M08: SIOBHÁN O'NEILL INTERVIEW SUMMARY

Interviewee: Siobhán O'Neill [pseudonym]
Interviewer: Dr Barry Hazley
Interview summarisers: Dr Fearghus Roulston and Prof Liam Harte
The interview was recorded across two audio files that were spliced together to create a single audio file.

M08: Siobhán O'Neill	**Start time: 00:00:00**	**Finish time: 01:49:28**	**Duration: 01:49:28**	**Brief description of content:**
00:00–09:59	Explains how and why she came to be part of this oral history project, saying her generation's story is 'very different' from that of more recent generation of NI people in England. She was born in 1962 and grew up in west Belfast with four siblings. Her mother was a housewife and her 'mean and tight-fisted' father a company director. Recalls being sporty and 'quietly rebellious' at her all-girls' secondary school, in contrast to her academic and conformist older sister. Notes culture of anti-Catholic discrimination in NI and families' investment in education to counter it. Recalls 'some horrific times at school' in the early 1980s, as the escalating conflict intruded: 'we had to dodge […] plastic bullets, petrol bombs and stuff like that through the, that summer of the hunger strikes'.			
10:00–19:59	Her first job was as the 'youngest ever personal secretary' at Royal Victoria Hospital. Recalls her 'tortuous' Catholic upbringing and teenage rejection of religion, quickened by her disdain for clerical hypocrisy and awareness of her burgeoning homosexuality. Discusses the importance of a secret same-sex relationship she had with a fellow pupil, which kept her 'sane', but for which she had 'no language'. Contrasts the blissful times they spent together in the Glens of Antrim with 'the most extreme violence' of Belfast. Mentions failing and having to repeat all of her O-level exams.			
20:00–22:55	Recalls seeing 'convoys' of Catholic 'refugees' who were displaced at the start of the Troubles, and her family's relative good fortune in being put up in a 'really posh hotel in Malahide' for a short time by her father's Dublin-based employers. The interview is suspended when food arrives for Siobhán. The two interview audio files were spliced together here.			
22:56–32:55	Reveals that she has chosen to have no contact with her father since her teens. States that while her parents were not political, her mother 'had a real pride in the fact that we were Irish' and inculcated 'a very acute sense of what is fair and doing the right thing, and that's never left me'. Recalls the oppressive atmosphere of the early Troubles in Belfast, including hearing punishment shootings taking place, and the difficulties caused by her family's opposition to republican violence. Describes the deep bond she forged with nature and the NI landscape, particularly the Mourne Mountains, with which she has an abiding 'absolute love affair'.			
32:56–42:55	Recalls a childhood holiday in Newcastle, Co. Down during which a bomb explosion destroyed their accommodation. Remembers being cared for at the scene by a British soldier, which triggers a later memory of seeing a young black soldier on the Falls and 'thinking I just want you to know I'm not like everybody else'. Links her 'non-feelings of hatred for soldiers' to her 'quietly rebellious' younger self and her family's preparedness to resist IRA intimidation, as exemplified by a story about her mother's involvement			

	in a local youth club that shunned IRA recruiters. Speaks of her desperation in her late teens to move out of her ' very violent house', where her mother was 'very violent' towards her, yet 'also really loving and caring'.
42:56–52:55	Says that she has forgiven her mother and now understands the intense stress she was under. Recalls moving into her first flat and drinking heavily, partly to numb the pain of her upbringing and sense of being 'a definite failure from the age of ten'. Meets and falls in love with a Corkwoman, which prompts her to move to Cork in 1983. Finds Cork more liberal than Belfast, though meets with some anti-NI sentiment there. Comes to realise that 'all of my upbringing to that point was not normal' and continues to struggle with childhood legacies. Having never previously considered emigrating, she impulsively moved to London with a friend in 1986. Intending to stay for six months, she ended up living there until 1999.
52:56–01:02:55	Remembers her family's sadness and dismay at her decision to leave Ireland, and feeling like 'a true immigrant' as she departed for Woking, 'to sleep on the floor of a friend of a friend of a friend of a friend'. Recalls encountering indiscriminate anti-Irish hostility in the wake of IRA bombs in 1990s London, as well as ignorance of, and indifference towards, NI. Voices her exasperation at having left Ireland 'to try and get away from this shit and then here I am caught up in another bloody bomb'. Compares her fearful response to fireworks to post-traumatic stress disorder. Recalls speaking to staunchly unionist NI Protestants in London and being intrigued by their unsettling discovery that their cultural identification with the 'mother country' was largely unreciprocated.
01:02:56–01:12:55	Claims the NI accent is a 'leveller' that fuels English perceptions of all NI people as 'bad bastards'. Recalls being involved with the London Irish Women's Centre in Stoke Newington, where 'it felt very empowering […] to partly be with just all women, but all from Ireland with an unspoken commonality'. Stresses her love of London's multiculturalism and its diverse LGBT community: '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'. Says that her lesbian identity took precedence over her Irish identity at this time.
01:12:56–01:22:55	Cites some of the campaigns she supported in London to exemplify how she could be political there in ways that were impossible in NI. Underlines the continuing importance of principles formed in NI – fairness, equality, 'doing the right thing' – to her life and work. Discusses a shift from demonising Irish people to demonising Muslims in British discourses on migration. Reveals that she became teetotal in her twenties and sought therapy to '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'.
01:22:56–01:32:55	Explains the varied nature of the social and counselling work she did in London. Describes moving to Leeds in 1999, noting how this unplanned development is consistent with her life's pattern. Recalls once being questioned by Special Branch at Heathrow, which caused her to miss her flight to Belfast. Contrasts family members' enjoyable trips to see her in London with her own 'fraught' visits to NI at this time, which made her feel like 'a real outsider' because she was seen as 'living with the Brits'. Returns to the theme of struggling to be understood in England: 'People don't understand that you've lived through a war'.

01:32:56–01:42:55	Welcomes the growing acceptance of same-sex relationships in NI, while also noting its belatedness on this and other issues: 'Northern Ireland is still playing catch-up with lots of other parts of the world'. Admits to being 'obsessed' with developments in NI, unlike her English partner, but does not wish to return to live there. Acknowledges the profound impact of the Troubles on her life, but is also proud of her resilience and achievements. Reflects on her lifelong quest for self-realisation and self-understanding, which she now believes was 'what that quiet rebellion was about'.
01:42:56–01:49:28	Considers herself to have achieved a satisfying degree of self-knowledge and credits her migration with affording her a better insight into the complexity of English people and their attitudes to their imperial history. Also confesses that 'coming from Northern Ireland and being an immigrant, […] I'll never be, have a home. Ends by stating: 'my culture and my heritage is definitely home in Northern Ireland, but […] 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'.