

L18: GARETH AICKEN INTERVIEW SUMMARY

Interviewee: Gareth Aicken
Interviewer: Dr Fearghus Roulston
Interview summarisers: Dr Hilary White and Prof Liam Harte
The interview was recorded across two audio files that were spliced together to create a single audio file.

L18: Gareth Aicken	Start time: 00:00:00	Finish time: 02:31:00	Duration: 02:31:00	Brief description of content:
00:00–09:59	Interview begins with some discussion of this oral history project, after which Gareth explains that he was born in Larne, Co. Antrim in 1950. His mother was Welsh, so he used to spend summer holidays in rural Wales. Describes Larne as ‘a pretty predominantly Protestant town’, a fact he only belatedly realised. Explains that his mother was ‘from outside’ and that his father had ‘been away’ from NI, which meant that he was not raised in a ‘narrowly sectarian way’.			
10:00–19:59	States that his father graduated from QUB in 1940 with a science degree, after which he worked for the Ministry of Supply and as a researcher, living in Scotland and Greater London. Gareth’s parents married in Fort Halstead at the end of the war and moved to Larne when his father got a job at the grammar school around 1947. Living in Larne until he was almost ten, he describes his childhood as ‘fairly normal’. Attended the prep school attached to the grammar school, which was mostly Protestant, though he doesn’t remember ‘any great emphasis on [...] sectarian issues’ while there. Discussing his father’s experiences, he refers to the 1950s as relatively peaceful, ‘but peaceful because people weren’t addressing the issues or they were suppressed, not because there weren’t any issues’.			
20:00–29:59	Recalls that most of his parents’ friends Protestant, apart from a Catholic dentist. His father was not very religious, and later became agnostic. Though not against religion, he had little sympathy for ‘embattled [...] religious views’ in NI. Gareth’s parents left NI in 1960, partly because it seemed a ‘rather narrow-minded environment to be brought up in’. His father had also secured a job at a grammar school in Welwyn Garden City. He remembers the move to England as largely undramatic, but notes that ‘people laughed at my accent a bit’.			
30:00–39:59	As a ‘new town’, Welwyn Garden City was largely populated by people who had moved from elsewhere, but he doesn’t recall any other Irish families being there. Did one term of primary school, then joined the grammar school where his father worked. Overall, he had a good time at school and was a diligent student. He ‘kept a close interest in how things were developing’ in NI and visited three or four times during the 1960s. Recalls visiting Belfast in 1970 and noticing changes from when he was younger, epitomised by the presence of the British Army.			
40:00–49:59	Gareth was ‘very committed’ to the civil rights movement in 1960s NI. Explains that his mother was a Presbyterian from Hawick in Scotland, an area without a ‘sectarian issue’. His father’s brother-in-law was more bigoted, and Gareth was always wary of clashes between him and his father. Gareth was in his late teens when the Troubles started. Reading about left-wing causes in the US and student protests in France at the time, he describes how he ‘felt connected to them’ and believed that NI was part of a transnational campaign for social justice.			
50:00–59:59	States that he has always been attuned to power dynamics, whether between individuals or groups of people, and that this awareness led to his work in international development. Mentions living in Pakistan for an extended period.			

	Thinks that coming from a deeply divided society has given him some insight into how social injustice and inequality are developed and sustained. Recalls studying English literature at Churchill College, Cambridge, starting in 1967. Says he 'got sort of politically active a bit' and demonstrated against the US presence in Vietnam. He was also among those who pushed for reform of the Cambridge English curriculum, which 'more or less stopped in 1930'.
01:00:00–01:09:59	In England, Gareth would occasionally get questions about events in NI. Thinks most people in Britain have 'never really accepted' that NI is 'actually part of the same country as England', and that 'Ireland has always been seen as something else', a place apart. He stayed on at Cambridge to do a postgraduate certificate in education, and taught English in Sweden for a year, where a couple of his classes asked him for a talk on NI, wanting to learn more. After that, he returned to England, to a job in a language school in Hove in Sussex.
01:10:00–01:19:59	He later worked in a children's home in Islington for six months, then returned to his post in Hove and acquired a further qualification to teach at a more advanced level. After this he got a job in a private school in Australia through a colleague he'd met in Sweden. He moved to Sydney in January 1974 and his English girlfriend soon followed him and they got married there.
01:20:00–01:29:59	Explains his involvement in a government-based initiative to get more Aboriginal students into tertiary education, work he found more rewarding than teaching. Discusses the nature and effects of the structural disadvantage that Aboriginal communities suffer. Reflects on how his experiences made him realise the relative social and educational privilege that enabled him to achieve academic and occupational success. Reveals that during this period in Australia, he did not visit NI for four or five years, but kept in touch with family as best he could.
01:30:00–01:39:59	States that his parents were broadly supportive of his move to Sydney. However, he and his wife, Celia, decided in the late 1970s that they would return to England with a view to starting a family there. After leaving Australia, they travelled in Fiji and Samoa, followed by a road trip around North America, before arriving back in England in late 1979. Gareth then got an international development job in the Commonwealth Secretariat, which was based in London, but involved travel to the Caribbean and Africa. Celia had a parallel job to his, in employment. They had their first child in 1981 and then a second child, after which they abandoned the idea of going back to Australia.
01:40:00–01:49:59	The Secretariat was a multinational organisation, and Gareth was able to travel a lot. States he was 'fairly active' in the Labour Party while at the Secretariat during the 1980s, but when he joined the Department for International Development in Whitehall in 1990, he became more 'dormant', as such activism was discouraged. Proceeds to discuss his relations with and attitudes towards the Labour Party between the Blair era and that of the present day.
01:50:00–01:57:21	Explains that his politics in the 1980s were not explicitly involved with NI. Reveals that he did not visit NI between 1970 and 2000, but 'it wasn't a case of me deliberately staying away'. He has been back to Ireland five or six times since 2000, however, and both of his children have been to the ROI, but not NI. He believes that a united Ireland would be better for both NI and ROI, but 'a lot of things have to happen first' for that to be possible. Thinks that the ROI has 'changed hugely' in recent years, such that going there is akin to visiting a 'continental European country': 'there is a religion which may be Catholic but it's not kind of in your face the way that it may have been in the past'. The two interview audio files were spliced together here.

01:57:22–02:07:21	While 'not a pacifist', he does not glamorise violence or 'romanticise the IRA'. Says he was aware of the Troubles in England to a certain extent, through reading international news, but was abroad so much in the 1980s and 1990s that it wasn't the 'detailed knowledge' of someone living there. Recall the NI peace process, for which he says John Major deserves some credit for helping to initiate it, though it was largely 'the achievement of the Labour government'. Returning to his life chronology, he explains how in the late 1980s he joined the British civil service and worked for the Overseas Development Agency in Pakistan and Malawi, and also spent some time on secondment at the European Commission, before returning to England in 1998.
02:07:22–02:17:21	Explains that his overseas development work took him to Pakistan for four years in the early 2000s, then to Bangladesh for two years. He later returned to Pakistan, but this time with a non-profit NGO called the Asia Foundation. He finally returned to Britain in 2016. Says that he still thinks of himself as Irish and objects to being called English. He 'will admit to being British', but specifies that he is originally from NI, his mother is Welsh, and his paternal grandmother is Scottish. His children 'have the burden of being half-English' and his second wife is 'originally Indian'. Gareth has a British passport, but as a 'latent Irish citizen' he has also applied for an Irish one, with Brexit providing the immediate stimulus. Though he is 'depressed' about developments in the UK, he thinks he will remain.
02:07:22–02:27:21	States that he still enjoys the familiarity of Larne when he visits, but now has only two cousins living in NI. Thinks that the British government's inept handling of the Brexit process is likely to bring a united Ireland closer, which 'in terms of an end result would be a good thing', but he worries about the immediate economic and political difficulties it may cause. He also expresses concern about 'what that might mean in terms of the Troubles starting again', and mentions the disparity between some people's sentimental attachment to the idea of Irish reunification and the hard economic realities that it would present.
02:27:22–02:31:00	Mentions that he has a sister who lives in the north east of England, who has not been back to NI since the 1970s. Explains that she was only five years old when their family emigrated to England in 1960, so will have few memories of NI.