INTERVIEW M08: SIOBHÁN O'NEILL

Interviewer: Dr Barry Hazley
Interviewee: Siobhán O'Neill [pseudonym]
Interview date: 26th November 2019
Location: Leeds Irish Health and Homes, Leeds
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. The interview was recorded across two audio files that were spliced together to create a single audio file.

BH: Okay, that's it recording and as far as I know the batteries look okay, so I'll put that near you.

SON: Yeah, yeah, sure.

BH: Because, in between us, just to make sure, cos, as I say, they want maybe at some point to use some of these excerpts in a Radio 4 documentary, so they need to hear your voice. Okay, so it's the twenty-sixth of November 2019, I'm here in Leeds Irish Health and Homes, I'm here with Siobhán. Before I begin, I just want to say thanks very much for agreeing to do this, really appreciate you taking the time out of your day to come down to do the interview. This thing takes like, a life history format.

SON: Okay.

BH: So what I'll begin to talk about is basically, you know, your family background and what you did in Northern Ireland and then moving over here, this kind of thing.

SON: Okay, yeah, yeah.

BH: But before that, I'll just ask you a general question. How did you hear about the project and why were you interested in taking part?

SON: I heard of it through a contact, Deirdre, from Irish Health and Homes, and why did I want to take part, what an opportunity to talk about yourself–

BH: Brilliant [laughs].

SON: And also I think it's really important that this gets recorded because we've got such a story to tell and it's very different now I think for people coming here from home to what it was when I came in 1986.

BH: Okay.

SON: So yeah.

BH: So winding back then, to 1986 or before, where were your family from?

SON: Falls Road, west Belfast.

BH: Okay. Both your parents?

SON: Yeah, born and bred.

BH: And what about your grandparents then? Were they all west Belfast?

SON: Yeah, they were, but they also lived, when they were really young though they lived down near Downpatrick.

BH: Okay, right, so–

SON: But then they, but they were in Belfast like, from babies.

BH: Right, sure, so it wasn't a rural to urban kind of migration?

SON: No, it wasn't and they were, initially all my grandparents were Lower Falls, around St Peter's, and then we got posh and moved up the Glen Road, so [laughs] we got rehoused by the housing executive and moved to the Glen Road.

BH: Is that right, yeah?

SON: Yeah, yeah, they were, cos when they started, I mean, this is going back donkeys' years obviously, but the Lower Falls started to be now what we would call regenerated [laughs]. They were tearing down the old, really old Victorian small terraced houses and so they got rehoused up in, off the Glen Road.

BH: And that must have been, you said housing executive, so this must've been the seventies then anyway, before that.

SON: God aye, Jesus.

BH: It wasn't a postwar rehousing like, it was–

SON: No, no, it was after that.

BH: What did your parents do?

SON: My mother looked after five kids, so she stayed at home, and then when we were a wee bit older she got some jobs in the evening, and then she also helped to run the local

youth club, try and keep us all safe and off the streets. My father was a company director in town, in Belfast city centre.

BH: Right, okay. Were they prosperous people?

SON: No, my dad was mean and tight-fisted and my mum didn't really work, and he was very, you know, traditional in his approach, every Thursday, I think he got paid, you know, weekly then, every Thursday he would put some money on the fireplace for my mother for the shop keep, the housekeeping and stuff for the week, so we weren't, I wouldn't say we were prosperous, no, but we weren't poor either and we were really encouraged, mostly by my mother, to achieve.

BH: Is that right?

SON: But we, that's a whole big issue around being Catholics, not having the same opportunities, you know, we're talking now, I was born in '62, Troubles started when I was seven, so, you know, we were always pushed by my mum, cos there's four girls and one boy in the family, so it's, particularly for us girls, my mum, cos my mum is a really intelligent woman, but she just didn't, never got the opportunities, you know, she writes poetry and all sorts of stuff, but she never shares that with anyone, so if she had've had the things, she wanted us to kind of prosper and do well, cos that was kind of her living through us in a sense, because she just missed out, but she encouraged us to do everything like, she really did.

BH: And was that something you were interested in growing up? Were you engaged with your education or was it more your mother's kind of aspiration?

SON: I'm the second eldest and my older sister is, at that time I thought really, was really smart and quite a genius and so did the schools, and I followed her through, I went to St Louise's Comprehensive College for girls on the Falls Road.

BH: Oh it's on the Falls Road?

SON: Yeah, there was two and a half thousand girls, it was, at the time it was the largest comprehensive in Europe actually, and it's just recently they started taking, allowing boys, so it's co-ed, but, so I followed my sister through school and she is a bloody genius and, so she was a, sort of, you know, what we could call now an A-star type pupil, really enjoyed the academia etcetera, I couldn't have given a shite about academia when I was that age, I was really into sports like, playing hockey, football, bit of tennis, so I liked the outdoors, I always have liked, from really young, I've loved being outside, so the academic stuff just didn't appeal to me then, but I had to follow her through school and she was getting, you know, doing A-levels in a year and getting an A, and I'm like–

BH: Right, so you mean she was the barometer against which everything else was measured, yeah?

SON: Oh God [sighs], and she, you know, she never, she was really well behaved and, you know, played the violin in the orchestra and, you know, all this sort of shite and, you know, never, but did everything by the book in a sense, and then I was following her up and I didn't do anything by the book. I wasn't, I was quietly rebellious, I had my own mind, and I think that's why my mother kind of tolerated me in a sense of like, the school would moan oh Siobhán hasn't done this, Siobhán hasn't done that, my mother was like, but Siobhán's got her own mind and she's not Niamh and she will make her own decisions, which is great when I look back on it, so, you know, I was really encouraged to kind of, I suppose be my own person.

BH: Okay. You mentioned there that that was something that was maybe characteristic of the Catholic community in Belfast, that educational aspiration was a thing.

SON: Absolutely, yeah, yeah.

BH: Could you say a bit more about that? What was that idea?

SON: I think, and some of it was spoken and unspoken, cos obviously I'm a child at this point and I'm growing up and then, you know, getting in my teens and then you start to realise, hang on a minute where do I live, but I think it's because there was a real lack of opportunity for Catholics over history, we know that in Northern Ireland history, you look at all, when we did, when Northern Ireland had industries like, obviously Harland and Wolff and Shorts, the–

BH: Yeah, the engineering.

SON: Yeah, well, my, I'll tell you a story about my uncle cos he ended up being the chief exec of Shorts. He was about the only, only Catholic, seriously, so we, so yeah, so we were really pushed into achieving, you know, my mother obviously knew what our challenges were going to be and also as girls I think she thought that you've definitely got to get an education, if you're going to achieve anything in your lives you need an education, so she pushed us into school and like, we had some horrific times at school cos we, during the hunger strikes that summer, I think I was about fifteen, you know, the IRA came into St Louise's, they got up on the stage with guns and told the school they had to close, you know, and we were all sitting having our lunch and the next thing the RA are in and you think huh, and there was a big call on the Falls, cos we were such a big school, for families not to send their children during the hunger strikes to school, of course my mother sent us and we had to get through the riots, cos they, what used to happen was the riots would kick off in the afternoon, cos everybody, the guys who were rioting rioted late into the night and then they'd sleep all day and then they'd get up about lunchtime, would go to the Rock bar on the Falls, get pissed and then start fighting, you know, the soldiers and stuff, so we had to dodge, you know, plastic bullets, petrol bombs and stuff like that through the, that summer of the hunger strikes, and I always remember like, when Bobby Sands was the first one to die and how severe that was, you know, and I always remember coming home from, getting, trying to get home from school when he had died, and there was a shopkeeper, McCann's shop was a sweet shop, and he let a whole load of us into the shop and shut the door to keep us safe, cos the soldiers were shooting and we couldn't get home safely, you

know, even though I was only two streets away, but he just opened the shop and said come on, come on. I'll always remember a load of us in our br-, cos we had brown uniforms, we were called the brown bombers, all the brown bombers, piling in, exactly, piling into Brian McCann's shop because he kept us safe, you know, and so, but going back to what we were saying about, so we knew that industry wasn't, we weren't going to find work easily, but that was never kind of spoken to us, it's only now probably with hind-, with a lot of hindsight I know this, but at the time we were just pushed, you know, my sister, **[00:10:00]** older sister went to Queen's, I didn't want to go to university, you know, and I just wanted to work at the Royal Victoria Hospital, got a job there, you know, but like, we've always bloody achieved things in my family, you know, like, I was the youngest ever personal secretary to one of the directors in the Royal Victoria Hospital in the personnel department, I was nineteen like, what the hell did I care, all I wanted to do was have a drink up at the Whitefort up the Falls Road, but, you know, it was that whole thing that we had to, we knew we had to achieve if we were going to succeed.

BH: What about religion itself then? Was the church important as something distinct from education?

SON: The church was torturous for f-, and this is why I need to decide about my pseudonym, but I suppose the church, cos what I was really interested about, you know the information you sent out about your study that you're doing, you never mentioned sexuality.

BH: No, I didn't, but actually we have got that built into the question schedule.

SON: Cool.

BH: It's actually in it.

SON: Yeah, cos I thought when I saw the bumf, I thought that should have been in there, but anyway, so from like, the age of fifteen I knew I liked girls and I had like, a relationship at the age of fifteen in school, you know, till I was eighteen, with a girl at school, and so religion really was tort-, tormenting us because we were brought up very strict Catholics, you know, we were all marched out as a family, seven of us would go to mass on a Sunday when we were young and, you know, all that thing.

BH: And this was obligatory, like?

SON: Oh absolutely, there was no, you know, we all did it, made your first communion, did your first confirmation and, you know, all that crap, and so it was only when I got to about the age of probably fifteen, sixteen, one day I thought do you know what, I can't listen to you anymore. I remember being in mass in St John's and the priest who was preaching at the time, the night before had been in my family home pissed, and he was very drunk in our house, and I remember thinking do you know what, you're a frigging hypocrite and I walked out during the sermon and I never went back, and my mother couldn't do anything about it cos she knew how stubborn I was and that if I said I'm not going that's it, and I think she knew she was losing her grip on it because, you know, you're fifteen, sixteen, you're nearly an adult, make your own mind up.

BH: Is that what you meant when you said I had a mind of my own, earlier on?

SON: Yeah, definitely, definitely, and I knew then too, and my mother knew, she must have seen something in me, she knew that I was attracted to girls cos she always tried to, you know, she was always watching me and so, you know, so I had this secret relationship at fifteen with a girl from school and that was fascinating, you know, and I love looking back at that in terms of sexuality, but [pauses] that kind of, it was a, it's like it kept me sane I think through the Troubles because it was at the height of the riots and, but we, the thing that I find fascinating is, about this now, and I've thought about this long and hard for years, is that at that time we had no language. You imagine, we were like, brought up working class, middle of west Belfast, in the height of the Troubles, strict Catholic families, nobody had any language around sexuality then. I didn't know I was a lesbian, I didn't know that till I went to London, you know, I didn't know anything around sexuality, and it was fascinating. So we just knew that we loved each other and we used to like, in school we got bullied because people were kind of thinking that we might be having a relationship together, so we got a lot of shit in school. I remember going to talk to the teacher about it and she came out at assembly and said, you know, the stuff around people being friends and stuff, and she was really brave and I always loved her for doing that because she tried to protect us, and I think she might have been probably, had been previously in a relationship with a woman, so she kind of, she was older, but she knew the score, so she was brilliant. So my sexuality, you know, I knew I didn't have any words for it, I didn't know lesbian sexuality, nothing. Now I knew we were like, down, meant to be doing like, I failed all my O-levels the first time cos all we were doing was having sex and everybody thought we were studying [laughs], cos I used to go down to her house and she, you know, had this, they had this sort of four storey house and her bedroom was right at the top, so we took full advantage, her parents were on the ground floor, and all we ever did was, you know, we'd do a wee bit of work, but we'd get distracted by each other so, but it kept me sane, and we used to, her parents had a little cottage up in the Glens of Antrim, one of my most favourite places, up in Glenariff, they'd this old cottage, you know, my idea of heaven and still is, but there was like, no running water or anything and, but we used to go there and spend a lot of time, you know, get away out of Belfast and go walking up the Glens, you know, in the Cushendall, Cushendun, up the back roads and spend time there in the summer or weekends, and that was just like heaven to me, and I can still remember, you know, smelling the gorse bushes up around Cushendun in the summer and that smell of, that sort of like, honey coconut aroma of that gorse and I still love that to this day, and that kind of kept us sane, because we were there, you know, three, we were together over three years, you know, that took me into like, eighteen, nineteen, and it also helped me move out of home and stuff, so it was all, you know, that's why sexuality's so important, and then knowing that I liked girls, but also knew that, you know, because we were brought up Catholic nobody ever said anything about it, it was all just related to sex, so I knew I was having sex and I shouldn't have been, I was sixteen, fifteen, so I was definitely condemned to hell, so like, we really struggled with what we were doing even at that age, thinking, feeling so guilty, you know, we'll be punished and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, and because of the church, the Catholic church and its, you know, God, Jesus, what it was like in the seventies listening to the bloody prie-, you know, the fire and brimstone type stuff, so.

BH: Were you aware, for example, that in other cities like Manchester, Birmingham and so on that there were actually queer cultures and gay scenes? Would you have had any concept of that, no?

SON: None whatso-, like, seriously nothing, we, I'll tell you what, and cos I knew I was coming to see you something came back into my head recently and this might, yeah, I'll say it anyway, so I never knew the word orgasm, didn't know what that was, so we used to say, we used to say that we exploded.

BH: Right, exploded.

SON: Yeah, cos I remember saying us to each other, and I don't know if that's too intimate a thing to say, but I think about that even now and I'm fifty-seven and that happened when I was fifteen, but the word that we used to experience an orgasm and sexual pleasure was like an explosion, like a bomb because you got that euphoric feeling, but it also fitted with the context of the way we were growing up.

BH: Of course, yeah.

SON: And I find that fascin–, to this day I still, even though I probably bore myself, but I find it fascinating that that's how we saw that. So in terms of knowing about Manchester or Lo–, Jesus Christ, we knew nothing, we were in a wee bubble of west Belfast, and knowing that we were doing, what we thought we were doing was wrong cos of the church, but we were having a ball, you know, until I failed my exams and then I got a lot of pressure, you know, you've got to stop, you're not allowed to go down the road until you've done your homework, stopped me getting around [laughs], do my homework and then I'd go off.

BH: Say a bit more about, I think you used the word there, that was our, that kept me sane–

SON: Yeah, it did.

BH: During that period, say a bit more about the relationship between that experience and like, the Troubles as you experienced it going on around you. What function did it perform within that?

SON: I think, I mean, we grew up in the height of the most extreme violence and, you know, most of our neighbours all had sons and they were all in Long Kesh, they were all in the H-Blocks. We stood out as a family in the one sense because we weren't involved, my mother made sure we didn't join up, we had opportunities to, we were approached to, but we didn't, but that's because of the sort of what we would now call I suppose diversionary tactics by my mother more than my father, but in terms of the Troubles, so yeah, I grew up Falls Road, you know, from an early age like, from the age of six really like, we were part of the refugees when, you know, the Troubles first started before the–

BH: You were moved out of–

SON: Paratroopers, before the paratroopers arrived, all the men on our street, so I don't, do you know Falls Road at all?

BH: Yeah, not well, but I know–

SON: Right, well, you've got a series of streets that were all called the rock streets, like Rockmore Road and blah, blah, blah, and so all the men of those streets would act as sort of vigilantes, they were on guard really, because of the proximity between the Falls Road and Protestant Donegall Road, you know, you could walk it in ten minutes and you're, at that time, you know, the delineation was very acute. So what was happening was Protestants, loyalists were coming up and burning Catholics out of their houses, so all the men at night like, my dad would go to work and then they'd all have a rota for night time and they'd all go and stand guard and they built barricades to stop people coming up like, and I remember one of my earliest memories is my mother, she used to go and buy us clothes in the market and I always remember, cos I was a right tomboy as you can imagine, and she bought me, I loved these shorts, she bought me a pair of blue shorts, cos I was always in shorts in the summer, trousers in the winter, and I remember to this day, **[00:20:00]** sliding down, you know the sheet of corrugated iron on the barricade, and I ripped the arse out of these new shorts, and my mother nearly killed me, cos I, and I remember having to walk up the street with the arse hanging out of these, and I remember, cos there was all hedges in everybody's garden, and putting my arse up against each of the hedges so nobody could see that I'd ripped these brand new shorts on the barricades on the corrugated iron, and so that's like, my memories of the Troubles like, my dad being on sentry duty almost–

BH: Is that right, yeah?

SON: With various other men, and then eventually it got so serious, you know, I remember watching, you know when you talk about refugees, people talk about it, and I'm like, Jesus, that was me, years ago, and I remember seeing like, convoys of people, Catholics, you know, with vans packed up and with all their belongings that they could possibly take. Because my da worked for a company in Dublin we were lucky, they paid for us to get on the train and they put us up in a hotel, Malahide, that was the first I remember went to a hotel in my life, young, less than ten, and next thing we're staying in this really posh hotel in Malahide. So my da and his company arranged for us to be taken down to Belfast train st–, I'd never been on a train either, next thing we're on a train, seven of us like, down to Malahide, think it was the Bay Hotel, and we stayed there for a while and they put us up, his company put, my da had to go back to Belfast and keep our house safe and then left my mum with us lot.

BH: And then how long did you stay down?

SON: Ach Jesus, we were there a few weeks.

BH: A few weeks, and then what, you came back to the same house?

SON: We came back to the same house, but we had a blast, imagine the first time in a hotel, you know, and you're like this [laughs], you know, and that's what, very early seventies, even if it was, maybe even been still the late, you know, sixties, cos I was young and us

being, what I always remember is like, you know, there's somebody playing a grand piano, there was horses in a paddock and I always remember us lot thinking Jesus, we can have rice crispies everyday, cos you could go and choose your cereals and stuff, and we were like, every day we can have rice crispies and I remember that, it's really fascinating, but we were lucky that they put us up in this bloody hotel.

BH: Yeah, cos there were other people moved out, but they went in groups, didn't they?

SON: Absolutely.

BH: And stayed as a group.

SON: Whoooh [reacting to Deirdre Quill entering the room with food]. Food, glorious food.

DQ: There you go.

SON: Thanks Deirdre.

DQ: You're welcome.

BH: Do you want to take a minute to eat that, do you?

SON: Bloody hell, do you want some?

BH: No, go on ahead, you work away.

SON: Are you sure?

BH: Yeah, yeah, do you want me to stop while you have–?

SON: Yeah, I'll only eat half of it, if that's alright.

BH: No problem, no problem, there's actually, the battery's gone down here, so it's a good opportunity to, yeah, just remember where we were at there, Malahide.

SON: Malahide, living it up in Malahide, it's hilarious. **[00:22:55]** [The two interview audio files were spliced together here].

BH: Okay, that's us off again. So we've just been talking about, you had to move down to Malahide. What I was going to ask you was, just before that you'd mentioned that, I think this was after you'd come back from Malahide and your father protected the home kind of thing, that he'd be on sentry duty effectively, and my question was, were your parents political?

SON: My, well, they weren't political. My father really doesn't feature in my life really. I've no contact with him and I haven't had contact with him through choice for, since I left home, so he never really featured in our growing up because he kind of went out to work

everyday and he also had a bar job in the evening, so, and he just wasn't political at all. My mother was more a proud Irishwoman as opposed to political and she wouldn't have no-, good Jesus, if I was to say to her now, I mean, she never considered herself to be a republican either, but I think she just had a real pride in the fact that we were Irish and that was very much, that we were Irish, even though we were growing up in Belfast and could've been seen very differently, and she gave us all, you know, very strong Irish names, every one of us because she believes in and believed in our culture and keeping it alive and stuff, so she gave us very strong Irish names which really helped during the Troubles, not. But they weren't political, but they brought, my mother brought us up with a se-, a very acute sense of what is fair and doing the right thing, and that's never left me, you know, that's even how I do my work and stuff like that, I'm obsessed about doing the right thing and being fair, and I think that's part of growing up in Northern Ireland, cos it wasn't fair. So they weren't political by any means, and I remember like, when the paratroopers came in and everybody was like, out on the street walking when the soldiers, little did we know how soon that would turn like, I remember the paratroopers, they, being on the streets and like, women making them sandwiches and tea and because, you know, at that time my da was still being a vigilante on the corner at the night time on the barricades, and then the soldiers came, so they didn't even do that anymore, so they'd be standing at the bottom of the street and I remember like, women going down the street at that time with trays of tea and giving them all a drink, and that, you know, obviously rapidly changed, and then I remember, cos when the soldiers came they did a thing called the census, and they went to every house and knocked on the door, came in, and you had to account for who lived in your house, and that was all written down–

BH: Recorded, yeah.

SON: And like, my ma starts going, so they're saying to her like, what are the names of your children, so she goes Niamh, Siobhán, Cathal, Maeve and Oonagh, and the guy had, I remember I was there at the time, he didn't believe her, and he thought they she was making these names up and never, and they certainly couldn't spell them, but he hadn't a clue and, you know, and of course that set us out because Irish names to them and to most of the soldiers and the RUC like, when we used to go through the checkpoints in Belfast, soon as I'd say my name, oh shite, Siobhán equals republican, you couldn't just be a human being, so, you know, as much as my mother gave us that real pride in our culture and stuff, it also was a real hindrance at the time, living in the Troubles, because we were singled out all the time for having Irish names when we stopped like, by the army or the police, they would, you know, put two and two together and get, you know, five, and so we were, and that set us aside too because in the street I grew up, like I said, there was a lot of, the guys were involved, they were all members of the IRA [pauses] and we just, we weren't, and so we did stand out, there was a few families like that on the street, but a lot of them, you know, the house next door, two sons were in H-Block, one, two, three houses up at least three of their sons were, you know, so you could sort of dot your way across the street and the sons'd just disappear and then you'd find they're either in Long Kesh or they're in Castlereagh, God help them, and then we would hear things happening on the street, you know, we would hear kneecappings, cos of the houses, there used to be like, an entry that ran in the back, you know, and I've heard men being kneecapped, I've heard them screaming from being shot, when their knees are shot through and–

BH: And what, this, these were punishment kneecappings?

SON: Yeah, yeah, I heard them.

BH: Yeah, so there were, it sounds like there's an intense pressure to conform.

SON: Oh Jesus, not half, absolutely, and you had to kind of, I think, you know, when I look back through like, secondary school I was really quiet and it's just now actually dawned on me that's why I was quiet, because partly I knew I was having a fling with a girl and that made me stand out and then also I knew that because we didn't go along with what was happening, so we had to be quiet, cos I remember getting hit one time by a boy and I think I must have been about eleven and he was saying something about the army and I didn't agree with what he was saying about the army, but I was only about ten or eleven then, and I remember him thumping me really hard, and I remember I must have gone home to my mother and told her cos she went down to see the principal about it, me being hit for saying something, and I can still see this boy now, he had like, real blonde curly hair, but I remember him giving me a right whack in the back, I remember it really hurt and I must have been hurt enough to be able to report it back to my mother. So we kind of were different because we weren't republican. In a sense now I would say we probably were quite pacifists in a way that we didn't agree with the violence, and I remember like, during the hunger strikes when they, cos the Falls Road used to be lined with really old trees, really big, old sycamore trees, and I remember one time like, sitting out on the doorstep with everybody and hearing this fecking chainsaw, and the next thing they're cutting down the frigging trees and you just think, you know, the next, they're not bloody lumberjacks, you know, they're like, if that goes the wrong way it's next to your house, it's going to flatten it, and I remember going out and shouting at them, because I was such an outdoor person I couldn't bear that they were going to cut down these old trees to make barricades, and they did, they cut down two of them, and I remember feeling devastated by this.

BH: So this was the local paramilitaries cutting down trees?

SON: With a chainsaw and, yeah, they blocked the roads so the army couldn't get up and down the road, but I remember feeling devastated by that cos I love nature and these trees, you know, have been there God knows how long, and then they were hacking them down with a bloody chainsaw.

BH: How did you develop that interest in the outdoors and nature? Because obviously it's quite an urban context, the Falls, or I suppose it's quite close to the countryside too.

SON: It is, because I remember like, when I was probably, when we still could go up onto the Black Mountain and I remember my da taking, walking us from our house all the way up the Whiterock, through what was Ballymurphy and onto the Black Mountain, and I was really young then and I still can remember like, being up there and seeing all over Belfast, way out beyond the Cave Hill, through, you know, you could see Belfast Lough and it was, and I remember that as a child and it was stunning, and there was that, cos we're surrounded by the hills and the Black Mountain, the Hatchet Field, cos you can see a field that's the shape

of a hatchet, and always looking up at that, and then when the army came they built their camp on the top of the mountain, so nobody was allowed on the mountain, it was all barbed wire, helicopters'd land there, they had their fort on the mountain, so you couldn't go on it, and, but I think it was the peacefulness probably and then going up to the Glens and then like, our summer holidays we used to go to Ballycastle or Newcastle, you know, for a month, we'd rent a house and then so I'd see the Mournes and that's what I fell in love with the Mourne Mountains, that's my absolute love affair, every time I go home, you know, in a couple of days you'll find me up in the Mournes and–

BH: Is this walking, is it like, walking?

SON: Aye, and now I've got a dog and, you know, I remember the first time taking my dog, I cried my eyes out because it was just like [pauses; tearful], cos it's one of my like, most favourite places in the world, still.

BH: Yeah, it was important to you back then.

SON: Oh my God, back then, I remember I did the Mourne Wall Walk when I was about twenty, so I went off, me and my mate, and our practice was we used to go up and down the Cave Hill, and we used to get the bus out up the Antrim Road and then, you know, traipse up and down the Cave Hill to try and train, cos there was no gyms to do the Mourne Wall Walk, which is like, twenty-six miles of walking the Mournes, you know, so I've walked all those peaks, you know, Big Binnian, Wee Binnian, Slieve Donard, the lot, and you do it in a day, and they don't do it anymore because it obviously was really bad for the mountain, but, you know, I've still got my badge, you know, you did the Mourne Wall Walk, and so it was a place of sanctuary for me.

BH: Yeah, escape I presume plays a role in it.

SON: Oh God absolutely, absolute an escape, and I remember like, one of the times walking up there, you know, I'd just, I remember lying on a huge boulder in the middle of one of the rivers up on, near Donard and just lying there and the sun shining **[00:32:55]** on me, just thinking, you know, Belfast was a million miles away, and that bliss, and I always remember like, as a youngster, my mother saying to us look up at the sky, and I, to this day I still do, I look, you know, every night if it's a clear night, and I live out in rural north Yorkshire, so we get some great starry nights and like, I always remember my mum, even when we were young, saying look at the sky, look at the stars, look at the moon, and I remember watching the moon landing, I remember that happening and watching it avidly on our, you know, old black and white TV, and it was those sorts of things that I think because of my mother, she just generated that interest, in us, it was sort of like, to make us, I think really understand that there was life outside because we didn't get any flavour of life outside, so she encouraged us to find that, and I suppose, you know, taking us away and, you know, we would go to Newcastle and then that got wrecked because one of the times we went to Newcastle we were all really young, in the middle of the night the army and the RUC came and they got us out of the house because they'd had a bomb warning for the post office in Newcastle and we were staying near there, in this really nice house, and they came and they were just getting us out of the house and the bomb went off.

BH: Is that right?

SON: Yeah, and I always remember, cos we're all in our night clothes like, pyjamas and stuff, we were only young, and like, I always remember a soldier taking off his jacket, cos we were freezing, you know, we literally ran out of the house in our pyjamas, a fecking bomb went off, and I always remember the soldier wrapping his jack-, some of the soldiers putting their, took their coats off, the big army like, jackets and putting them round us, and then when we went back, you know, after that bomb went off, we heard, it was a huge bomb and the house was fucking wrecked, you know, the windows were in, the doors were all off, you know, they literally saved our lives cos like, I always remember my younger sister's cot or bed was covered in glass, and so that was the last time we ever went on holiday in Newcastle.

BH: That soldier putting the coat around you, was that a strange thing to happen, like?

SON: God yeah, absolutely, but we, we, this was why we stood out I think, cos my mother didn't tell us to hate the soldiers, and she just didn't, and so when they did that they looked after us, you know, and you could feel it, so we did stand out because we didn't hate them, but I knew I was meant to hate them, but I couldn't cos I wasn't brought up like that, and I always remember like, I don't know, I was early teens and I remember just sitting out on our, you know, on the front step of the house and the first black man I ever saw was a young soldier and I don't think he could have been any more than eighteen, nineteen, and I remember, cos they used to come up the street with a gun, you know, on patrol and then they would sort of sit inside, you know, just on your passageway, and I remember this guy coming up the street and he crouched down in our, where the garden gate was, and I remember holding his stare and seeing the fear in that young fella's face, and I can still see his face now totally, I can see what he looked like and the fear, and that was the first time I'd ever seen a black person, you know, in real life, you know, we'd been collecting for the Biafrans in school, but, you know, to actually see a young black man in an army outfit, in his uniform and looking so scared, and I always remember that, it was a fleeting thing of moments where we just held each other and I didn't, you know, he was probably thinking there that she's probably going to say something to me, but I remember thinking I just want you to know I'm not like everybody else, and I remember thinking that at that age.

BH: And was that stressful, that?

SON: [sighs] I couldn't, you know, it was not something that I would talk about, cos I would know absolutely not to talk about those sorts of things, that I might've have non-feelings of hatred for soldiers, so I knew to be quiet, and that's what I mean, why now I fecking understand in school I, it had never dawned on me, that I was so quiet in school, I was quietly rebellious, that's why, cos we were really different, we stood out.

BH: What about for your mother then, that experience during that period? Cos I know sometimes children can be quite resilient in that they, they've got their friendship groups or whatever–

SON: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

BH: But maybe a parent's at home actually more worried because they're worried about what's going to happen. How did she experience that period?

SON: Well, I suppose my mother and a couple of her friends they ran the St John's youth club which was attached to the church and that was run on the youth club, in the street next to us, and there was her and a couple of good guys, and this is another guy who's dead now, he died suddenly of a heart attack, but he used to take us in our teens walking the Mournes, he was an outdoor person, he's also a teacher, Brendan Rogan, he's a really good man and him and my mum and a couple of others ran this youth club.

BH: Is that right, yeah?

SON: Yeah, and they used to let me go there and they'd like, have a Sunday night disco and they had a little café bar, you know, where you could buy like, a soft drink and a packet of crisps or something and there was a pool table and we used to just play games and stuff, we'd go and use our school to play badminton, that's where I learnt to play badminton, and so she was heavily involved in doing good stuff for kids, and then one night the IRA sent an ambulance to our house, and the ambulance, and I was home and I remember the ambulance saying we've come because we've been told that Cathy O'Neill, that was my mother, has been shot, so that was a veiled threat to my mother if she carried on, cos she wouldn't let the IRA come into the youth club, cos they wanted to come in and talk to folk and try and recruit them and they wouldn't let 'em in, so they sent the veiled threat, sent the ambulance to our house to warn my mother, you will end up in a bloody ambulance if yous carry on, but they did carry on.

BH: They did carry on?

SON: Yeah, yeah, yeah, they didn't, they didn't deter them, they kept that youth club going and, you know, and I'm sure that saved a lot of particularly young men, there was a lot of young boys like, I was really good friends with cos, like I say, I was tomboy and we used to go and play football at the school in the summer and, but they probably saved them, because they didn't join up because they were in that youth club and it was, you know, genius, and we would put all sorts of labels on that now, in terms of, you know, the work we all do now to save the youngsters and the knife crime blah, blah, blah, but they were doing that purely through a gut reaction. There was no learning, there was no books for them to read about that, there was no studies, you know, there, nobody was looking at their outcomes and their performance and stuff, they just did that as a pure gut heart thing, of keeping kids safe a few nights a week through the winter and did things in the summer, so my mother was involved in that, and then we got like, threats and, you know.

BH: Did those threats and things, did your mother ever think, you know, we'll move away from here?

SON: Never, nev-, that was never ever talked about, never.

BH: Never. What about school then? Cos you said, I think you mentioned that you'd done your GCSEs, but you didn't get on too well with the exams cos you were doing other things.

SON: Yeah, indeed.

BH: So what was your plan then after that, after you'd done–?

SON: Plan, I didn't have a plan, well, what I had to do was I had to repeat them, and then I passed them, but I knew I didn't want to go to university, I just didn't want to, and I think probably cos of my sexuality and all those things I just thought I need to do something else, so I just, and I needed to move out of my house, I needed to get away from my family.

BH: Were your family aware of your relationship at this stage?

SON: No, Jesus, and they still don't know about it now actually.

BH: They don't know about it?

SON: Not with the woman who I'm talking about, and I would never say her name, but no, they don't know about that, so they didn't know, they hadn't a clue and, so kind of, I think, you know, I left school at eighteen and I went straight into a job, I just got that job at the hospital cos I could do, I had secretarial skills, I always remember them saying to me in school if you're not going to do academia you're going to have to be a secretary, Jesus wept, so, but actually it stood me in good stead, they really did me a favour because it did get me out of some, you know, deep shit at different times, when I needed a job and I could just turn to that. So I got a job in the Royal and then moved into, and desperate to leave home, cos I also grew up in a very violent house, my mother was very violent to me, even though I was like, the one that she leant on most, but because I was the second eldest, the most rebellious, a quiet rebellious person, you know, like, first one to swear in the house, first one to not go to mass, you know, first one to come home pissed at eighteen, soon as I turned eighteen I was like, right, drink, I waited until I was legal, so they couldn't say anything, you know, so I was kind of the first, the first, the first in my family to do stuff, so I got the shite knocked out of me for lots of stuff like, badly.

BH: By your mother?

SON: By my mother, yeah, yeah, yeah.

BH: I find that difficult to reconcile with the image of her doing the–

SON: I know, exactly, this is, imagine how my head was, so that's why alcohol was great because it sort of sorted all that mess out in my head, well, it numbed it, you know, but yeah, so she was very violent and my parents argued all the time and stuff, but she was also really loving and caring **[00:42:55]** and, you know, made sure we always had things for Christmas, there was food on the table, you know, we did well at school, but yet she was, but then that, I think it was all, you know, hindsight's wonderful, isn't it, the pressure she was under, it's like a bloody boiling melting pot.

BH: Sure, yeah.

SON: To keep five kids safe.

BH: In that context, like.

SON: Yeah, so I can forgive her and I have forgiven her for her nastiness cos, well, why wouldn't I, but yes, so I was desperate to leave home cos they were just doing my head in and so–

BH: You were able to get a good enough wage out of the job in the Royal?

SON: Oh God aye, so I moved in to somewhere at the lower, at the bottom of the Donegall Road where the Royal Victoria Hospital is, they still have accommodation for nurses and doctors and stuff, so I was working in personnel in the Royal and my uncle worked there at the same time, and I went to the head of personnel and said look, any chance of getting me one of them, into the, one of the nurses homes, so I can move out of home, and he said yeah, we'll get you a place, so I got, they gave me like, they were like, you know, little studios, so you had a, you didn't have a bathroom actually, you had a wash-hand basin and, you know, a desk, cos this was like, for people who were studying, you know, and a bed, single bed, and it was like heaven, Jesus wept, shared a bathroom in the thing, there was a TV lounge and I was away, moved in there and it was riotous.

BH: And how did that change your life then? In what ways did that change things?

SON: It was a, well, the freedom first, oh I could do what I wanted, drank as much as I liked, and I did really heavily drink, I was like, it was the best medicine ever.

BH: Where did you drink at? Where would've been your local?

SON: Up in west Belfast, up in the Whitefort in Andytown, we used to walk up there, Jesus, it was miles, couldn't walk it now. We used to walk up sober and fall down every pavement on the way back, pissed [laughs], so I'd just go drinking, go to work, work really hard, I was really good, cos I'm smart, you know, I was smart, I didn't know I was smart then, but I know I'm smart now because all the time, cos I hadn't done the academia I always felt like, I'd failed my eleven-plus, so I was a definite failure from the age of ten, I was shit, you know, and it took me a long time to remove that chip off my shoulder and, so yeah, I used to go drinking up there on a Friday and Saturday, get absolutely slaughtered, and worked really hard, and then I met a girl who lived in Cork and I just fell really in love with her and I went to Cork.

BH: What happened to the other girl?

SON: She got a fella.

BH: Is that right?

SON: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

BH: Did she stay in Belfast?

SON: She stayed, she's not in Belfast now, we're still in touch actually, after all these years, we've known each other since we were fifteen, and so she is in England, she's here, and we're still in touch, which is really nice.

BH: It is, yeah.

SON: And, so she, yeah, she got a fella and went off and did her thing, and I was off doing my thing, and I met a girl from Cork and I just fell head over heels in love with Gillian and was going to work and stuff, and then one day I thought do you know what, I'm going to Cork.

BH: So how did you meet her? Was she living in Cork, was she, or was she in Belfast?

SON: She actually came up to visit, somehow or other she was a friend of my sister, I don't know how she was, and then I got to meet her, she was up in Belfast for a visit and we just had the best time one summer, it was like, woo, hiding away from the family and, yeah, and then we kept in touch like, phone calls, cos of course we didn't have bloody mobiles, did we.

BH: I was just going to say, there's no Facebook or anything then.

SON: Jesus, you must be joking, so it was all like, public phones, letters, cards, the old-fashioned way and, yeah, just really liked each other and then just one day I thought I'm going to Cork, and I just gave in my notice, went home, told my family I'm moving to Cork, and went and fecked off down to Cork [laughs].

BH: So what year would that have been, like?

SON: That was, I was in Cork three year, '83.

BH: '83, right, and what was that like, moving to Cork? Cos I can't imagine it's that much more liberal than Belfast.

SON: Ah but it was.

BH: It was, was it, yeah?

SON: There was no trouble, there was no, I remember like, going down there and immediately going to open my bag, there was no security, it was like, normal, you could just walk about, there was no threats, there was a gay bar, there was like, nothing, it was so, and I think that's where I lost the plot, in Cork, that's where it started to hit me that actually all of my upbringing to that point was not normal, cos when you're living in it, it feels that's your normality and you don't know anything else, and then the shock of suddenly realising

hang on a minute, that wasn't so normal after all, so I just, I worked, I got all sorts of jobs and it was really interesting actually, working. I got a job in one of the hospitals in Cork, working in the kitchen, and I remember sitting down, cos we used to have like, a sort of tea break about eleven o'clock, I remember a couple of older women there who were really oh fecking bitter, you should never have got this job, you're taking jobs, you're from Northern Ireland–

BH: Cos that was going to be my next question, yeah.

SON: You're taking jobs from somebody from the South, and I got that real, and, you know, you're the, you lot, cos Siobhán, i.e. you lot, the republicans and the IRA, look at the trouble you're causing, and so I got a whole heap of shit from older people working in the hospital, yeah, for being from Northern Ireland.

BH: And did you, where was your accommodation, did you–?

SON: I rented a room off someone in a house, I don't even know, how did I even, yeah, I stayed with Gillian for a while in Fermoy and then I knew I had to get work, so then through work somebody said ah we can, there's somebody looking for a house share, it was somebody bought like, a really nice brand new house, so I got, rented a room there, so that was ace, and just worked, stayed in Cork, rarely sober like, for three years, working and drinking and trying to cope I think.

BH: Yeah, cos you said there this is when you think it unravelled like, when you went to Cork.

SON: Without a doubt, it all fell away, it all fell apart, and probably being away from family, and just realising that it wasn't okay, where I had been brought up, and just seeing, living in somewhere that was peaceful, you know, Cork is a really lovely city and near the coast and, you know, we used to go out and explore and hitching everywhere, used to hitchhike all around the place, and seeing the countryside and it was stunning and feeling that peace I think, but then knowing what was happening like, less than two hundred miles up the road, so it definitely fell away, definitely started to unravel.

BH: How did Gillian react to this? Did she have any sense that this was a potential occurrence, like?

SON: No, cos we were young like, we're twenty-one, you know, didn't have a clue, it wasn't like, you know, didn't know anything about the world really, so we were just like, young, getting pissed all the time and partying, you know, and, cos eventually I got a flat of my own and we used to have a party every weekend, you know, people'd come round, you know, and we'd have a good time, we'd watch fecking *Live Aid* and, you know, and just were, just living life, but not, we never called it anything or named it. It was only later when I went to London, you know, and then it, started to really understand it more cos I went into therapy, cos I needed to understand what was going on and, you know, so in 1986 I decided I was going to London, somebody, a mate of mine in Cork, said I'm going to London in January, this was like, December, do you want to come.

BH: Right, and were you still with Gillian at this stage?

SON: No, we'd split up, but we're still friends and we still are now, she lives in L.A. and we're still friends, it's really funny, all these fecking ex-girlfriends, but I think it, but it's more about that indicated the closeness that we had and what it was like in Ireland in those times, and we've got that sort of lived experience together, so you, there's something that still keeps you connected. No, so we had, we weren't, we were still moving in circles, so we knew each other, and then just somebody I know just said do you want to go to London, I thought fuck it, why not.

BH: And had you ever thought about moving to England before?

SON: I knew, no, it was never in my consciousness, the only English people I knew were soldiers or what you see portrayed on the TV, so I hadn't a clue about England, how we might be received with our dodgy accents and, you know, nothing, at all, it was just like, well, that sounds like, that sounds exciting, you know, and in six weeks I was in London.

BH: And this was like, a decision made kind of off the cuff, as in, somebody was going and–

SON: This is how, this is how I live my life though, it's just like, bosh, just do it and you could, you know, so I remember like, going home, up from Cork, I remember hitching home from bloody Cork with all my belongings and going home to my family and saying, by that time they'd moved out of the Falls Road and they were living up in County Antrim.

BH: How come, how did that happen, how did they–?

SON: They moved cos of all the shit, the Troubles and needing to do something different, get away, so they moves up into Glengormley, which is kind of a mixed area, **[00:52:55]** so they moved. When I moved into that hospital accommodation they were just getting ready to move and I knew I wasn't going to move with them, so they all, three of them with my, three of my, my brother and my two sisters, younger sisters, my mum and dad moved up to Glengormley and I moved into the hospital. So I had to get home and I'd no money of course to pay for a bloody train, well, I don't even think I had thought about it, just thought I'll just hitch, you know, so like a fecking eejit set off to hitch home and luckily just, I did it in two lifts, but going home and telling them like, I'm going to London, my mother was devastated. She, I always remember and I remind her of it to this day, you can't, you're going to that den of iniquity, that's what she'd call London, den of iniquity, and she still like, now every now and again I'd say to her do you remember me going to the den of iniquity, and she was beside herself, I was the first one like, to really say I'm leaving the country.

BH: Well, that's interesting now, cos what did she say when you went to Cork? Was Cork a den of iniquity or was it okay?

SON: No, that was alright, still in the country, there was no sea between us, and I think she probably thought in Cork we could still see each other, you know, it wasn't as hard, she probably didn't think it'd be as hard, probably it was easier to get home from London than it

was from Cork. So she, they were all like, devastated, my younger sisters and brother were really upset, they felt like I was deserting them, and so there was a lot of emotion around it, but it didn't deter me. I just thought I've got to get out of here, I feel like I'm going mad and I need to leave and, I mean, and I just remember thinking yeah, this feels, you know, and I was a true immigrant, you know, I got the fecking ferry out of Larne, you know, and I robbed my da of eighty quid cos I said to him at the time I've got no money, I'm going to London, this is it like, it's true, and he said well, I haven't got any money, cos he was so mean, and I said well, what have you got in your pocket, and he was like, oh I've got eighty quid, thanks I'll have that, and I left on the ferry, with about a thousand bags, I don't know how the hell I thought I was going to carry them, and, and eighty quid from my da, and I was sleeping on a floor, going to sleep on the floor of a friend of a friend of a friend of a friend.

BH: In London, this was?

SON: In Woking in Surrey, yeah, and they, so I had to get off the ferry all the way up in Scotland, get on the bus, then I got into Victoria. I don't even remember do you know buying the ticket, I have no idea how I even did that or where the money came from, I must have saved it, and getting off at Victoria then having to get on the tube to get on a train to get to Woking with all these bags on the tube, and I'd never been on it, what the hell did I know about the tube, and stayed down in Woking for a while till I got a job in London.

BH: Right, and did you have any idea at the time like, what you were going there for like, was there a–?

SON: Six months, we said we'll just go to London for six months, we'll see what it's like, and that's what we said, and here we are, Jesus Christ, thirty years later.

BH: And you stayed there after that then.

SON: I stayed in London until 1999.

BH: Right, and what was that like then, London–

SON: Riotous, oh my God.

BH: In terms of, because what I've, people that I've interviewed before, in particular the ones who have grown up kind of in Belfast, have said actually coming to England wasn't that bad in the sense of it was already so bad in Belfast that this was actually a relief to some extent, but I'd just be in-, I've never had any, spoke to anybody yet who's been to London, so I'm just interested to know what, what was that like?

SON: It was a very interesting time to go to London because obviously the IRA were bombing and very prolifically too, and it was fascinating because I did get a lot of shit. I remember like, at times when like, when I think the Birmingham bomb went off, and I remember being on the tube and thinking I better not open me gob here, cos you could just feel the atmosphere, people were fearful, and I knew I just was not safe, I didn't feel safe to be able to open my mouth and people hear my accent because I think what Irish people

have experienced over years of coming here from Northern Ireland is that they just see Irish people as all being the same from Northern Ireland, so people didn't differentiate between whether like, we were just good folk who didn't give a, who weren't involved in the Troubles, they just assumed you were, and that's why a lot of people struggled I think, because you were just, everybody was tarred with the same brush, you're all as bad as each other, I remember somebody saying that to me years ago in London. So there was a time where I didn't feel particularly, I felt unsafe I would say in London because I didn't feel it was okay to open my mouth or to say my name.

BH: So there was actually instances of like, verbal hostility?

SON: Oh God, yeah, absolutely, and then I remember like, and then at the time when, do you remember when the bomb went off in Canary Wharf?

BH: Mm hmm.

SON: Well, I was living on the Isle of Dogs then, so I had watched them build Canary Wharf, cos I had a partner at that time and I lived in a tower block and that was just when the Canary Wharf was really starting to be developed and they'd built the first tower there, and I remember saying to Jane at the time that's going to be a target, there's no security, we used to go up and just stand in the basement, walk around, and I remember saying to her that's a target, she said well, what do you mean, I said there's no security there, this is seen as the pinnacle of the redevelopment of the East End, it's a big government initiative, that's a legitimate IRA target. Wasn't I right?

BH: Yeah.

SON: Cos they blew it up and, and it was really, you know, I wasn't in at the time and, I mean, the fact that we had the windows all blown in again, you just think Jesus Christ.

BH: This was like you were reliving–

SON: Absolutely.

BH: West Belfast again.

SON: Absolutely and, you know, people were really distressed, I mean, I was upset, but it was a bomb, I'd heard one when I was six, come on, but the distress, and what really upset me, because at the time there used to be a newsagents that we used to go to a lot and I knew the guy there really well, he died in the bomb in Canary Wharf, and I remember going into another newsagents and saying, and I was buying the *Guardian*, yeah, can I have the *Guardian*, and he was going well, if your lot hadn't blown up Canary Wharf you could have the *Guardian*, and I went what do you mean, cos the *Guardian* plant was on the Isle of Dogs or Canary Wharf as the posh call it, and he said well, your lot blew it up, the printing works, and I'm like, it wasn't my lot, and I said to him, you know, I said the guy who died in that newsagents I knew him really well, so this guy got into this whole bloody heated thing and I

thought do you know what, there's no point in arguing, but it was like, and I can't remember what year that was that they bombed Canary Wharf.

BH: Was it '92 or something like that, was it, yeah, so it must be quite a short time after you arrived in London.

SON: Yeah, yeah, and I remember, and I thought you bastard, I'm going to have you, cos I had a mate who worked for the *Guardian*, so I went to her and I said look, I've just been in a shop that sells the *Guardian* and this guy's giving me a whole heap of shit, they said don't worry, we'll get, we'll, we won't let him have the *Guardian* anymore, so they stopped him selling it [laughs], and then they gave me a pad and a pen with *Guardian* written on it because I'd had this shit from the guy in the newsagent [laughs].

BH: My goodness [laughs].

SON: Cos I just thought you've no idea mate who I am, plus I'm so upset about the man who's lost his life, you know, and I've come here from Ireland to try and get away from this shit and then here I am caught up in another bloody bomb, so I thought right, I'll have you.

BH: Was it difficult to explain to people–

SON: Oh my God.

BH: English people–?

SON: It was horrendous, I remember like, even, first time I heard fireworks I hit the deck, and this was in Canary Wharf, and Jane was like, what's wrong with you, I said that's shooting, she's going, no it's not, it's the fireworks, I said but that sounds like shooting, cos a lot of people wouldn't know what shooting sounds like funnily enough, but I do know what shooting sounds like, I can tell you the difference between a pistol, a fecking, you know, Armalite, as they used to say, your semi-automatic weapons, a machine gun, I've heard a rocket being launched up the middle of the street, cos they've tried to shoot a helicopter down the Falls Road, so fireworks went off and I hit the deck because I thought they were shooting outside and I was shit-, I was like, it took me back, it was almost like post-traumatic stress, shaking, really scared, you know, obviously triggered memories in me and, so it was very hard to understand, and like, I always felt that when I came here, cos you'd always hear like, when you grew up in Northern Ireland people going on about the English and how they view the Irish and the Northern Ireland problem, and actually English people couldn't give a shite about Northern Ireland, that was my experience actually of when you, I started talking to them, some are like, I don't know what you're talking about. They certainly couldn't understand the politics, but that's understandable cos who could, but they actually couldn't give a flying frig, and they really didn't give a shit about where you were from, in terms of the issues or they just didn't care, and I found that fascinating, and I remember talking to a couple of people I knew who were Protestants, and very staunch unionists actually, and they really struggled, more so than a Catholic coming to England, because they expected to be treated as, oh here comes unionists, here comes the royalists, the loyalists, God ble–, you know, fantastic, you've come here, you've come home, you're part of the UK, and all people

hear was you've got a Belfast accent, you've got a Northern Ireland accent, you're a bad bastard, you've been blowing up the Birm-, you've been blowing up bombs, exploding bombs here, killing our soldiers, and they didn't, there was no differentiation between whether you're paramilitary or not, Catholic, Protestant, republican, loyalist, it was just your accent, **[01:02:55]** and I found that fascinating, that a lot of Protestant folk just couldn't understand why they weren't kind of, you know, welcomed with open–

BH: Embraced like, yeah.

SON: Absolutely, you know, you're now part of the Union, you know, you're on royal soil and that just didn't happen and they really struggled, you know, cos I've work, I work in and I have worked in mental health services and then you see that coming through, big time, that they've really, really struggled, and also they didn't get the same opportunities around, they didn't have that thing whereby, you know, they automatically walked into a job, you know, cos you just got a job for life, didn't you, my da's in the shipyard, I'm in the shipyard, I work for Shorts, my da, you know, that didn't happen here, you had to compete, and I think the thing that, you know, my ma would always say what stood us against was the Catholics, we knew we had to get an education and we were driven into education and, whereas, because sort of Protestants, this is, you know, all the mythology we grew up with, because they always thought they had a job for life, they wouldn't, didn't necessarily push around education, so I found that fascinating once I was here, and then actually the, your accent was the leveller, it didn't matter which part of the sort of, you know, the, whatever your boundary was it didn't matter, you know, whether your pavement was painted red, white and blue or green, white and orange, your accent, you're a Northern Ireland, you're a bad bastard, cos you have to be a bad bastard if you're from Northern Ireland, and that was definitely my experience.

BH: That's fascinating, and on that like, you mentioned two unionist people you knew. Did you know, when you came to London, did you know other people from Ireland, whether North or South, Catholic or Protestant, no?

SON: I came here with a mate and she was from Cork and I didn't know anyone.

BH: Is that right?

SON: Not a soul, even like, the woman whose house we went and slept on the floor in, I'd never met in my life, she was a speech, a sp-, she actually is a bloody speech therapist, but I'd never met her, didn't know her from Adam or Eve.

BH: What about like, what you would call I suppose like, the institutions of the Irish community over here?

SON: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

BH: The clubs, the centres and things like that.

SON: I, what I did was, in the eighties obviously the women's movement was really big and I got involved when the first Irish women's centre opened in Stoke Newington in London.

BH: Right, and when did that open?

SON: Oh my God, in the eighties.

BH: In the eighties, right, so you're already involved in that before it, before you moved over?

SON: No, I just got to, three friends, they were talking about this Irish women's centre being opened in Stoke Newington and they were like, do you want to come along, and I'm like, I was fascinated, I'm like, yeah, course I do and like, do you remember Nell McCafferty, the–?

BH: Yeah, I know her, I've seen her, is it recently I've just seen something she'd written actually.

SON: She came, her and another woman author came, can't remember their name, and they were there for the opening, and so I was involved in setting that up, taking part in some of the groups and the conversations and, up in Stokey, in Stoke Newington, and that was lovely, to be part of that and then to hear, cos I think joining that sort of group was the first time I'd heard, you know, more Irish accents, you know, and it was definitely a lot of women from the South and there was a few of us from the North, but it felt very empowering, very powerful, to partly be with just all women, but all from Ireland with an unspoken commonality, you didn't need to go into really anything cos we all understood, we're all here from Ireland, we've all left for various reasons, but there was just that common, it was just, there was, I use that word again, a leveller, because we all knew what our experiences had probably been, so that was amazing, that time of being around that, but I never got involved and it was really funny, I think partly because I had left Ireland and it felt like I was leaving it behind, and I wanted to kind of embrace a different culture, and I enjoyed the sort of multiculturalism of London, I loved that, I soaked that up, so I rarely, I didn't go up to fecking Kilburn or Irish centres, I never have done, and partly it's not because I'm not interested or I deny where I'm from, but it's like, hang on, but there's also this huge richness around me.

BH: It's not what you were searching for, like.

SON: No, it wasn't, it was a different way of life and a way to find me I suppose and explore me and my sexuality and what my abilities are and embrace something new, you know, like, to eat bloody different food, you know, to taste food that's so different, to talk to people who are from different countries, different accents, you know, and I'm still like that to this day like, most of my friends are not white, but that's because what I discovered is like, people from the Caribbean and African and Caribbean people have got very interesting, similar histories to us, one of migration, one of violent families, sexual abuse, incest, God in some respect or other, and so actually we've got an awful lot, our skin might be a different colour, but we've got an awful lot in common, and it's very easy to share those

commonalities, strong family values, etcetera, etcetera, so I think I really fitted into that because of where I came from.

BH: Okay, what about like, the wider LGB community in London? Were you involved in that?

SON: Yeah, massively, no, I was absolutely, it was like, bloody hell, I'm in heaven, you know, cos at the time in the eighties, early nineties there was lots of women-only bars, women-only clubs, you know, so there was lots of women-only stuff and I'd never experienced that, I was like, fucking hell.

BH: Is this completely different from Cork obviously?

SON: Absolutely, in Cork there was one gay bar and that was mostly gay men, there was a few of us lesbos hanging around, but then London was just like, Jesus Christ, you know, and you'd go to a disco, you know, you had three, four, five hundred women like, bloody hell, drinking like a fish, working really hard, and I got a job when I first eventually got to London, I was a, used my secretarial skills, got a job straight away in University College London, working for a professor of anatomy and embryology, and that was fascinating work cos he was doing stuff that was really ground-breaking at the time, and it was a student environment, I was young, he didn't expect me to dress up or anything, as long as I could do the work he didn't give a shit what I looked like, a lot of the time, you know, I'd have been out on the piss all night and I'd just go straight to work and he'd be a bit like, hmm, and I'd be like, don't worry, I'll be alright, but, you know, so I got a job at UCL and that was great, great environment to be in, you know, I was twenty-odd, twenty-four, you know, so it was buzzing, London was buzzing and then there was all the women's movement, and then HIV came along and I got involved, you know, in setting up the first like, needle exchange, cos I started working in drug services and setting up like, the first needle exchange in south London, being part of the body positive movement, supporting people who were, you know, gay men who were getting their diagnosis in the late eighties, early, '88, '89, so very much involved, then there was the lesbian and gay centre in Farringdon, volunteered there, used to bake the cakes in the kitchen in the evenings.

BH: What I'm wondering about here is, in that scene did you encounter any other people from Northern Ireland at the time like, were there many other people coming over?

SON: Not many. I remember meeting a guy who I adored and he was from Belfast, he was a gay guy and we'd known each other through my brother, and he and, bumped into him in the lesbian and gay centre in Farringdon, it was like, bloody hell, what are you doing here, and what are you doing here, but it was ace, but there wasn't many people–

BH: Wasn't many, right.

SON: There really wasn't, there was a few women from the South, but hardly anyone from Northern Ireland like, really just no one, so I suppose, you know, and I think why I obviously didn't go to any of the Irish centres too because church–

BH: Exactly, yeah.

SON: Homophobia, you know, I wouldn't have been accepted, so I knew, probably knew to stay away from those places too and I didn't seek them out [distracted by noise], is your battery going, something just beeped or a noise came out there.

BH: Something did, oh I think the battery's okay.

SON: Okay, cool. So I think I knew a way to stay away from the institutions, but also I suppose, cos I'd left the institution at the age of fifteen, I wasn't interested in all that institutional Irishness and I wanted to embrace just being in London and all that it had to offer in a sense and, just, you know, it gave me some great opportunities.

BH: So would you have said at that stage then, when you moved to London, was your lesbian identity more important than your Irish one?

SON: Absolutely, I'd never known, I didn't know that's what it was called, you know, I'd suddenly got all these new labels like, people would say to me you're a lesbian, I'm like, what, and I didn't know, do you know what I mean, because no, I didn't have the language.

BH: Yes, the identity politics language.

SON: None, and they'd go to me oh you're really butch, and I'm like, what, no I'm not, you know, I'm a pseudo, my, the standing joke is with my friends that I'm a pseudo butch, one of them actually got me a T-shirt made that said pseudo butch on it, cos I cry at anything, and so I was getting all these labels, you know, like, you're a real traditional-looking butch dyke, and **[01:12:55]** I'm like, what, butch dyke, no I'm not, I'm just me, and I remember saying that to everyone, I'm just me, I'm just Siobhán, I'm more than what you're saying that I am. So my identity, my sexual identity, I think yeah, absolutely, because suddenly I could discover it, I could express it, I could dress truly how I wanted, not that I really didn't when I was at home actually, but like, I remember, there's even Christmas pictures of me like, at fourteen and I'm sat there, we've got like, in a family photo, and I've got a shirt and tie on, but my ma let me, really short hair and I had a shirt and tie on and a V-neck jumper, just like I am now, all I'm missing is the tie, but she let me do that, and so I suppose to be in London, nobody gives a shit what you look like or what you do, you know, total freedom, unless you're Northern Ireland and there's bombs going off, but, so yeah, it was very much about exploring sexuality, women's movement, women's rights, you know, fighting to get Clause 28 when the Tories brought that in, going on those marches, joining the miners' marches, being quite political, but in a different way that I could never be, I could never be political in Northern Ireland cos it certainly wasn't safe.

BH: What about that past then, everything that you'd left behind in Belfast? Were you still, was that still part of who you were when you were in the–?

SON: Massively.

BH: Massively, yeah.

SON: It had a huge influence on me and I think it still does because I'm still driven about doing the right thing, about, even if it's unpopular, in terms of equality of opportunity, you know, people use that phrase very lightly, I don't. I really look at how we practise anti-disc-, that we don't discriminate, and that's definitely from where I grew up, that has definitely, definitely moulded me into the person I am now, of that huge, it's like a deep, it's a sense, I can almost not explain this deep, deep sense of you have to do the right thing, and that's very driven, it's, gets you, me into scenarios that makes you unpopular cos it drives me through my job of like, you know, up until six months ago I worked for Leeds City Council and I was driven to have to do the right thing and that meant going up against elected members, so I had to find a way to persuade them actually what I was saying was a really good thing and it would make them even more popular, but it was that driven, and that definitely comes from being in Northern Ireland, of seeing people suffer, of having suffered, seeing the impact that things have on people, you know, sexual abuse, the violence, the controlling of the church, the politics and how they can be so negative, and so I was really and still am just driven by that, of everybody should have that opportunity, whether it be, I'm not talking about tokenism, I mean truly, and that thing of doing the right thing, it drives me up the wall.

BH: All of those past experiences that moulded you or shaped you into that person, when you were in a sense discovering your sexual identity in London or finding new ways of conceptualising it, presumably a lot of your friendship group would have been other people from London, or from England anyway.

SON: Yeah, yeah, absolutely.

BH: Were they aware of your Irishness as a thing?

SON: They were, but they just, you, people can't understand it because if they haven't lived in that war, cos it was a war, let's face it, you know, Saracens on the street, jeeps, soldiers, shooting, getting shot at, you know, dodging petrol bombs, you know, it's all the stuff that people watch, you know, I look at Hong Kong at the minute and think that's what it used to be like in Northern Ireland, fecking tear gas, rubber bullets, live rounds of ammunition being shot at people, so I think people just don't understand it, they can't understand it because they cannot bel-, imagine that four hundred miles away this was going on, that over three thousand people died, you know, people died in this country, Manchester bombings, you know, all of those things, and then recently, you know, and I was saying to somebody a while ago yeah, we've got the Good Friday Agreement, but what's happened is, is that ISIS has taken over, you know, it used to be Northern Ireland, your accent, but now people are afraid of men, frightened of men with beards and rucksacks who might have, you know, a slightly darker hue, might think, hmm they look a bit dodgy, and they've replaced us, and I find that fascinating. I remember saying that to somebody a few years ago, you know, we're not the focus anymore, we are now cos of the backstop, but in terms of terrorism we've been replaced, there's a new terrorist, and albeit it's fairly quiet at the minute cos nothing awful's happened since Manchester, but we've been replaced now, you know, it's that whole thing of immigration, where, you know, we started off with Jewish people, African, Caribbean folk coming, etcetera, etcetera, eastern Europeans, you know, Iranians, Iraqis, and so it's just all this, this whole global migration and then who replaces who, and, you

know, as people prosper you see them moving out and areas, new immigrants come in, and so it's fascinating that, and that's what's happened to us, we've been replaced now, we're not the same threat as we used to be, and I find that is, it's almost like, that makes me feel a real kind of kinship I suppose with my Muslim friends because I get it. I know what it's like to be shouted at on the street, accosted on the street, accused of all sorts of stuff, and that's what they get, that's what my friends get, my female and my male friends get that, and I can empathise and I think they get it, cos they can understand it, but people who haven't had that kind of experience just don't get it, and you can't explain it, cos either you feel it in you gut or you don't, and that's what I think how I've probably made my connections with people because of that understanding of some of that.

BH: So that's actually, that's motivated your embrace of multiculturalism.

SON: Absolutely, absolutely, and like, you know, thinking about Brexit, you know, I'm a European, I don't want to, the thought of the end of freedom of movement is criminal to me. I think that people do not understand because they haven't had that, they haven't needed to move, you know, they haven't been pushed to, so to lose, for me, I feel that acutely, for people, you know, like my niece and her boyfriends, you know, they were definitely Europeans, they were so excited about, you know, graduating from Queen's, they were going to go and work in Europe, and when Brexit happened I remember my niece ringing me and she was crying and I was like, Jesus, has something happened, she was going Brexit, you know, and she's gone to New Zealand, and I just think oh my God, we're losing that richness that is crucial for society, that we have that richness, that people can move about, and if I, if I, you know, if I hadn't have been afforded that opportunity I'd have probably ended up with a serious mental health problem. I knocked my drinking on the head in London, you know, cos I knew I was drinking just to escape, but I was wise enough to stop it before I got into trouble with it, you know, and I haven't drank since my twenties, I stopped it.

BH: Is that right, yeah?

SON: Yeah, yeah, knocked it on the head totally and, you know, I don't even think about drinking now, but I knew I had to stop it, I didn't know why, I just knew I had to and, you know, I finally checked into therapy to deal with all my issues and, you know, cos my brother was abused by a Catholic priest, the one who was in the house drunk and preaching, he had actually been abusing my brother, and so I knew I needed some sort of help to deal with all of that.

BH: And when did you start therapy, was it in London?

SON: Yeah, in London in the eighties.

BH: And how did that come about? Did somebody say, you know, it was something you should try?

SON: It was through the women's movement, the women's group, cos I started off in a therapy group of women just talking through how, what it was like, what life was like really,

and I was the only Irish woman of course, but it just started through that and then eventually got a know a therapist and then thought oh yeah, I need therapy, I need to understand why am I reacting to things like, the way I do and who am I as a person, you know, trying to kind of get, I felt that I needed somebody to help me mirror back to me who I was and how I got to be where I was, cos I couldn't make sense of it. I was so obviously subjective about it, I needed somebody who was really objective, but also would help me make sense and heal some of the wounds and feel better about me and being Northern Irish and, and living in England and my sexuality and all of that sort of stuff, so I went into therapy and bloody loved it.

BH: So therapy worked then?

SON: Oh my God, it was ace.

BH: A good decision, like?

SON: Yeah, yeah, it was cracking, well, Jesus, you go and pay, alright, you're paying for an hour to talk about yourself, but it's at a safe environment, I think that's what it was, you know, and I've dipped in and out of therapy over years cos I find it helpful, you know, just think actually I need to go and deal with that, just, and I used to go to the therapist and say I only want to talk about this, I need to sort it out, we're not going to, don't let me deviate, anything else is a red herring, this is what we're going to focus on, and they'd just be sitting back in the chair [laughs] thinking Jesus Christ, who is this [laughs], and there's your money, but I just, I was driven to sort my head out because I knew I needed it to sort out, I just **[01:22:55]** was miserable at times or really deeply unhappy, but I couldn't work it out by myself, so I thought I need a bit of help to sort it out, to work it out.

BH: And it sounds like you did this when you were quite young, I mean, you went to therapy in your twenties, you were still in your twenties–

SON: Aye, yeah, yeah, yeah.

BH: Which is unusual for, a lot of people do it a lot later in life.

SON: Yeah, yeah.

BH: You haven't drank since then?

SON: No.

BH: So what have you been doing then effectively after those first years in London?

SON: Yeah, yeah.

BH: Where have you been or what have you been doing?

SON: Stayed in London till ’99, so I had various jobs working in, mostly with people who drank [laughs].

BH: Is that right, yeah?

SON: Yeah, I worked in recovery services, what we call now, so yeah, I worked in like, detox centres, did outreach work around the West End, worked with homeless people, worked in rehabs, did therapy, you know, and did counselling.

BH: You trained as a counsellor yourself, right?

SON: Yeah, yeah, worked in, with people who were dying of AIDS, you know, setting up support groups for people with HIV, so did a lot of frontline work, but then worked with like, real bad boys in south London who were real serious crackheads, you know, did a lot of that and then, you know, managed services and did that until, you know, nearly the end of 2000 [pauses], and then, you know, moved to Leeds.

BH: Well, that was, that was kind of what I’m getting at now. How did you get from London to Leeds then?

SON: Well, what I was finding was, I was getting burnt out from doing client work, without a doubt, and I found all the time I was driving to the countryside, I just was longing for the countryside as I was spending loads of time driving out of London, and then I was with my partner at the time and she was from Lancashire and she was like, getting homesick, so we said why don’t we just move up north. This is what I mean, I don’t plan anything, and I was like, yeah, sure, feck it, why not, I’d had enough of London, and so she said why don’t we just, whoever gets a job, will move first. You know when you just, this is me, cos I don’t have like, a five-year plan and just, I applied for a job at Leeds City Council like, in, this was September ’99, that’s why I always remember what I was doing for the millennium, and never thinking in a million years I was going to get this bloody job, I’d never been to Leeds in my life, I came up for the train, on the train from London for the interview, and by that point we had mobile phones and I remember I went Jesus, I’d only put my ass down in the carriage and the fecking phone rang and there was this, my bo–, who then turned out, you know, was going to be my boss said we’d like to offer you the job, and I remember saying to him shit, you weren’t meant to do that, and I thought ooh I’m so sorry, and so that was like, September time, early September and then come, I got here on the ninth of December.

BH: And that was it then?

SON: And that was it, and on the millennium I stood up on Otley Chevin and toasted in 2000, thinking what in the name of Jesus have I done–

BH: Am I doing here [laughs].

SON: And everybody’s popping champagne corks and I’m there with my Pepsi Max [laughs] and celebrating and being, you know, really missing folk, cos I knew that all the other new years that I’d spent with my really good friends.

BH: Yeah, cos you'd been quite a while in London by this stage, like.

SON: Fourteen years, and then not to be with my friends on such a momentous occasion, but I was stood up on Otley Chevin in the pitch dark, luckily you could see the stars, drinking a Pepsi Max and thinking what the hell.

BH: [laughs] So during this whole period then, from moving to London and also moving up to Leeds, did you go back to Northern Ireland?

SON: Northern Ireland, yeah, I did, particularly from London, but not, London probably once a year, because at that time there was only two airlines that flew out of Heathrow, there was British Airways and British Midland, and at that time in the eighties, cos we were still bad bastards and still terrorists, they had the, the departure lounge was at the furthest point of Heathrow, so you had to walk miles because in case the bomb went off, so they had it right at the far end, and I remember once getting stopped by Special Branch going home. They pulled me in and took my passport and bag and made me sit with a bloody armed copper and, you know, and I missed my flight, cos I knew, he said oh we're just going to check you out, and I remember saying to him, you know, there won't be anything to check out, and he looked at me as if to say shut the fuck up, and so I was like, you know, watch the clock, watch the clock, thinking my family are all going to be stood in Aldergrove and I'm not there, and eventually I said to this copper, I said look, would you really mind just going to see what's happening, cos my flight's about to literally take off, and he was like, yeah, don't move, and I thought well, I can't move, you've got my bag and passport, and then the Special Branch sauntered out, no, no, that's okay, and of course my flight had gone, so I'd missed my flight.

BH: You don't get compensation for that, that was it, like.

SON: On your bike, no, it was like, missed the flight, no mobile phone of course, so you can't tell the family and they're all frantic thinking what the hell's happened, so yeah, I would go home from London probably about once a year and then my family came over and then my mother fell in love with London, the den of iniquity. When I first brought her over, cos my mum loves to travel, you see, so she'd been all round Europe and stuff, and I kept saying to her mum, just come to London, it's amazing, so then she came and I couldn't get rid of her, she loved it, you know, then she'd be over quite a lot, cos she loved the art galleries and the whole buzz of London and she realised it wasn't that bad really, and so we used to have a great time. So family would come over and they'd surprise me and say we're coming, you know, and they'd bring my nieces and my nephews to see me.

BH: Is that right?

SON: Yeah, yeah, they'd come over and they really loved London.

BH: Yeah, cos a lot of people that, you know, when I'm asking these kind of questions their parents never come over, they just kind of stay where they are, and they won't leave, you know, wherever like, they're from, like.

SON: Yeah, no, they came and like, even my eldest sister ended up doing another masters here in, she lived in Hertfordshire and she did her masters at one of the really famous London universities, she did another masters of theology. My parents came for her graduation, I remember us like, going, Niamh, to the Barbican to her graduation and, you know, doing the traditional thing and then going out for dinner afterwards, sitting through hours and hours in the Barbican, thinking Jesus Christ, losing the will to live, but yeah, my ma and da came and we went out for dinner in Islington, cos I used to work around Islington, so I knew some good restaurants and I thought we'll sting my father, make him pay and going to, so they did come over. That was the only time my dad came, but my mother came quite frequently to visit and then my sisters would come over and visit and stay and, you know, and we'd have a great time.

BH: And when you went back then, once a year or whenever, did you like going back?

SON: I found it awkward cos they used to go you sound English now and I'd, feck off, and, cos you do, certain words you say and you do, when you're home you sound different, and then I've got to say I did get grief from people initially when I first went to London in the eighties because obviously it's still the Troubles and people were, that's where, you know, that it did get said, someone did say to me you're now living with the enemy, we can't, we're not going–

BH: Is that right?

SON: Yeah, we're not going to speak to you anymore because you've chosen to go and live with the Brits, and that's what they said, I mean, that's why it stuck in my head, and I always remember thinking well, I never, I never talked about the Brits in that way, but, so that always struck me, so it was uncomfortable in the eighties definitely, it got better in the nineties, but in the eighties it was really tough going home because it was like, once a year, and it was hard because you didn't, you know, there's always the anxiety of getting through security, and I carry an Irish passport, I have done since I was eighteen, and so people automatically did the same thing, you know, there was a judgement by your name, judgement, oh you're carrying an Irish passport, you must be a republican, and you couldn't just be a proud Irish person. So it wasn't comfortable going home because people saw you differently, why are you living with the Brits, worried about you getting arrested at bloody Heathrow, and so it was always fraught, it wasn't kind of pleasant, and then I always felt like a real outsider. I felt like, you know, a big part of soul and history and all of those things is so much about Northern Ireland, and now I've lived here, you know, way more than half my life and that killed me, when I had the tipping point of having lived in England longer than Northern Ireland, that killed me, it really upset me for ages, and then I thought well, actually it's alright because how I live in England is formed definitely of how I grew up in Northern Ireland, and that's had a huge impact and it still does, but I think you can't talk about it, even now at fifty-seven, people still don't understand it. It's like my colleague today joking, you know, they hadn't a clue what I'm talking about, people don't understand that you've lived through a war and I've heard men being shot, I've been shot at, fucking, you know, soldier shot over the top of my head one day when I was walking home and my mother went down to the barracks, banged on the door, I want to see the commander and, you

know, and there's my mother, this is what I mean, it was so conflictual, then she'd come and beat the shite out of you, but if anybody tried to harm you, you know, she had insisted on seeing the commander and they took her into the fort on Broadway Road, you know, and I can imagine this small woman just disappearing behind these huge, you know, the security doors in the front of the forts, and in she went and told them off, I'm like [laughs], oh my God, I can't cope, it was just unbelievable.

BH: What about then, so that's one **[01:32:55]** thing about being over there so long, your Northern Irish identity or Irish identity. While you're living over in London you're expanding and developing your sexual identity.

SON: Yeah, yeah.

BH: What was it like then going back to Belfast, having basically, you know, fashioned yourself as a new person to some extent?

SON: [laughs] As a butch lesbian, butch dyke, yeah. I never went out on the scene in Northern Ireland and, I mean, now, you know, when I, seeing what's happened over the years and how, you know, it's eventually has developed its own theme, I've never been on the scene in inverted commas in Northern Ireland, I've rarely ever been to a gay bar.

BH: Is that right, yeah?

SON: And I just think it's, cos it wasn't accessible to me at that time and now I'm just, I was, I suppose I got to the point where I wasn't interested as well, I'm mean, I'm delighted that it's like, there and, you know, we've now got gay marriage and blah, blah, blah, because like, two of my other siblings are gay as well, it's not just me.

BH: Is that right?

SON: Aye, it's in family, yeah, I told my mum [laughs], I told my parents it's genetic, yeah, so, you know, to see them to be able to have that freedom that I didn't have when I grew up there, that they can, you know, go out, you know, and I've gone out with my sister a few times when I go home, but I suppose cos the bar scene [indecipherable]–

BH: Are they still living there now, are they?

SON: Yeah, yeah, yeah, so, you know, that's great that it's there and there seems to be a great acceptance in some, partly with the much younger generation, you know, who wanted to see the changes, you know, who can't stand what Arlene stands for and, so it's very vibrant in a sense, you know, gay pride now in Belfast, Jesus Christ, it looks phenomenal, I've never been, but it looks phenomenal, and how the town centre responds to it seems to be incredibly positive, so, you know, that's fantastic, and, you know, Northern Ireland is still playing catch-up with lots of other parts of the world, you know, if I compare it with England and Ire-, because of what went on in Northern Ireland, you know, it's definitely still in the fifties and sixties in its attitude to anything that's different, you know, that's why it's got some of the highest rates of racism in Europe, why there's so much homophobia, but then

there's also real acceptance too, so there's, it's, Northern Ireland's found itself back in that sort of I would say dichotomy of trying to understand itself, because it's conflicted again and it's trying to work itself out where what is our position now, who are we, and you're starting to see, you know, second-generation immigrants like, Polish, Romanians, being born with Northern Ireland accents.

BH: That's right, yeah.

SON: And you just think Jesus, hang on a minute, did I hear you right, you know.

BH: It's never happened before.

SON: And it hasn't, and so I think all those struggles of Northern Ireland are, you know, have been playing out everywhere else around the world at some stage or another, and we're now in that kind of real infancy of finding our place, and I find that fascinating in Northern Ireland.

BH: When you were over in England, in London and then moving to Leeds, did you continue to like, you know, watch on the news what was happening in Northern Ireland, did you follow what was going on?

SON: Frickin' obsessed.

BH: Yeah, you did, yeah?

SON: Absolutely, bloody apps on my phone, *Belfast Telegraph*, *Irish News*, BBC Northern Ireland [laughs], absolutely, my mother will ring me up and go I'm reading the deaths in the *Irish News,* and she's going do you know so, do you remember so and so, no mum, I don't, well, they're dead, their notice is, you know, their death's in the *Irish News*, you know, my ma's still got a habit of reading the deaths first thing in the morning and then she rings me and tells me who's dead and I've no idea who she's talking about, so yeah, absolutely obsessed, and I try not to be, but I am.

BH: Yeah, that's interesting because sometimes you interview people and they're like, I never want to hear about it again.

SON: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

BH: And just, I've never looked at a newspaper or anything, like.

SON: No, I'm obsessed, I have to know what's going on there and obviously with Brexit and the backstop and listening to all that debate and dialogue and the unionists and oh my God, you know, sometimes it is overwhelming and I just think no, I've just got to leave it, but it is, you know, we're still having a say, around what's happening.

BH: Are you with somebody now?

SON: Yeah, I am.

BH: Is she from England or is she–?

SON: Yeah, no, she's English.

BH: She's English.

SON: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

BH: What does she think of–?

SON: She hasn't a bloody clue [laughs]. We don't go there cos she never, she's like, consider that I suppose I am quite a political person, she's just not interested and wasn't interested, didn't pay any heed to what was going on until like, she's from Manchester, until the bomb went off in Manchester and that gave her a different view, but she's just not interested and we just don't talk about it because she's not interested, doesn't understand it, I can't be arsed to try and help her understand it, cos in some ways it's also incredibly boring, so I can't be bothered, so we just don't go there.

BH: Yeah, do you ever go back like, to Belfast for holidays and things like that?

SON: I've been home a lot in the last twelve months cos I've got an aunt who's ill and I'm acting as her next of kin cos she hasn't got any family, and she is really poorly mentally, so I've been home five times in the last twelve months.

BH: Okay, and do you bring your partner with you?

SON: No, she stays at home and looks after the dogs and that's more about practicalities as opposed to, has she been with me to Belfast even once [pauses], no, my ma's been over and my aunt, no, and it's just because what I'm going for, it's not a holiday, it's like being a carer, a long-distance carer, so it's like, normally means hospital visits and talking to doctors, so no, she hasn't.

BH: Sure, well, my next question was going to be, probably I know the answer, would you even think of moving back there? [laughs]

SON: [laughs] For your, purposes of this recording, no [laughs]. I have thought about it, cos I love the countryside, and then I think, and look how backward it still is and all the battles that are still being fought and I think no, and then I think, but then I could go home and give something back, you know, what it's like to live here and do restorative practice and blah, blah, blah, and then I think no, I'm fooling myself.

BH: Yeah, oh well, that's–

SON: Cos I'm still Siobhán, I'm still called Siobhán, it still doesn't go down well in certain parts.

BH: No, so I think I'm moving on to the last few questions now.

SON: Okey-doke.

BH: Basically, these are just very general questions.

SON: Yeah.

BH: So [pauses], do you think the Troubles has had an impact on your life?

SON: Hundred per cent.

BH: Yeah.

SON: Yeah, in ways that, my life, my family's life, you know, and stuff that has happened to family, that's impactful, yeah, definitely, and some of it's for the good and some of it's been negative, but I think I'm kind of proud of how I've come out of it, and what I've achieved, you know, and, you know, I finally did go to university two years ago and did my postgraduate and–

BH: Is that right?

SON: Yeah, I went to Bradford Uni, got a chance through Leeds City Council.

BH: And is that something you always wanted to do, was that like, something–?

SON: As I got older, I think I was that, doing that rebellious pisshead bit when I was young, but I loved learning, you know, and I loved understanding how we all work and tick and what goes on, and so then I got an opportunity two years ago to do a postgraduate in twelve months.

BH: And what was the course?

SON: It was just in management and health and social care, but it kind of reinforced all the work I'd been doing. It gave me a lot of learning and it's kind of supportive stuff like, you know, what I was doing from a gut reaction, but it then backed it up with some academia now so, you know, so I once, just, we just went in and did, we had an academic year to do a postgraduate, you know, and I was delighted, cos I went and I was shitting myself because I thought I've never studied, yeah, I've written really serious reports for work, very, you know, research-based reports and stuff, but I thought I don't know how to study, and I was terrified, and it brought me back to like, growing up, older sister genius, brother genius, me in the middle who's thick, so I had to really battle those demons, and then I passed with a 2.1 with merit, straight in, bosh.

BH: Well, that's a good point to ask the question, why do you think you were so rebellious at that time?

SON: I wanted to be different, I wanted something different, I didn't just want to be the same as everybody else, and it was a quiet rebellion, you know, I wasn't, there was nothing outrageous, you know, I wasn't argumentative, I didn't get into fights, I didn't, but I just challenged, I just couldn't, if somebody, I always remember like, being in RE class in St Louise's and our teacher saying something and I just couldn't, I couldn't agree with him and I was so, we were having this sort of philosophical, but he allowed it, other teachers would've like, slapped you down, but he loved it, he loved us challenging him, and I always remember doing that cos I just couldn't believe, I thought I can't just believe everything you're telling me, otherwise what's the point, and that, and it was that kind of rebellion, I think it was knowing there has to be more, but I didn't know what the more was, and maybe now I do know a bit more, but I was always seeking that, I was seeking answers all the time, and that's what that quiet rebellion was about. I wanted answers, I wanted to understand, the thing, that's what drives me still, I need to understand, and that's what drove me I think, of that quiet rebellion.

BH: Yeah, and do you think over the course of your life you've found some of those answers?

SON: Yeah, I think I have cos I can be at peace now. I always remember that was part of the thing of being in the Mournes, when I was young, of trying to find peace, **[01:42:55]** and I always felt it in the Mournes like, lying on that big boulder in the middle of the river, up Slieve Donard, and falling asleep in the sunshine, in the peace, it was about finding that, driven for peace in my head, yeah, and there is still torment in there and there's still times when, you know, it takes over, but I understand it now, whereas before I didn't, and that's what the booze was about, because it was a great thing, great number of, you know, anything, and so now it's about, yeah, I can be sober because I can be at peace with me, I understand me and my position in life and where I've come from and, you know, where I am and I'm not bothered where I'm going to cos that's the future, I can just be now, sitting here and I know who I am and that's a good thing.

BH: Was moving to England something that helped you to find those answers, was that part of–?

SON: I think so, I think it resolved something, about the Brits.

BH: Is that right, yeah?

SON: Because, well, we grew up with just soldiers and people telling us how bad the English were, and then it was always really funny too because, you know, there's all that stereotypical stuff, isn't there, about Irish, us Irish being real drinkers and pissheads and stuff, and then I came to England and thought hang on a minute, people are drinking more here than they are in Ireland [laughs], I remember like, walking up around Farringdon when the, you know, the whole time with the yuppies and stuff, and being on the Isle of Dogs too, Canary Wharf, and people are like, linen suits drinking champagne at lunchtime, I remember walking through Farringdon thinking hang on a minute, you're all getting slaughtered at lunchtime, you're all in your suits, shirts and ties, and you're all going back to work, but yet

we’re the brunt of the jokes, and I thought hang on, this doesn’t stack up any more, you know, we’re not the only pissheads, and so I think I needed to come here.

BH: Yeah, that was interesting, you know, your only perception of Brits, I suppose, as you say, was basically soldiers who were, you know, kitted up, standing on your street.

SON: Absolutely.

BH: Coming to England dissolved that myth around them, is that right, like?

SON: Yeah, without a doubt, without a doubt, because you could see just people as human beings, you know, with the same kind of struggles and stuff, and even the English have their own struggles, which I found quite fascinating because of their fucking own history, you know, and what they’ve done around the bloody British Empire, well, we won’t go there, but, you know, if you start to unpick some of that and you think hang on a wee minute, let’s go and look what’s in your museums and what doesn’t belong to you and that, cos English people are really in denial about I think the part they’ve played around the world, you know, and even, and like, the whole notion of a Commonwealth, what in the name of Jesus, you know, the Solomon Isles, what have they got to do with the Royal family, why are they ruled, or Australia and New Zealand, what’s that about, you know, and I don’t think the English have really, really looked into that. They take a pride in the British Empire, they take a pride in the Commonwealth, but what the hell, what is that about, so I think, you know, it’s been fascinating being here and being from Northern Ireland and then seeing a totally different side to that culture.

BH: That is fascinating [pauses]. Final question really, what does home mean to you now or where is home?

SON: Pfff, that’s a very emotive question and it’s a really hard one to answer, I don’t have one.

BH: You don’t have one?

SON: That’s what it feels like.

BH: Is that right, yeah?

SON: Yeah, I am homeless.

BH: Cos some people I ask that question and they say oh I’ve got two homes, I’m half here and half there, but you don’t have any.

SON: I don’t feel like I have a home anymore.

BH: Okay.

SON: Cos I don't feel like where I am now is home, it's like, it's somewhere I live. I feel at home in my job that I've got now, I love the job I'm doing now, but in terms of, if I was to think of where like, where do I lay my hat in terms of home, I haven't got one. I feel really homeless.

BH: Mm hmm, and is that something that you're, that you want to change as you get older or is it something you've learnt to live with?

SON: I think it's something, I've definitely learnt to live with it and certainly kind of learnt how to reconcile that, so it's not too emotive or overwhelming, cos you don't want to feel homeless, cos I always attach home with soul, and so does that mean I'm soulless, well, no it doesn't, but I'd like it to be resolved, but I don't know if it ever will, because I just feel that coming from Northern Ireland and being an immigrant, kind of where we started this conversation, I'll never be, have a home. That's what I feel like.

BH: Could Northern, Northern Ireland couldn't be a home?

SON: No, it just doesn't feel like that, the countryside does, and I'll say when I'm going, I'm going home, but it doesn't feel like [pauses], it just, it's that, it's such an emotive word, so I don't know where, my culture and my heritage is definitely home in Northern Ireland, but in terms of feeling settled or, I've never felt settled, and I don't now and I don't know if I ever will, and I think I just kind of accept that now. I know there's definitely going to be another move.

BH: Okay, there's going to be another move, yeah?

SON: Oh aye, without a doubt, and where that'll be I've no idea, but there will be at least one more move.

BH: Okay, so I've asked all my questions, but the last thing I have to ask is, is there anything that I haven't asked about which is important, that I've missed, that you want to tell me about?

SON: [pauses] No, it's fine.

BH: No, okay. Thanks very much for doing that, that was fantastic.

SON: It's a pleasure.

BH: Again, I'm really grateful that you have taken the time out of your day to come and to tell me all these things, that was really, really good.

SON: Thanks.

BH: Cheers.

SON: No, it's a, it's a, it's an amazing thing to do cos you don't often get the chance to do it.

INTERVIEW ENDS