educated in Ireland and I went to Queen's University and then I went to Edinburgh University for a professional qualification, and then, and John and I were going out then and then he asked me to marry him and I said yes, and then I went back briefly to Northern Ireland, worked in Antrim social services, then he got a job in England and we came to England.

FR: Okay.

NB: So that's that bit of the story, so hopefully that's still valid, that's alright.

FR: Oh absolutely, absolutely, that, so that's a quick, a quick overview and then maybe I'd like some more details about that. So what age were you when your family moved to Newcastle?

NB: Four, three, four, yeah, yeah.

FR: And do you remember anything of that, do you remember the move or do you remember–?

NB: I don't remember the move, the strange thing is I, I thought I had a dream, and I remember saying to my mother one day about this dream, and she looked at me and cos I described a place and she looked at me and she said, **[00:10:00]** she said that's such and such a house in Aberfoyle, and she said how can you remember that, and so that was obviously when I was about two or three, so I remember that place outside, again, it was a forest and, yeah, I don't remember actually moving in, I don't remember, I don't remember coming over particularly, my older brother Alistair, who's five and a half years older, he, he just thought he'd come to paradise almost, he loved it, and he loves, and he always loved being, he was very Scottish, but he loved, you know, being at. I do remember going, going back to Scotland with our little car, you know, there was all us kids, but we somehow managed to squeeze in this car and at I guess Larne, I don't know if it would have been Larne or Belfast, I remember standing on the shore because they would put the car in a kind of like, basket almost, and I'm just looking at a squirrel, I hope you're not eating my raspberries, sitting out there, he knows I can't come to get him, and, and the car being hoisted up in this kind of net basket onto the ship, and I obviously thought, and I know my, it was probably my mother, she was oh I don't think they should be doing this and so on, and I, that was probably why I remember because it was obviously traumatic for somebody in the family, but that wasn't the coming, that was the going back, so yeah, so I don't, I do remember that first house though, I remember it very well.

FR: And then did you spend all of your childhood in Newcastle?

NB: Yeah, pretty much, so we lived in that house until I was ten and then my father got promoted to head forester and we moved to another house in the park. Do you know Tollymore?

FR: I've been to it, I know it fairly well, yeah.

NB: Okay, you know when you go into the park there's the, the big gate thing.

FR: Yes.

NB: Just on the left before you go in there's a bungalow.

FR: I think I, I think I know where you are, yeah.

NB: That was our house.

FR: Okay.

NB: That was our second house, the first house, if you look right away over, I think you can still see the roof of it over in, in the woods, yeah, so, and so I lived there until I went to university and then when I was at university, I don't know which, which year, my father was then, became chief forest officer in County Antrim, so they moved to Country Antrim and, yeah, and so, but I never, I never found Ballymena as home.

FR: That's where, that's where I'm from, Ballymena.

NB: Are you?

FR: Yes.

NB: God help you [laughs], sunshine city we used to call it. The thing was that when my parents moved there, that, the forestry commission as it was or whatever it was called then, were selling off their houses, and so mum and dad had to buy a house actually in Ballymena, so they bought a house out on Old Cullybackey Road, so yeah.

FR: But you, but you'd already left home by this stage?

NB: I'd already left home. I mean, obviously I went back there and, you know, but I was living in Belfast, first of all in student accommodation and then I got a job as an assistant social worker in Belfast City Hospital, during what is euphemistically called the Troubles, and that was quite an exciting job, and then because, because I needed that qualification because I'd, I'd done actually a degree in English literature and language and then did various interviews and thought I don't want to do any of these things, and then foolishly thought that social work was about helping people and so then decided to do social work, but I needed some other experience before I could do a qualification, so yeah, so I worked in Belfast Royal, Belfast City Hospital for a year, and I'd previously done a summer job in the Royal, one summer prior to that, yeah.

FR: Okay, and what kind of date are we talking about there? So you said the Troubles–

NB: Okay, so I went to university in 1966.

FR: 1966, okay.

NB: And my degree took four years, cos I did, I did an honours degree, and then I did a diploma in social studies to get a qualification. I, I could do that because I had had social and economic history as a subject in my first year and psychology, you know, in, you know, you kind of do three subjects, so because I had those two I could do the, the thing in social studies, the diploma, and then I needed the year's experience, so four years, so 1970, so that was 1970 to 1971, '71 to '72 I was at the hospital, and then '72 to '73 I was at Edinburgh University and that was diploma in social work.

FR: Okay, so just going back a little bit then to kind of growing up in Newcastle. What, what was that like, did you also find it, I think you said your brother said it was like a paradise?

NB: Yes, well, I mean, we had, we had the forest to ourselves, it was, it was an incredible and just, it was a wonderful childhood because we just had the, the run of the place, particularly up to 1953 because nobody else, nobody, nobody was coming in then, but really mostly what you find in all these places is that, go a mile away from the car park and you don't see anybody anyway, so yeah, so it was good, it was just the most beautiful place to live and, yeah, yeah, it was, it was good, it was good. I went to primary school in Newcastle, that was okay, the headmaster and headmistress were aggressive and horrible and hit people [laughs], that was very much part of the whole thing, I mean, it was just, yeah, yeah, it was, it was interesting. Looking back on it now, I mean, you just, these guys would have been put in jail, still, I remem-, I was, luckily I was quite a good girl and I was only smacked twice in that time, and I left when I was ten, my parents decided to send me to Down High a year early, I think they were fed up with the head. So the head would shout and yell at kids and he would whack, you know, you'd get whacked with a big stick, you'd hold your hand out, whack, and so on, so that, that was, that was that. Mrs Hunter took the beg-, the younger chil-, the, you know, years one and two or whatever it would be called now, and I remember the first time I got smacked was, I was, I'd finished whatever work I had and we had, you know, the little desks, two children and a space and two children, and I was sitting here and my friend Edna McCready was at the next desk and so there was a little space, and we'd finished our work, so we, we were screwing up little pieces of paper between us and then pulling them apart like little crackers, Mrs Hunter came along with her ruler, the side of the ruler across your knuckles, we were only five. Oh and then the other time I got smacked, I'm left-handed, and I, I smudged the ink, because we had ink, and I got smacked for that cos I'd smudged the page. I'm still left-handed, my father was left-handed too, what's remarkable about that is that he, he, you know, he was born in 1917 and he was not stopped, right, he was allowed to write with his right, with his left hand.

FR: Yeah, because you hear stories about children being forced to use their other hand, yeah.

NB: I mean, that generation particularly, yeah, yeah. But, having said that I was still very happy at school, I was always happy [laughs], I was really happy at school, and I think despite what they did, they were only in two classes and I never got into Mr Hunter's class because I left before that, my parents **[00:20:00]** decided to remove me, and I was in Miss, Miss Somebody's, Miss, trying to think her name, and Mrs Watt's class, that was the, the other, the other teachers as well, so yeah, and I had lots of friends and friends in the town. But the thing is living in the forest you always had to have your, your dad or somebody take you, take you down to see your friends until you were old enough to be allowed out on your bicycle and you could go on your own, so by the time I was about ten I could cycle into Newcastle and meet friends, particularly in the summer, so we'd usually meet at the swimming pool in Newcastle, yeah, so yeah.

FR: And so where did you go, where did you go on to secondary school?

NB: Down High, yeah, Down High, the grammar school.

FR: The grammar, and how, how was that?

NB: I loved it, yeah, I loved school, loved that, we, we had to, first of all had to go from Tollymore down to Newcastle station and get the bus, with all the other kids from Newcastle, to Downpatrick and, you know, that was just, there were about three, three buses, double-deck buses and a couple of coaches, and kids would be doing their homework on the bus and shouting and yelling and, yeah, all of, all of that stuff, and the first year or so that I went, my older brother, my eldest, oldest brother was there, he was five and a half years older, and then after I was two years in, my younger brother Malcolm came into Down High as well, yeah, so and my eldest brother of all, Albert, he'd been in, at Down High, he, he must have gone straight in there when we came from Scotland cos he would have been eleven, yeah, yeah, so, but he'd, he'd gone by the time I came, but Alistair was in the school, and then me, then my brother Malcolm, who I, sometimes I call Malcolm Callum, his name is Malcolm, but at home he was always called Callum, so just in case you think oh it sounds to me like there's seven of them, no, there wasn't [laughs], yeah, so–

FR: But still quite a big, quite a big family.

NB: Yeah, yeah, there was nineteen years between my oldest brother and my youngest brother.

FR: Wow.

NB: So Albert was born in 1939 and then my father was conscripted in 1940, January, February, and then he was trained in Aberdeen and he was trained as a [phone rings], I think John'll get, yeah, he's picked that, he was trained as an engineer which was like, amazing. I think what I just found recently is that he must have been doing technical drawing at night school, and so I think that's how he managed to get, and he was getting ninety-five, ninety-six, ninety-seven per cent in those, and I think then, although he joined the Highland Regiment, that they then put him into the, into the Royal Engineers, and so he became, that's what he did, he, and then eventually he was drawing maps and things, so then he was, so then he was at Aberdeen, and then my mother must have got pregnant and then they were sent to Belfast, so he was in Belfast and they were stationed at Campbell College, but the soldiers were not allowed to go into Campbell College, they camped in the grounds, we don't want those sappers in our college, and so I think he was being trained then for various things, I'm not sure because obviously he didn't talk much about his ar-, about army life at all once he came home. So then he, then my mother was pregnant and they'd, they'd lived for some while or for a little while in Belfast and in Donaghadee, I have no idea why Donaghadee, I mean, it wouldn't have been their choice I'm sure, it just have been, happened, but my mother had some friends, then in January 1942 she was going back to Edinburgh and got across Larne-Stranraer and then, so she was seven months pregnant with a two-year-old and they got stranded in the snow at Stranraer for days.

FR: Really?

NB: Well, there was a war on, so who cared, but I can't, you know, I can't imagine what that must have been like with a toddler and being very heavily pregnant, anyway, she managed not to drop the baby and my brother Alistair was born in March 1942. My father did see him, but he was by then in England with the army, and I found a letter where he said his last kiss was on the first of July 1942 and he didn't see my mother or brothers again until December 1945.

FR: So almost two and a half years, wow.

NB: It's more than that, '42, yeah, it's three and a half years.

FR: Oh yeah, you're, three, three and a half years, yeah.

NB: Three and a half years, yeah, yeah.

FR: Wow.

NB: And then he was repatriated and I thought that meant finished, but of course that's not the end, he was still six months, I can't remember what that's called, but you don't get out of the army immediately you get home, so yeah, and at one stage he, he was in hospital at Edinburgh Castle once he got home cos he, he'd had malaria and it came back again and there was an army hospital at the castle, so yeah, so, so yeah, so I was talking about, so that was a big space until I came along, and my mother had a miscarriage first of all, she had several miscarriages, we, we could have been eleven, but she had a miscarriage and then I came along, and then two years later my brother Roddy, my brother Malcolm, and then there was a space of four and a half years, something like that, and then three years, and so my youngest brother Roddy is nineteen years younger than my oldest brother.

FR: Wow, okay.

NB: So they hardly knew one another at all.

FR: No, that's such a a big gap, I suppose you wouldn't really.

NB: No, cos my eldest brother went to university when he was seventeen, he won a state scholarship and so the school got a day off because there hadn't been one of those won in fifty years.

FR: Wow.

NB: And so he went to university when he was seventeen and then he, he wanted to do VSO, but the head of the sch-, oh he did maths, but the head of school said why are you going off, why are you going off to teach children in Africa when we need maths teachers here, come and teach in the school, so he, he taught in the school while I was there and that was incredibly embarrassing.

FR: Oh I can imagine, so he, he was teaching at the school that you were attending?

NB: He act-, he actually taught me maths in one class.

FR: That must have been [laughs]–

NB: And he wasn't, he wa-, my oldest brother isn't just an ordinary kind of a guy, he is, it, he, it's, he went to America eventually, he was, he was, I suppose you'd call it, what would you call it, headhunted by, what was the big computer place then, can't remember, so anyway, he taught for a couple of years at the school and John said that his enthusiasm for maths is because of my brother, so he was certainly very enthusiastic about maths and did all sorts of things. I think one of things that John remembers particularly was that he, there was one lad in our class, in our year, not so much our class, in our year, who would go down even though he was obviously under age, he would go down and put bets on the horses at Downpatrick, you know the racecourse?

FR: Yeah, I do.

NB: He would put bets on the horses, and Albert, my brother, would, did a whole thing on chance and how foolish betting was and, you know, chances and all this kind of thing, which I don't know if Thomas McCurry ever remembered, but certainly John did, and a number of years ago when we had a year reunion, they sort of like, well, I mean, people in the class went all over the world, there were people, as you, as you know, they were in Canada and they were in America, they were in the US and there were a lot in England, Scotland, that **[00:30:00]** was all about looking for jobs, you know, but this guy, McCurry, had gone to Australia, now he was dead, he'd been shot and you kind of think, was it like the wild west, did he get shot because he'd been betting or something [laughs], you know, nobody knew why, but did, you know, Thomas McCurry got shot in Australia.

FR: Shot, shot in Australia?

NB: Shot in Australia [laughs], like something out of a film, it's not funny, it's not funny, but, I mean, and that, and he must have been shot about thirty years ago I suppose.

FR: Wow, strange.

NB: Yeah, so he was the guy that put bets on the horses, you know, you just think well, he, maybe he just got caught up in something, who knows, yeah, so yeah, so my brother, my brother taught at the school and I was at the school, I was in the same class as John, the same year, same, in fact, not just the same class, we were in the same year, we were in the same class, you know, we used, you were streamed.

FR: Yeah.

NB: So we were in the same class through school.

FR: So that was how you, that was how you met then?

NB: That's how we met.

FR: Yeah, I, I just very quickly wanted to ask, I don't think you've mentioned this, why did your parents, did they want to move to Northern Ireland, or was it just a posting came up and they took it or was there some kind of–?

NB: Yeah, yeah, yeah, the, there was a job that was better than the one, dad, my father said that the jobs in Scotland, because he was one of the latest ones back home and then trained and so on, he said the jobs were only dead men's shoes, so, and in fact, at one stage he, they were thinking well, maybe, a lot of Scottish people went to Rhodesia, as it was then–

FR: Yes, yes, that's right.

NB: And he was looking all over, he'd, you know, all over to, to see where there were jobs, but this one fitted the profile so well that, you know, cos he'd been in the first ever forest park in Scotland, so, you know, yeah.

FR: Makes sense, yeah, and so did you, did you think of yourself as, as Scottish or did you have a kind of sense of difference from other Northern Irish people?

NB: We were definitely Scottish, I mean, we lived, we all still had Scottish accents.

FR: Sure.

NB: Even the two that were born in Ireland had Scottish accents [laughs]. Don't leave me [laughs].

FR: Sorry, sorry [laughs], I was turning a light off in the corner there.

NB: [laughs] Yeah, yeah, no, we were the Scottish family, yeah, yes.

FR: Okay, that's interesting.

NB: Yes, yes, so we were different, not just because of my eldest brother.

FR: And were you a church-going family, was it like, a–?

NB: Yes, yes, we were, my parents had been very involved in, I think that's how they met actually, was in the church in Edinburgh. I'm not sure about that because actually my father and my mother's brother were friends, so whether it was that or whether it was the church or whether it was a combination, so when we went to Northern Ireland, Newcastle was just a small place and the church that they'd belonged to in Scotland, in Edinburgh, there wasn't one equivalent, so they decided well, the Presbyterian church is the Church of Scotland and we're Scottish, so we'll go to the Presbyterian church.

FR: It makes sense, yeah.

NB: So that was it, yeah.

FR: And, and did you, and would you have gone to church then at that age?

NB: Yes, yeah, always, yeah, yeah, and in my, well, I suppose at about ten, eleven I joined what was the youth group there which was the Girls' Brigade, cos they didn't do Scouts and Guides, they did BB and Girls' Brigade, and also I was part of the youth club on a Friday when I was in my teens, yeah.

FR: And what sort of things did that entail?

NB: Well, the, the Girls' Brigade was just, you did lots and lots of badges of all sorts of things, whether it was from, I mean, I had an armful of badges and, you know, whether it was first aid or learning how to put the electricity on and off in the house or skipping, that was another, we didn't do a lot of camping, that sort of thing, but you did do, you know, kind of lighting fires and things, and I can't remember all the sorts of things, but what I did do was I did the Duke of Edinburgh award. I was the first girl in Northern Ireland to get the bronze Duke of Edinburgh award.

FR: There you go, that's amazing [laughs].

NB: Yeah, I know [laughs], I know, it's amazing.

FR: And were, were you, was that because it was discouraged for a girl to do it, it was only–?

NB: No, it was, it was cos, it was because I'm so old and, you know, in England there weren't that many, it was just, it was beginning to come in for, for girls.

FR: I see.

NB: Yeah, so yeah, so I did all that, I did the hikes and the, the hikes in the rain and all the rest of it, and what have we got there John?

JB: Rhubarb.

NB: Oh I've got more rhubarb from a neighbour, I take her eggs and she gives me rhubarb. I'd love a cup of tea, John. Yeah, so and then I did the silver and, but I didn't do the gold because by the time I would have finished it I would have been at university and at that stage you didn't continue, now I think you would, but at that stage, you know, that was a school type thing, not that I did it through school, but I did it through the youth organisation and I really enjoyed it, it was good fun, so yeah.

FR: I was, I was in the Boys' Brigade and I also got the, I remember the badges [laughs].

NB: I, I have, I still have my red sash because I became an officer, I was a sergeant by the time I was eighteen [laughs], shouting at people.

FR: I remember a lot of–

NB: Tallest on the right, shortest on the left and single rank sides.

FR: Yes [laughs], I remember a lot of marching to and fro in the Boys' Brigade.

NB: There's a great deal of marching, yeah, yeah, and we did displays and things as well, which again were quite good fun.

FR: Well, so actually what my sort of last question about that period of, of your childhood, I just wanted to, so your parents were in the Presbyterian church, would they have been involved in kind of politics or Orange culture or anything like that?

NB: Absolutely, definitely not, absolutely, definitely not, and in fact, my father wouldn't even join the British Legion as he felt that it was, he employed, he employed a lot of Catholics.

FR: That's interesting.

NB: It was very, it was very important to him, just, what was important to him was just being even-handed with everybody, you know, and, but because it was an employment scheme, I would say probably, there was probably more Catholics than, than Protestants, thanks darling, in the forest, and although I didn't, although obviously I went to the state school, we all went to the state schools, so there weren't many Catholics, there were a lot, we, we just knew a lot of the folks in the forest that were, that were, you know. It's funny to call men, men that were obviously grown-up men friends, but there were some guys that obviously became friends because they would come down to the house and so on and, and there was a guy, a farmer, he was from near Downpatrick and he was, he was such, he was such an Irishman, he loved his horses, he just loved his horses, I don't know if he did them at Downpatrick racecourse or not, but he gave us little ponies twice, or my father got, you know, at different times, through our childhood, so yeah, but he ran sheep up on the back of the mou-, of the forest, up the mountains, and so he would come in often and, and visit, visit my mum and so on and he wouldn't sit down, no, no, I'll not sit down, I'll not sit down, no, no, and she would say well, Joe, will you have, Joe McGinn, Joe, will you have a cup of tea, oh no, no, no, no, oh no, no, and eventually she would say will you have, will you have a wee cake, have a wee, oh a cup of tea in my hand, in other words not sitting down, cup of tea in my hand.

FR: But not sitting down.

NB: I'm not sitting down, I'll have a cup of tea, but I'll, you know, and he, he gave me a compliment that I just hated one day. I was, I don't know what I was doing, I was out in the yard doing something, and as far as he was concerned I'm sure this was a compliment cos it was to do with a horse, and he said look at that girl there, strong as a horse, strong as a horse, at fourteen **[00:40:00]** I don't want to be strong as a horse, but I was, still am, yeah, so just–

FR: But it was meant kindly.

NB: It was meant kindly cos he loved horses after all, you know, so yeah, yeah.

FR: But that's interesting, so, so you, you kind of knew Catholics at stage and your parents were quite like, explicitly non-sectarian or non–

NB: Yeah, yeah, I mean, they never actually said it, and what we didn't know, I mean, we knew that my mother's, my mother's maternal side of the family had come from Ireland, she was very proud of that, she had, she'd the red hair and the blue eyes to prove it, it wasn't cos she was Scottish, but what we found out that, was that actually, my sister started to go back into some genealogy at one stage because she was bored, and we discovered that that side of the family, the Perrys must have, they, they came to England in 1851–

FR: Wow, okay.

NB: From Roscommon, which was badly hit by the Famine, so we're fairly con-, fairly sure that they were surviv-, cos they were poor, they were survivors of the Famine, so they came, they must have come to Liverpool, but we haven't found that, then the next child was born in Newcastle upon Tyne and then the next, all the, all the rest were born in Edinburgh, and they were in the Canongate, the poor part of Edinburgh, and various records allude to the big Catholic cathedral just at the north of Leith Walk.

FR: Yeah, I know, I know exactly, yeah.

NB: Yeah, yeah, yeah, so yeah, so I've been in there, but I didn't get any feeling of this is where I belong or anything it was just, you know, just a track [laughs], yeah, yeah, yes, so–

FR: So there's an Irish connection, kind of historic–

NB: Yes, but I don't think my mother knew more than just her father was from Irish–

FR: Yeah.

NB: Yeah, yeah, so yeah, yeah, so that was his, that was my mother's father's side, my mother's mother's side was from Aberdeenshire, rural Aberdeen, and my father's people were from Shetland, they kept moving south and, Shetland and England, so the Shetland girl went to work in a hotel in England and married and then they came back up to Scotland, so yeah, that's the background, but, but yes, my, my parents were, yeah.

FR: And so going back to yourself then, you, you decided to go to university in, in Northern Ireland, so Queen's.

NB: Yes, there wasn't, at that stage you just went, if there was something on at Queen's you went there. My eldest brother, as I say, he went to Queen's, my next brother, Alistair, he wanted to study something to do with biology, zoology, somewhere around that, which was not available at Queen's at that time and so he got, so he went to Reading University, which

was very unusual, but after the first year there he wanted to change courses to zoology, which was offered at Queen's, and so if he wanted to keep his grant he had to come back to Queen's, so it, it was I think probably about grant money, and so he came back, I mean, he went into second year cos, you know, that was okay, but he couldn't stay at Reading to do it, he had to, he had to return to Belfast, so I presume that was why, but in 1966 I would say, that was the first year of UCAS.

FR: Oh okay.

NB: So no, that's not, that's not true, I did apply to Edinburgh University cos I always wanted to go home, that's right, and, but, and I had, I had digs, I wouldn't, I wouldn't choose this now, but at the time I suppose my mother persuaded me, I had digs with one of her friends, or family friends and that was all sorted, and then sometime in August the, the friend's sons divorced, or the friend's son separated from his wife and so he got the room that I was going to have, but by then it was too late for me to get into halls of residence in Edinburgh University, but I still had a place at Queen's, and so I decided to go to Queen's because I didn't want to be boarded somewhere way out in the sticks in, in Edinburgh.

FR: Sure.

NB: Yeah, so, so, so yeah.

FR: And so what did you–?

NB: But it was the, it was the first year of UCAS cos obviously I'd applied to Edinburgh through UCAS, but I still had Queen's waiting on another application.

FR: As a, as a back-up?

NB: Yeah, yeah, so, so, but because it was UCAS there were, there were quite a lot of English students that wanted to come to Northern Ireland because of what was going on and, you know, all that sort of, so it was the first big influx of other than Irish students then.

FR: So nineteen-.

NB: I, I, I suspect that it has actually gone the other way again, that it's now more Irish students than mixed, I don't know, it's just a feeling I get.

FR: Mmm, so you studied English, is that right?

NB: Yeah, I, I took English, history and psychology in my first year, then I was offered honours in history and English, and I didn't know what to do cos I liked them both and I had no time for psychology really, and, and I think that was because just, it was a sub-subject for me, and so lots of people had it as a sub-subject, so it was, it was an enormous number of students, and quite a strange man that headed up the department and, yeah, so then I was offered joint honours, but I didn't fancy that because I knew people who'd taken it and you don't, you don't feel like you belong to either department, so in the end I plumped for

English, so yeah, and then that, and then that's another, so then if you do, if you do an, the, the three-year degree is three years, but if you take it as honours you have an extra year on top of that. So my mother said to me once by the time you finish studying you might as well have done a medicine degree cos you've taken this long, which is true [laughs].

FR: And did you move to Belfast then to study or did you travel?

NB: Yeah, yes, yes, definitely, definitely, definitely didn't want to stay at home [laughs], I wanted my freedom, yeah, I moved into halls of residence, they were terrific, it was great fun, but I was a very serious student, no, I wasn't, so it was a new halls of residence which have been demolished already and they were, they were tower blocks, ten floors, and there were three halls for men and one hall for women, and then you had the refectory and so on, and then each floor had, I think something like, ten, ten or twelve students, some were double rooms and some were single rooms, and the, the women's, the women's hall and this was, this was, this was something that was, really annoyed the women, the women's hall had three, they'd loo-, toilets, but then the bathrooms, you had three baths on, bathrooms, rooms with baths in it, on the, on your floor plus one shower, whereas the men had three showers and one bath. Who thought that we would have wanted more baths than showers.

FR: [laughs] That's a strange, gendered–

NB: Yeah, so you'd, you'd have women running up and down the stai-, the stairs trying to find a shower that was empty because your shower was, always got somebody in it, yeah, interesting isn't it, so, there we are.

FR: Where, where in Belfast were the halls?

NB: Up the Malone Road.

FR: Malone Road, okay.

NB: Yeah, so they were up the Malone Road, you could see **[00:50:00]** from the towers over to Stranmillis College, so, and in fact, there were some paths that you could kind of get through from on, from Stran to Queen's, to sort of, you know, put it in context, and from, from, you didn't have to go out the main entrance, there was paths round at the bottom, I suppose it would have been about three quarters of a mile down to the main student block, or to the main university, but you came through, walked past the psychology department which was very close, I suppose cos it's quite new, and then walked down and you'd walk past the big engineering block and then down to the students' union and the main thing, and then there was the big library and the houses that had the English and history and languages and all the rest of it, yeah.

FR: And so this is Belfast in 1966?

NB: 1966 and, my claim to fame, Seamus Heaney was one of our lecturers.

FR: Oh wow.

NB: Yeah, and also as it happens, I was in his tutorial group in my first year.

FR: Wow.

NB: So yeah, he was a really nice, really nice bloke. I mean, he was beginning to get famous then, just beginning and I think a year or two after that he left because, you know, he couldn't keep doing what he was doing and so on, but yeah, he was just a really nice bloke, not full of himself in any way or anything, no.

FR: That's, that's a–

NB: Good lecturer.

FR: That's amazing [laughs], that is a claim to fame.

NB: Yeah, yeah.

FR: And what, what was Belfast like in that early period, did you, did you like it?

NB: Yeah, yeah, I did. I mean, most of what I did was up round the university, you know, meeting people, going to their dances and things, went into town with, of course you'd walk into town mostly, maybe get the bus back, walk down Sandy Row, walk down the other place because down Sandy Row, I, I always made my own clothes in those days, you had short skirts and I wasn't so wide and a yard of material would make me a skirt [laughs] and that sort of thing, and I could get, I could get cheap material and stuff down Sandy Row, and then if you went the other way there was a second-hand shop and one of my friends would get second-hand clothes and, well, recycle them now is what you'd call it, but yeah, upcycle, yeah, so yeah, go into town a bit, occasionally go to cinema. Did we, did we notice in the early days, not, the Troubles didn't bother too much when, where, in the early years, no, of course they wouldn't because there was nothing, 1968 was the start, by 1970 and the early seventies it was much more noticeable and, but mostly, I mean, when I worked in the hospital it was on red light all the time, pretty much.

FR: What, what does that mean, on, on red light?

NB: It's always on emergency, yeah, yes, and you'd hear things that happened. I mean, there was one awful, there were two awful things I remember in that year, not being involved in particularly, but one year, one time, we heard of an old guy who had jumped out of a window, he was being, but he thought the IRA were, were after him and he jumped out the window, obviously hallucinating, you know, all the rest of it. Another time there was, the daughter of one of the, one of the politicians was, I, I can't remember if her hair was just cut or if she actually had, you know, the tarred and feathered, something awful like that, came into our hospital, so yeah, and then we got used to just soldiers being around, they always walked in the same way, three would walk backwards and one would walk forwards.

FR: So yeah, okay,

NB: With, with their rifles up, and there was one time when I was working at Belfast City, I'd to, I'd to go round to the Royal with something or for something, so I'd cycled out, down that bit, I can't remember what it was called, but it was a redevelopment area, it wasn't bombs that, it was the bit that they would always show on television of bomb-torn Belfast and it wasn't, it was, it was houses that had been, you know, mostly pulled down for redevelopment, but anyway, there were houses on one side of the street and I was coming along to a T-junction and I saw some soldiers suddenly get down on their knees and point up to a house, they obviously thought something was there and the re-, the lights turned red and I thought do I stop, I mean, you know, this goes through your head so quickly, I'm like, do I stop and risk maybe being in the centre of fire, if there is any, or do I just keep going, so I just kept going and, I mean, really, mostly I do stop at red lights, but I didn't then, so I just kept cycling past the soldiers then, so yeah, so there were, there were times that you did wonder, I mean, there was, there was, there was a Friday that there were bombs going off and I knew that John had gone down into town for a haircut, and I knew my brother had been in town as well, and–

FR: This is 1972, maybe.

NB: '71, '72, not, yeah.

FR: Bloody Friday they call it, may-

NB: Yeah, I, no, it wasn't, I don't think it was Bloody Friday, it was another, another Friday, I don't think it was actually Bloody, Bloody Friday, and I was concerned about, you know, had either of them got caught up in anything, cos you didn't have mobile phones or anything, you know, and of course both of them were perfectly alright. I think the saddest thing of all was, so by then I was living off the Stranmillis Road with friends, so I lived with, I'd lived, the last year of my university I'd lived with three English girls and then they moved to another house, but I stayed in that same house and three Irish girls moved, moved in, and one of them was Anne Moroney and she was from Dublin, and she was just the sweetest, sweetest person, she was just oh, and she'd, she'd stand like this and she'd just och now, oh now, she'd be like this, very, very Irish, but she was already a, she was already a social worker and she had, she'd a little mini and she came back one day and she was just shaking and obvious-, and, you know, white and, you know, so she'd gone to visit a family in, oh I can't remember, one of the really rough republican areas, and the family wasn't in, so since she was in the area she thought I'll go up and see such-and-such, another family, so she, in the car driving up the street went past four soldiers and then decided, actually I don't have time to do this before my next appointment, so she did a turn in the road, came back down, the soldiers down on their knees to shoot towards her car, she screeched to a halt and they questioned her, said what are you doing, you turned round there right past us, and she was like, this is what I'm doing, I'm a social worker, you know, and so she was alright, but she said she could see them in her mirror, she suddenly realised what was happening, so that, that was quite scary. I mean, we, we, I went, I went out on some home visits and, I mean, you did have to climb barricades and things, yeah, it was, it was part of what you did, but looking back on it, yeah, yes, so early seventies things were, but the saddest of all was, so

one of, one of the girls that, that I subsequently shared a house with that, I shared a house with two, two other people who also had worked in the City hospital, Janet McKay, who was a Protestant, and Mary Cleary, who was Mary from Tipperary, a Catholic, so it was the three of us, and Mary had previously, **[01:00:00]** as I say, worked in the City hospital, lived in, in a house with and again, another mixed group of social workers or student social workers or whatever, and they were, one of them was caught up in the Abercorn bomb, do you know what I mean?

FR: Yes, I do.

NB: So she was, she'd been in, in the, in the little restaurant upstairs when the bomb went off and she lost a leg, but probably and, and her lungs had collapsed as well, she was, she was in hospital for a long, long, long, long time and just, you know, just in her early twenties and she then, I, I knew her, but she wasn't a close friend, Mary was my close friend, this other girl was already I think a social worker, but just, you know, early days and, and then she had to go for rehab, and they also said that if they had, if that, she hadn't lost that leg they probably would have taken the other leg, it was pretty mashed up as well, but what was, she was a Protestant and she'd pretty much given up, she didn't want to live, what was there to live for, you know, she'd only one leg and she was ill and how long was this going to take, and so then she, she, she was lying in the bed one day and this is, this is what I heard, and a young priest came up to see her and prayed, I don't know what he prayed, but she said afterwards it was at that stage that she decided to fight and to, you know, recover, and she did, but that's interest actually, it was a priest and not, yeah, so there's all these things that, you know, that, that happened and so on, and, and another thing going back to my father and the forest, of course it was a government place and there was, there was a building up at the car park that had, it's like, it was called a museum, so it had all sorts of models, stuffed animals, which you wouldn't do now, but models and things and a thing saying what trees there were and my father had done a lot of the work on it, and it was blown up. It was only after it was blown up that he realised that he'd been warned to stay away, somebody, cos we lived very close, it was up, we, well, I told you where we lived, the park, the main park was about a mile at most, and it was only afterwards that he realised that actually somebody had tried to tell him to stay away on such-and-such a night.

FR: It seems like a very strange choice of target.

NB: It's a government building–

FR: A government building–

NB: Even though it was, I know–

FR: That, a little park museum, I mean, it's not–

NB: I know, I know, but, you know, these, there were guys that, alright, we're in, I don't know, this local group and we've got to do something, and, and, you know, we can't get to Belfast cos we haven't got a car or whatever, I don't know, I don't know.

FR: Sure, sure, yeah.

NB: But, you know.

FR: Any, any government building will do.

NB: Yeah, we'll just, we'll just show them, so, I was a bit sad really, but yeah.

FR: No, absolutely, and were your parents worried for you being a social worker living in Belfast, home visits, while all this was going on?

NB: I don't think they knew mostly what I was doing, they thought I was in the hospital, so that was, yeah, so that I think, yeah, I, I don't know if my mother worried or how much my mother worried or not, but I wasn't aware of her worrying, particularly, yeah, so–

FR: And is, is John still in Belfast at this stage?

NB: Yes, he was still in Belfast, so he was, he stayed in Belfast, he was still in Belfast while I was at Edinburgh, so we married, we married at, so he did his degree and then he did his PhD, so he, he was still at Queen's all that time and then when I came back, when I came back I worked, as I say, for a short time in Antrim social services and then he got a job with the Met Office and we moved here. He hadn't quite, I think he had, he had by then submitted his PhD, but he didn't get his degree till that Christmas, and that was '73.

FR: '73, okay.

NB: Yeah.

FR: So when do you move to Edinburgh within this?

NB: The year before, so I, I finished in, I finished in August '73, so it was a full-year course, so it was September '72 to August '73, so yeah, you had lectures, but you had two placements, so I had a placement in Edinburgh, Edinburgh, what was it called, it's like, mental health, hospitals, the first one, and then the second one was in, just off Princes Street in Edinburgh because I didn't have a car, so I was lucky, I got to stay in Edinburgh for my second long placement, which was in an adoption agency in Edinburgh, and at that stage, and I think still, adoption regulations were very different to what they are here.

FR: Okay, and then, did you and John get married in Northern Ireland?

NB: Belfa-, yes, in, in Ballymena, yeah.

FR: In Ballymena [laughs]?

NB: In Ballymena, we got married in, because that's where my parents' church was and stuff, and in some ways it became more their wedding than mine I think [laughs] and, yeah, so they were paying for it, so they would say you can have this many friends, very different

to what my children did, they, I feel we're the generation that missed out really because my parents decided who, who the guests would be, my children decided who the guests, I've never had the chance, so anyway, so yeah, we got married in West church in Ballymena and had the reception out at a hotel, out towards, sort of north of, not Cullybackey, not as far as that, somewhere out there, yeah, and then, and then we, we didn't like, as they, as people do now, we didn't stay over at the hotel, we got in the car and went to Dublin and got on a plane and travelled to Corfu overnight.

FR: Corfu, wow.

NB: And, yeah, so got, got to Corfu at something like seven a.m., or got to the hotel at seven a.m., so yeah.

FR: Wow, and did you know at that stage that you were planning to leave Northern Ireland?

NB: Yes, yeah, cos we knew, we knew that John had the job in, as far as, because I by then had a social work qualification and it was in the days where you knew you'd get a job, we waited till he got the job and then I applied to Berkshire social services.

FR: And do you remember kind of making a decision to leave Northern Ireland, or did you want to leave Northern Ireland, or was–?

NB: I think, I think we just, I think I just assumed I would. My brothers had both left Northern Ireland and because I was by then engaged to John and I knew he was, you know, the better jobs were not in Northern Ireland by and large, if you wanted a better job you had, you had to go somewhere else, so yeah, so I just assumed that we would, and then, so all my family, all six of us left.

FR Wow, okay.

NB: Yeah, all six of us left.

FR: So there's a kind of idea that it's inevitable almost that you're going to leave.

NB: Yeah, yeah, so my eldest brother, just let me get something from in [pauses], so my eldest brother, he went to, he taught in Down High, as I said, for a little while and then when he was on holiday in Sweden, I don't know how this works, he was on holiday in Sweden and somebody from IBM offered him a job [laughs], and, but, but he said he wouldn't take it because he felt an, **[01:10:00]** an obligation to his students back, his, you know, people like John actually, so he, he said he wouldn't take it, so they, they said okay, so in the end, but he said he would take it after that, so then he finished that academic year and then went to IBM in South-, Southampton and then to IBM in the US, and he's never come back, and he's eighty-one, eighty-two now, eighty-one, eighty-two, yeah, yeah, he married an American, got American daughters, grandchildren and became an American citizen, and just to let you know that we were still Scottish, my mother said when he'd become an American citizen he was born a Scotsman and he will die a Scotsman.

FR: [laughs] Okay, so–

NB: But he, he, he's still got a slight Scottish accent and he, he will wear a kilt on any occasion that he can possibly wear his kilt, and sing Scottish songs at you, so yeah, so then Alistair, he, his first job, I'm trying to, his first job was in Mayo in the west of Ireland, in salmon fisheries, so he was there for a couple of years, two or three years, then he got a job with World Health in Uganda, so he went to Uganda for five years with his family and his second, his first daughter was born in Belfast and the second daughter was born in Uganda. He, he, his research then with World Health was on trypanosomiasis, which is sleeping sickness in cattle.

FR: Okay, yes, I've heard of sleeping sickness, yeah.

NB: Right, trypanosomiasis, so then when he came back, he came he came back to Salford University, yeah, and then he was there for a couple, I think that was when he was finishing his PhD by then, so he didn't do one immediately after university, but obviously decided, so I think he had to spend a year in Salford to finish it or something and then, then he got a job with Dinorwic power station in north Wales, so, so that was what the electricity board would have been, but his job was, because he was a zoologist, they had some fish, so do you know what Dinorwic is?

FR: No.

NB: Okay, basically it's, it's in north Wales near Anglesey, and so it's a national park, whatever, and so they couldn't make a mess, so basically they carved out a mountain to put the power station in it, inside, D-i-n-o-r-w-i-c, and, I mean, it's just amazing and I, it's a back-up, so it, it hardly ever, and so it's the water comes in and, you know, it's that, I think it's, it's water or something or other, but it only tends to go into operation at times like football World Cup, half-time when everybody goes and puts on their cup of tea, that, you know, yeah, so yeah, so he was there, but he was there as a zoologist because they had fish in a very cold water stream, which had to be preserved because that was the only place that these fish were or something, so he, that's what he did at the start, but then gradually he moved into more management and the rest of it, so basically he stayed with, with them, although they moved to Harrogate for a while and then they moved back to north Wales, yeah, so yeah, so he left, but he went to west Ireland, Africa and then, and then back. My brother Malcolm went to Queen's and then he got a teaching job, a biolo-, as a biology teacher in London, but, well, you'll talk to him actually, so I'll not bother telling you anymore about–

FR: Yeah, yeah, I've, I've been in, I've been in touch with him a little bit.

NB: Yeah, yes, so, and then my sister Fiona, she went to Stirling University and then she got her first job in Kent, teaching, and then Roddy went to university in Queen's to do architecture, he took his year out in London and then never went back to finish his degree, got into the music scene, did that for a few years and then decided to do a degree, which he had then to pay for himself, and I think his girlfriend paid for most of it, and he did a degree

in computer science, he did a science degree of some sort and then has worked for things like Barclays Bank or whatever, yeah, on the IT side, so, so yeah, so we've all left.

FR: Had you been to England before you moved?

NB: No, no, I hadn't, no, I hadn't. I'd been lots to Scotland, and to the Republic of Ireland, but no, I'd never been to England. The first time I went to England was when I was a student and I, I had an interview for the Post Office in London.

FR: Okay, and do you remember your kind of first impressions of moving, when you and John moved?

NB: Oh yes, yes [laughs], yes. It was like, the sort of, I worked in Berkshire, but I worked for Newbury social services, and that was probably a mistake, but I didn't know Berkshire well enough to know, you know, that was actually quite west, and a lot of the people I worked with lived wester, lived west of Newbury cos it was cheaper rather than in Newbury, so not many of them ever, I don't think any of them ever came to our little flat, which we had for six months, a furnished flat, but oh I'd say to people, you know, just drop in, any time, and they'd ring up to drop in, but that's not dropping in, I felt queer, that's not dropping in, so don't you get it, that, and that was that was a big thing and, you know, just door open and, yeah, and then the other thing was, that a lot of the shops seemed to close at four o'clock on a Saturday, what, of course they don't now, but, you know, I remember going, thinking oh I'll go out and get something and the butcher was closed already or whatever, so yeah, so and we found people were mu-, were friendly enough, but not the way Irish people are friendly, do you know what I mean?

FR: Yeah.

NB: Yeah, so, yes, there, there's, not standoffish, just more reserved I suppose, English people, most English people, but then there would be other ones that would be maybe north English people and they'd be different again, cos, cos they were incomers as well, so yeah, yeah, so, so we lived here and then, and then we moved, so we were here six, six months in Wokingham and it wasn't that, cos Wokingham is quite, seen as quite posh, but we were, it was, it was a flat that we could have, we thought we'd live in Reading, cos we'd friends who lived in, in Reading, Irish friends, he'd been, he, the McIlveens, he'd been the year ahead of John at Queen's University and got a job in the Met Office as well, so he was a, they were a year ahead, and we assumed cos they lived in Reading we'd probably get a place in Reading as well, but we couldn't find one at the time, so we got, we'd six, six months in this place and then through the Met Office we got an unfurnished Bracknell Development flat, cos Bracknell was a new town and so the Met Office had a kind of theoretical number of, they didn't have the properties, but they, they could say, we're a key worker place type thing, so we got one of their, one of their flats in Great Hollands, which is now quite notor-, well, became quite notorious, I think it's moved along a bit, but at that stage it was all new, **[01:20:00]** new flats and things and big new housing estate and we'd a third-floor flat, and so we lived in that and we thought, the houses at that stage were about five and a half thousand pounds, and we thought well, we could never afford that, it just seemed, you know, when you think about it now, but then after, after about three years the

houses had all, had already started to zoom up and our, we got our first house then, we got, we were going to, we're going to try and we got our first house in Wokingham and again, not particularly cos it was Wokingham, and it, I think it was twelve thousand pounds, a semi-detached, so yeah.

FR: Different, different times for house prices.

NB: Yeah, yeah, I know, I know, I know, so, so yeah–

FR: And are you working as a social worker still in this period?

NB: Social worker, I was work-, yeah, I was still working as a social worker. By then I was working for Bracknell social services because Berkshire had split into five unitary authorities, which was just ridiculous, but anyway, but that meant, I mean, it's not a big county, what, what, I think the government at that stage was thinking oh everybody will go into small unitary authorities, it's absolute, absolute madness, sorry, this is a completely different thing, but, you know, it meant that like, Bracknell, which was a small unitary authority, if you had homeless people, Reading wouldn't let you use, use the, their places or Slough because they were saving them for their homeless, where do you put homeless men, you know, that sort of thing, but, I mean, that's, and of course you've got these huge structures of top-heavy, in six different areas instead of one, anyway, I moved to Bracknell because we lived in Bracknell by then and I just, oh I know what happened, the, the fuel crisis.

FR: Ah yes.

NB: So I couldn't, I couldn't get to Newbury, I didn't have enough petrol, l so at that stage decided just move to Bracknell, so worked for Bracknell social services for quite a long time and then, then got pregnant and stopped working, as people did.

FR: Sure.

NB: Yeah, and I took, I can't remember what you call it, would've been the pension thing, you could, you could take your pension then, so I did and bought a piano and I've still got the piano.

FR: And you learned to play the piano or–?

NB: Oh I already could play the piano, yeah, I'd had lessons and all our children have learnt to play the piano and now some of our grandchildren are learning to play the piano.

FR: Wow.

NB: Yeah, so it was a good investment, although probably by now that little bit of pension, I mean, it'd probably be, so yeah, but I don't care, yeah, so yeah, but then I went back to work, so then I had, I had Euan and then I had Marie two years almost exactly afterwards, but Bracknell social services kept trying to get me back to work for them and I kept saying no, and then eventually we had the third child, we'd Eileen, and she was three, so I'm trying

to think how many years I was out, and I agreed to go back to work for twelve hours a week, and they said yes, so and then, yeah, worked for them for a while, part-time, and then, but I was on a temporary, monthly, temporary salary, I wasn't sa-, you know, which looked at the beginning like it was going to go on and on and on, but then something happened financially with social services, so they could not, I was a new, a new employee every work, every month, so I was, I wasn't even made redundant because obviously I wasn't, I wasn't a permanent employee, so anyway, I lost that job at the beginning of the summer and I wasn't too worried, and then I got a job with an, an adoption agency, which also did work in the community and was sort of vaguely part of the Anglican, so it was called Oxford Diocesan Council for Social Work at that stage, it's now called PACT, P-A-C-T, so PACT, yeah, so I worked for them and I did a lot of their community work. I did some adoption, but actually got more interested in their community work, so yeah, yeah.

JB: Can I swap books?

NB: Yeah, John wants to swap books and you're on–

FR: Oh sorry.

JB: And have you balloons for–?

NB: Oh the balloons are there, yeah, no, no, just those, yeah, okay. He needs to take balloons to the grandson, grandson is doing an experiment, so you, you put, I did it this morning [pauses], so we do this on Zoom, so this was this morning, so you put, you put bicarbonate of soda in your balloon when it's not, like this and you put vinegar in here, and you put this inside and then obviously the bicarbonate of soda falls out into that, this goes whoosh and it makes the balloon go up.

FR: Wow, okay.

NB: Blows up the balloon, that's very impressive to a five-year-old, I can tell you.

FR: [laughs] I can imagine, yeah.

NB: Yeah, so he wants to do–

FR: I'll try that with my, try that with my nephew [laughs].

NB: Oh definitely, so you have to make sure that you get, you get the, it's quite hard to get the bicarbonate of soda in, you have to really pull it out to get, make sure it's down and then it flops down and then you get your vinegar, white vinegar in there and then as soon as you lit it up, bicarbonate goes whoosh, you might have to stand back if you put too much in cos it just [laughs], yeah, good fun.

FR: Well, we may, we may give that a try later.

NB: Yeah, we did the oranges as well, you put an orange into a big fin and it floats, but then when you peel the orange it sinks, why is that.

FR: Oh I remember doing this at school [laughs].

NB: Anyway.

FR: So I was just going to ask when you, thinking about kind of first moving to England and stuff, did you feel kind of conscious of being Northern Irish, was it something that people–?

NB: Well, not really cos I always said I was Scottish, but often people didn't know whether I was Scottish or Irish, if they met John first they assumed I was Irish. But round, round here, round Bracknell were so many that had moved in and so on, I, I did not find in any way any prejudice or anything, nothing, no, nothing, nothing like that, yeah, yeah, I wouldn't have said that at all, no, no, no. The only time and I, probably John told you this, was when we still had an Irish reg, Northern Ireland reg car and we'd come off the M4 with my eldest brother from America, not that they would have known that and I don't know, somebody had said that, you know, the IRA always, always travel two men and one woman, I don't know, anyway we were stopped, we were stopped by the police as we came off the M4 and asked what we were doing, but as soon as they realised that John worked for the Met Office and then a car went past, obviously speeding, they dropped us and went for the speeding car, so that was that.

FR: Okay, so not, not too much scrutiny, no.

NB: No, no, no, none, none at all. I mean, not like, not like, you know, the stories we're hearing about, you know, black, black folks still, yeah.

FR: Absolutely, yeah, and would you have followed the Troubles, kind of from a distance, would you watch the news, were you kind of conscious of what was happening in Northern Ireland, or–?

NB: Yes, I mean, you would be cos you'd watch the news, we've always watched the news, and, and obviously our parents were still, well, my parents and John's mother, and still my sister and younger brother, they would've been still, my younger brother, my youngest brother would probably still have been at school, they went to Ballymena Academy.

FR: Ha, that's, that's where I–

NB: Eileen, Fiona and Roddy, so–

FR: Yeah, me, me too.

NB: Oh right, so they, that's not a school I knew, that was a school, so Fiona went into sixth form, that was a bad time for her, she never really, she resented having to move at that stage cos she lost all her friends and everything, never really, only made a couple of friends in Ballymena really before **[01:30:00]** she went to uni, but Roddy went all the way through

at Ballymena Academy, yeah, so yeah, so we'd, we'd follow what was going on and, you know, more recently still, what we'd still look at they'd be, you know, films or anything, so there's been one, I think we watched the rugby guy who's from, from the South and then came up North and somewhat controversially played the Lambeg drum and, you know, I can't, I don't know why I've forgotten his name and we've recently watched a, a film to do with the 1920s cos John, you've, you've heard John's mother was actually from Dublin and so on, so yeah, but not, not feeling any, yeah, I suppose, I suppose for myself and, and my brother Callum, particularly, I would say that we had a lot of sympathy for a reunited Ireland, yeah, I would say and we sang a lot of the sort of rebel songs and everything cos they'd got much better music, frankly [laughs], yeah, my, my family were all, as I say, I played the piano, but, but my brothers played, the two younger, anything that had strings on, and so that music was much, much more and they played, yeah, so yeah, I would say and at, at one stage my father actually went for a job in Cork county when we were, I think I must have been about ten, twelve, I'm not quite sure, I'm trying to think, it was, every hol-, every summer we went to Scotland for our holidays except for two summers and one we just holidayed very, we holidayed near Kilkeel, and it was only years and years and years and years, decades later, I realised that's cos my mother was pregnant with my sister who was born in August, so, but at the time you don't know, you don't realise, and then the other time was we went to, to the Republic and we went right down to Cork and with the caravan, we had a caravan, we always took the caravan everywhere, and I hadn't realised, but it was one of my brothers said oh well, dad was, dad was looking at a forest there, he was looking at a job and that brother went, went with my father to the, to look at the forest, so, and in the end he didn't take the job because they were concerned about, at that stage, so we, we're talking fifties to early sixties I guess, probably late fifties, so he was concerned about how good the education was and how good the health services were, those were the two concerns rather than anything sectarian, and I think the other thing is, I mean, it's, my father, my parents would never go to an Orange parade or anything. They, I think sometimes they would go to se-, to, and be somewhere nearby to watch the bands cos my mother loved a pipe band.

FR: Yeah, cos there's a Scottish kind of pipe band tradition as well of course, yeah.

NB: Yeah, yeah, she loved that, but they wouldn't ever really join a parade or go to the field or anything like that, so yeah, yeah.

FR: And so–

NB: That would be it.

FR: So do, do you remember the kind of end of the, end of the conflict then, do you remember the peace process?

NB: Only from a distance–

FR: From a distance, yeah.

NB: Only from, from here, you know, and seeing like, Mo Mowlam and so on, and the whole thing about, you know, don't, you don't negotiate with terrorists, yes, you do [laughs], you know, if you want, if you want peace you negotiate with the terrorists, maybe you don't want to, but actually it's the only way and, you know, the same in a, in a sense the same happened in the end in South Africa because de Klerk did have to negotiate with the terrorists, as he thought it was, Mandela, you know, and, yeah, and in the end, and in the end there is that whole thing about, you know, the minority and, and everything, so yeah, so, and, and I think whatever anybody thinks about Blair as well, I think that was, that was one of the little stars he can put on his chart, I think he did, did do his best, so yeah, yes, but yeah, and I do hope that this whole mad, totally insane Brexit thing is not going to in any way harm what has been positive, that's the, I just, you know, there's no, there's no way, there's no way that, that the border issue can be resolved I think, I don't see how it can be, so yeah, but anyway, we've got Covid instead, so.

FR: Yes, that's a whole–

NB: No doubt we'll get back to Brexit–

FR: Yeah, it's strange–

NB: At some stage.

FR: It's strange that Brexit has disappeared almost, I haven't thought about it for–

NB: Yeah, well, you don't, you don't know what they're doing behind our backs.

FR: Well, that's the thing, yeah [laughs]. So just–

NB: You don't know what they're up to.

FR: Just a sort of a final few questions really, I think.

NB: Yeah, go ahead.

FR: Would you have, do you still go back to Northern Ireland? It's kind of strange to ask that question now because obviously we can't go anywhere, but–

NB: No, no, well, after my mother died, my father died thirty years ago and my mother died in 1999 and we'd go back to see her, or my mother-in-law died before that, so we'd go back to Northern Ireland for that and then we didn't for a while and then a very good friend, an English friend, married an Irish guy and they live in Annalong, and we've been back a couple of times to see them, we've al-, we also went back for one school reunion.

FR: Oh yeah, you mentioned.

NB: So yeah, occasionally, yeah, I would have no objection to, and we've also been with friends to the Republic and we've, we've also been, we, we did a, you know Eyjafjallajökull, the Icelandic thing, that grounded all the planes?

FR: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, I remember.

NB: Yeah, well, our plan was meant to take us to Cork, we were going to holiday in Ireland then, so in the end we took a, a ferry to Cork and so that year we had a holiday round the south-west of Ireland and then went up to north-west, so we, we did that and, as I say, we've been with friends to Dublin and west and so on, so yeah, we travel. I love Ireland, I'd still travel there, yeah, very much, and John was meant to be there in the beginning of June this year with his climbing guys.

FR: Ah yes, of course.

NB: So, mostly they, they would, they couldn't have gone to Skye either as it happened, but this was the year he was going to go down round MacGillycuddy Reeks and so on, so there were going to be four of them, didn't happen, it'll happen another time.

FR: Yeah, okay. I'm just going to check my notes [laughs] cos I think we've, we've talked about quite a lot really. I, I wondered about your children, have they got any relationship to like, Ireland, Irishness?

NB: Yes, yes, yes, so they would probably, in fact, Marie, our second child, has just got her Irish passport.

FR: Oh really, okay.

NB: So, she's [laughs], and Euan our son wants to get his, purely because with Brexit they want their children to be able to travel in Europe. Marie is par-, now it's really amazing that Marie's done it first cos she's probably the least sort of getting things done person, I shouldn't let her hear that, but, you know, because she's, she is very busy and all sorts, but anyway her husband's Italian, so she doesn't want to be stuck with a British passport trying to get in and he, and they're trying to get Italian passports for their children, so that they, they all go and get through and she's stuck at the back of some queue because she's got a blue British passport, so anyway, she's not, she's got an Irish passport now, but Euan wants to get one as well. They probably would see themselves **[01:40:00]** more Irish than Scottish, which is a bit annoying, but anyway, there you go [laughs], and, and the grandchildren know about the Irish thing and so on and our five-year-old granddaughter, she's just like, makes up things all the time, so, so she's got a place that, that she imagines and it's called Irishland, which is not the same as Ireland, granny, but it kind of is, and they, they have green, but they have, it's, yeah, some sort of imag-, but it's Irishland, so yeah.

FR: So it's obviously left some kind of impression, there's some sort of–

NB: Yeah, yeah, and they all know that grandad supports the Irish rugby team and that there's, that the only time there's ever trouble in this household is when Ireland is playing Scotland in rugby.

FR: So would you support the Scottish?

NB: Of course.

FR: Of course.

NB: Of course.

FR: Okay, that's interesting.

NB: But there's not much point [laughs].

FR: No [laughs].

NB: They don't do so well.

FR: They've been better the last few years I think, but–

NB: They have, yes, yes, yes, so yeah, but, and of course our children have always mimicked the way I speak. Say, say world, mummy.

FR: World, yeah.

NB: World, say worm [laughs].

FR: It's interesting that, it's interesting that English people wouldn't be sure if you were Scottish or Northern Irish. I think often English people think that I'm Scottish–

NB: Yes.

FR: The kind of north Antrim, Northern Irish accent, especially when you speak slowly to make people understand you, I think sounds quite Scottish.

NB: Yeah, yes, yes, yes, I think that's, that's true, and my accent is nothing compared to what it used to be, you know, it's become very, I would say very anglicised, very English, you know, cos that's, that's who I'm living with and the, and the children would still call themselves English.

FR: That's interesting, okay.

NB: They, they would call themselves English, so yeah, so yeah.

FR: Were, were you ever homesick after you moved?

NB: No, no.

FR: No, that's interesting.

NB: No, not homesick, but I do remember living in Bracknell and looking out and thinking what am I doing here, cos there was no mountains and no sea, though not homesick to be back home with my mother or anything like that, but just the flatness and the no sea, cos Newcastle was right by the sea and just, you know, and a lot of the Scottish holidays we went would have been by the lochs and the sea and that sort of wildness I miss, I still miss.

FR: And especially in the south of England you, you just don't have that at all.

NB: Exactly, yeah, yeah, yeah, but I also remember going fairly early on when I was actually working in Newbury, but going through Bracknell to go to a children's home in Windsor, where a boy that I was social worker for was, was living and going through in November, wet November, round and round the roundabouts in Bracknell and thinking this is a dreadful place, just remember, I do remember just, it's just buildings and roundabouts and who would live here [laughs], but Bracknell, I've actually, when we lived in Bracknell, Bracknell people, because mostly they were also, even a lot of them were from London and so on, they were newcomers and they were friendlier than, than I would say people in Wokingham, because they were all newbies as well, yeah.

FR: That, that's interesting, so people who weren't from there anyway, so you've got a kind of a connection.

NB: Mmm, yeah.

FR: Okay, well, that's, that's great, I don't think I've got any more questions.

NB: Okay.

FR: But I guess just before I finish I, is there anything we haven't talked about that, that you wanted to talk about or that you thought we might?

NB: I don't think so, I think you've let me ramble [laughs].

FR: [laughs] It was really interesting.

NB: I don't think, yeah, I don't, I don't think there's anything particularly. I did say to use a pseudonym just purely because my name is so unusual, but yeah, not a big issue really.

FR: That's okay, no, we can, we can make sure to pseudonymise it, yeah, that's fine.

NB: Yeah, yeah, but if it slips out, I don't think it's going to matter, there's nothing I'm saying that's going to be so like, controversial that's going to be a problem, so no, I think that's

everything Fearghus, and I'd just really love to read the book when, let me know when you finally get it written with colleagues or whatever, cos I'm sure it'll be really interesting.

FR: Great.

NB: Yeah, and all the very best to you.

FR: Okay, thank you, and I'll, we'll be in touch I'm sure about the book, but thank you so much, that was, that was really interesting.

NB: Yeah, yeah, and enjoy meeting my brother Malcolm, Callum.

FR: I will, I will [laughs], and thanks–

NB: Well, I'll tell you one, I'll tell you one thing that happened, did, maybe John told you, about meeting Callum in the pub.

FR: No, no.

NB: Well, so when John, he's just gone out the front door, let, tell you, so when John went over to the Brecons with a whole crowd of guys, so they'd, they'd all meet and then they'd all climb the Brecons and they'd come down to a pub, and then, so John would be the one that would organise the climb, and then Jonathan, his friend, would be the one that would organise in advance what pub they would go to and how many dinners they were going to, how many places they would need, so he did this and Jonathan said to, to John at one stage I hope you don't mind, but apparently they've got, they've got a band playing that night in the, in the pub, some sort of thing, ceilidh type thing and John said oh no that's fine, so they came down off the mountain, went into the pub, John went into the toilet, saw my brother coming out, my brother Malcolm and said hello Callum, and Callum knew immediately cos the only people that call him Callum are the fa-, are the family, the close family, everybody else calls him Mal, and so he turned round, he said what are you doing here and John said well, we've been climbing, what are you doing here, he said well, we're the band, cos he plays, yeah, he's been in bands and all the rest of it, so that was just crazy.

FR: What, what a coincidence.

NB: Just, yeah, yeah, yeah, so yeah, so enjoy your time with Callum.

FR: I will, a musical fa-, a musical family obviously.

NB: Yes, yes, yes, he doesn't make any money at all, but it's nice.

FR: Well [laughs], but listen, thank you so much.

NB: You've been really good Fearghus, you take care.

FR: I really appreciate it and, yeah, take care.

NB: Yeah, yeah, okay, I'll leave the meeting now.

FR: See you later, bye.

NB: Bye.

INTERVIEW ENDS