

L16: NICHOLA BROWN INTERVIEW SUMMARY

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

| L16: Nichola Brown | Start time: 00:00:00 | Finish time: 01:47:33 | Duration: 01:47:33 | Brief description of content: |
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| 00:00–09:59 | Interview begins with some informal chat and discussion of this oral history project, after which Nichola explains that she was born in Edinburgh to Scottish parents. After serving in the army during WWII, her father trained as a forester and in 1953 secured a job at Tollymore Forest Park in Newcastle, Co. Down when she was three or four years old. This meant that she went to school in NI and did her degree studies at QUB, followed by a professional qualification at the University of Edinburgh. She then married her partner John, briefly worked in Antrim and subsequently moved to England when John got a job there. | | | |
| 10:00–19:59 | Reveals that she lived in the Park until moving to Belfast for university in 1966. Her father then became chief forester for Co. Antrim and moved to Ballymena. Explains that she was an assistant social worker 'during what is euphemistically called the Troubles'. Initially studied English, but wanted to do social work, so got experience in Belfast hospitals and later a diploma from Edinburgh, starting there in 1972. Of her childhood in Newcastle she says 'it was just the most beautiful place to live'. Recounts how the heads at her school were 'aggressive and horrible and hit people', and recalls being 'smacked' for smudging ink because she is left-handed. Despite these incidents, she felt 'really happy at school'. | | | |
| 20:00–29:59 | She went on to attend Down High grammar school and generally 'loved school'. States that there are nineteen years between her oldest and youngest brothers. Mentions her father engineer training during his army career. He joined the Highland Regiment, but was assigned to the Royal Engineers, where he made maps. The family didn't see him at all from 1942 to 1945. Explains that her eldest brother ended up teaching maths in her school, including to her class. He was later headhunted by IBM and moved to America. Recalls that many people from her class emigrated to the US, Canada and Britain to look for jobs. | | | |
| 30:00–39:59 | Explains that growing up in NI she thought of herself as Scottish, and that she and her family 'all still had Scottish accents'. Her family was religious, but since there wasn't an equivalent of their Scottish church in NI they attended the local Presbyterian church. Nichola joined the Girls' Brigade in school and was the first girl in NI to win a bronze Duke of Edinburgh award. States that her parents were anti-sectarian and that it was 'very important' to her father to be 'even-handed with everybody'. He therefore had no truck with the Orange Order or the British Legion, but did employ 'a lot of Catholics'. | | | |
| 40:00–49:59 | Explains that her mother's paternal ancestors emigrated from Roscommon to Britain in 1851, originally to Liverpool, then to Newcastle and then Edinburgh. The rest of her family was Scottish. Explains that most of her siblings went to QUB because 'at that stage you just went' there if they taught your subject. She did try to go to Edinburgh, but at the last minute lost the room she was allocated, so reverted to QUB. Explains that 1966 was the first year of UCAS, and a lot of English students wanted to move to NI at that point. She herself was eager to leave home because she wanted her freedom, and lived at first in halls at QUB. | | | |

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| 50:00–59:59 | Mentions that Seamus Heaney was one of her lecturers at QUB. As for her social life in Belfast, the Troubles were at first a minor inconvenience, but by the early 1970s the conflict 'was much more noticeable'. For instance, when she worked at one of the city's hospitals, staff were 'always on emergency' status. Recalls being worried when John and her brother were in town at the time of a bombing, and uncontactable. Also recalls being a social worker on home visits and having to 'climb barricades and things'. That was 'part of what you did' in the early 1970s. |
| 01:00:00–01:09:59 | Recalls a friend of a friend losing a leg in a restaurant bombing, and how a little museum near where her father worked was blown up. He only realised after the fact that he had been warned to stay away at a certain time. She spent 1972-73 in Edinburgh, where she completed two placements, while John remained in Belfast to finish his PhD. By the time they got married in Ballymena, he had secured a job at the Met Office in Bracknell, Berkshire. Nichola had always 'just assumed' she would leave NI, since two brothers had already left, and the better jobs were thought to be elsewhere. All of her siblings left NI eventually. |
| 01:10:00–01:19:59 | Explains that her eldest brother had been offered a job at IBM first in the UK and then in the US, where he still lives. Another brother worked in Mayo and then in Uganda, researching sleeping sickness in cattle. He later returned to England and ended up working at Dinorwic power station in Wales. Other siblings became teachers and forged careers in IT. Recalls that on moving to Berkshire, people 'were friendly enough, but not the way Irish people are friendly'. She and John had several short-term rentals before purchasing their first home in Wokingham. |
| 01:20:00–01:29:59 | Nichola worked for Bracknell social services for a long time, but stopped when she fell pregnant, 'as people did'. Recalls spending some of her pension on a piano, on which her children and grandchildren have since learned to play. She returned to work for the council on a part-time basis, and subsequently worked for an adoption agency. Explains that when she moved to England people sometimes didn't know if she was Irish or Scottish, but she didn't experience any prejudice. She followed events in NI from a distance by watching the TV news and keeping in touch with her family in Ballymena. |
| 01:30:00–01:39:59 | Mentions that she and one brother 'had a lot of sympathy for a united Ireland', and remembers playing Irish rebel songs with her family 'cos they'd got much better music'. States that her father considered a job offer in Cork, but declined it because of concerns about the education system and health service. Recalls the peace process 'only from a distance'. Believes that Tony Blair 'did do his best'. Expresses the hope that Brexit won't 'harm what has been positive'. Says her visits to NI have been infrequent since her mother's death in 1999, though she has been back to see friends and for a school reunion. She has also holidayed in the ROI. One of her children has an Irish passport and another intends to get one, thinking about their own children and post-Brexit travel in Europe. She thinks her children 'probably would see themselves more Irish than Scottish', which she finds 'a bit annoying'. |
| 01:40:00–01:47:33 | Discusses how her grandchildren have had a sense of Irishness impressed on them, particularly though their grandfather's support for the Irish rugby team, although Nichola herself supports Scotland. She notes that her accent has become 'very anglicised' and reflects on how she initially thought Bracknell 'a dreadful place' of 'buildings and roundabouts', with 'no mountains and no sea', unlike Newcastle in Co. Down. Even though she never experienced homesickness, is that 'sort of wildness' that she missed on moving to England, and still misses. |