

L17-SG3: ELEANOR KEEN INTERVIEW SUMMARY

Interviewee: Eleanor Keen
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

L17-SG3: Eleanor Keen	Start time: 00:00:00	Finish time: 01:34:50	Duration: 01:34:50	Brief description of content:
00:00–09:59	Born in Kingston-upon-Thames in 1988 and raised in nearby Surbiton. Her mother worked for 3i as an investment banker, while her father stayed at home after she was born, having previously been a commercial artist and truck driver. She has one older brother who she didn't grow up with because he was adopted at birth. She was educated locally and passed the eleven-plus. Not wanting to go to grammar school, she stayed at a local school for her GCSEs and A-levels, a decision she partly attributes to her father ingraining in her 'the idea that education should be free and not streamlined'.			
10:00–19:59	Explains that she has inherited a 'very hippy-based working-class identity' from her Fulham-born father, who was more of a socialist than a nationalist. Her mother was born in Derry in 1953 and moved to London in the early 1970s. Eleanor visited Derry and Donegal quite a lot as a child, and remembers the former as 'very slate grey' and the latter as 'very green'. She recalls her mother's excitement at the time of these visits, particularly when going to Donegal, where both of maternal grandparents are from.			
20:00–29:59	Recalls seeing police and armed British soldiers in Derry when younger, which had some 'sense of familiarity' for her because she had visited the city so many times. Describes her mother being cautious crossing the border with an English husband and child in tow. Her mother informed her about the conflict, and she herself researched it further when older. Recalls her mother being 'ecstatic' when the Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1998. Explains that there were no Irish kids in her primary school, but in sixth form she made two friends with ROI parents. This was at a time when 'it was getting very fashionable to be [...] of Irish extraction or to have some sort of Irishness in you'.			
30:00–39:59	Continues to discuss how being Irish became 'cool' in the early 2000s, in marked contrast to the anti-Irish prejudice of the 1970s and 1980s, which her mother told her about. Says that her mother 'always described herself as Irish' rather than Northern Irish, and 'made sure' her daughter 'felt a connection' to her Irish heritage. Eleanor has had an Irish passport since she was two, when the 'UK passport office was on strike', and now renews it because 'it retains my EU citizenship'. Although she identifies as British, she says being from London is her 'main identity': 'I identify with where I was brought up more than the country that I was born in'. Describes her teenage experience of London as 'brilliant'.			
40:00–49:59	Says she was 'quite a studious child', but 'hated school up to A-level' because she had to do subjects she didn't want to. Reveals that she was in the Woodcraft Folk from the age of six to eighteen. Says her 'strong left-wing leanings' come from both of her parents, describing her father as 'proper old Labour'. She moved to Newcastle in 2006 to study sociology at the university there, 'and then ended up staying and then married a local boy'. Notes that there were many students from NI in Newcastle, but no modules on NI history on the university syllabus.			

50:00–59:59	Mentions socialising in the Irish centre in the Chinatown area of Newcastle, and finding ‘a nice little community’ there. Explains that she worked part-time in a pub during her university years and originally planned to do a masters and a PhD, but found funding scarce when she graduated in 2009. Her work experience led her instead to a job with the bookmakers William Hill and then to Paddy Power. This means that she now visits Dublin every other month and hears lots of Irish accents at work, some of which are hard to understand. She met her husband, who is English, through work and recalls their trip to Ireland in 2018, when she ‘did what I did as a child’, visiting mostly Donegal and Derry. Says she misses London, but loves Newcastle both because of her job and the affordable rents.
01:00:00–01:09:59	Discusses the lack of awareness of NI politics in England and how Brexit has reanimated old animosities and divisions: ‘you just need to scratch the surface to see them’. Bemoans the absence of NI history from English school curricula and believes that ignorance about the Irish border is so prevalent in the UK because ‘no one’s taught about it here’. Says she fears what will happen if a hard border is imposed in Ireland and speaks of there being ‘a collective dissonance’ in Britain about what ‘happens over there’. Speaking to her mum about Lyra McKee’s murder in 2019, she says she could hear the ‘trepidation in her voice’. Recalls her mother’s calmness when she couldn’t contact Eleanor’s brother at the time of the 7/7 London bombings, because ‘she was used to not being able to get through to people if there’d been a bomb somewhere’ during the Troubles.
01:10:00–01:19:59	Talks about how the label of ‘terrorist’ has recently been applied to other racial and ethnic groups. Says that she felt a connection with the Black Lives Matter protests based on a shared history of discrimination that her mother and earlier generations of Irish people experienced under colonial rule. Speaks fondly of Dublin, where her aunt lives, yet also stresses that ‘it’s definitely where I go and work’ and as such she doesn’t feel fully ‘at home in Dublin’. Claims that having ‘a historian at home telling me stories about a different part of the world’ has made her respect her mother a lot and has ‘definitely made me a protestor’. It has also made her value the sense of belonging that comes with knowing ‘where you’re from’, which in her case has heightened her sense of herself as a Londoner.
01:20:00–01:29:59	Recalls listening to traditional Irish music and protest songs in her youth. Believes that ‘English history’s very whitewashed in school’ and ignores ‘the whole part of colonialism’. This is one reason why she feels no connection to the Union Jack, which she associates with loyalist areas of NI, where her mother always felt uncomfortable. Reveals that neither of her parents are religious, even though her mother had ‘the quintessential Irish Catholic upbringing’ in Derry. Eleanor herself is a ‘complete non-believer’, though she recently became a godparent in a Catholic ceremony. States that her identity is ‘split across the Irish Sea basically’.
01:30:00–01:34:50	She says her mother taught her about living somewhere ‘when you’re from somewhere else’, and how to use that to her advantage. Expresses her desire to learn more about her mother’s family history, including her grandfather’s experience of living through partition, when his identity suddenly changes from Irish to Northern Irish and he becomes ‘technically British’. It pleases Eleanor that half of her DNA comes from ‘a very, very small part of the world’ that centres on the remote rural community ‘dotted around the hills’ that surround the coastal town of Moville in Co. Donegal.