

### M13: GEORGE PEEL INTERVIEW SUMMARY

Interviewee: George Peel
Interviewer: Dr Barry Hazley
Interview summarisers: Dr Jack Crangle and Prof Liam Harte
The interview was recorded as a single audio file with no section breaks

M13: George Peel	Start time: 00:00:00	Finish time: 02:48:56	Duration: 02:48:56	Brief description of content:
00:00–09:59	Born in 1949 in Coleraine, Co. Londonderry, the youngest of three children. His father, an engineer, was from Argyll in Scotland and his mother, a housewife and dinner lady, came from Co. Tyrone. Explains that his parents met in Edinburgh when his father was serving in the British Army and where his mother was working as a waitress at the time. States that he ‘thoroughly enjoyed’ growing up Coleraine, where he attended a Protestant primary school, but didn’t blossom academically until he was in secondary school.			
10:00–19:59	Recalls few extracurricular activities when young, aside from childhood ‘mischief’. Notes that ‘church was a must’, at his mother’s behest. Traces the start of his journey from ‘Christian to non-denominational to agnostic [...] and eventually atheist’ to his seeing the film <i>Inherit the Wind</i> in the early 1960s. Stopped attending church as a teenager, having ‘better things to do’. Notes that the Heights in Coleraine, where his family lived, was a religiously mixed area, and says he had no qualms about having Catholics friends. Enjoyed Twelfth of July festivities, but rejected the associated ‘political meanings’. Mentions his mother’s occasional attempts to ‘indoctrinate’ him into Orange culture.			
20:00–29:59	Observes that while his father ‘couldn’t care less’ about politics, his mother was a moderate unionist. She was also the one who ‘pushed the Scottish influence’ by taking him to Scottish-themed music events. Attended Coleraine secondary modern school, where he developed an aptitude for English, but studied no Irish history. Recalls his gradual political awakening during the NI civil rights protests of the late 1960s and notes that while ‘there was very little trouble’ in Coleraine, ‘you could feel and you could hear the tension building up’.			
30:00–39:59	Offers his perspective on the Burntollet Bridge incident of January 1969, arguing that had the civil rights marchers not been attacked, the Troubles ‘may never have happened’. Joined the RAF in July of that year, having felt ‘rudderless’ since leaving school, aged sixteen, in 1966. Recalls staying in London, where his sister lived, for much of that summer, hoping to experience the World Cup: ‘I suppose you’d call it running away from home now’. Mentions that sizeable numbers of people from Coleraine emigrated in the 1960s due to a lack of job opportunities.			
40:00–49:59	Remembers 1967 as ‘the best summer I’d ever had’, working as a kitchen porter on the Isle of Man. Mentions some of the temporary jobs he had prior to his joining the RAF as an air photography operator in 1969, describing himself as ‘a piece of flotsam and jetsam, moving around’. Recalls sharing a dormitory with ten other Irishmen, from both sides of the border, and the anger he felt when they were taunted by senior RAF officers about the outbreak of violence in NI: ‘that was the first time I think that I’d had any sort of inkling [of] [...] what English people or people who weren’t Irish thought of the Irish’.			
50:00–59:59	Mentions the locations of his initial RAF training in England. Says that his posting to RAF Kinloss in Scotland in 1970 was ‘when I really started enjoying myself’, so much so that he paid little attention to news of the intensifying violence in NI at			

	<p>this time. Remembers seeing ‘no signs of anything whatsoever, nothing at all’ during a return visit to Derry while on leave.</p>
01:00:00–01:09:59	<p>Recalls his posting to RAF Gütersloh in Germany in late 1970, where he found the social life on the base more stimulating than his work. Describes receiving news of his father’s stroke while in Germany and returning to Coleraine to visit him. He reflects that ‘that’s when it first struck me that my dad was getting old’. George’s next transfer was to RAF Rheindalen, where he met his future wife, an English Catholic from Bolton who was in the WRAF. Recalls being verbally abused, on account of his NI accent, by a soldier on the base at Rheindalen who had recently returned from a tour of duty in NI.</p>
01:10:00–01:19:59	<p>Recalls a general dislike among British soldiers of serving in NI: ‘none of the army personnel looked forward to going there, not in the least’. Suggests the majority view of the NI conflict among British people can be summed up in the words ‘bloody Irish, let them get on with it’. Describes his wife’s parents’ attitude towards him as bigoted – ‘they didn’t like the thought of their family being tainted by Irish’ – and explains that neither they nor his own parents attended the wedding in Germany, at which point his wife was already pregnant.</p>
01:20:00–01:29:59	<p>Explains that his wife left the WRAF during her pregnancy and the couple returned to England when he was posted to RAF Wittering near Peterborough. Details his family’s serial moves over several years, owing to his successive RAF postings in the UK and Germany, during which time his wife gave birth to a second daughter and a son. Reveals that his parents left NI and moved to Oxfordshire in 1972, citing an IRA bombing in Coleraine as the ‘final straw’.</p>
01:30:00–01:39:59	<p>Discusses his parents’ adaptation to rural Oxfordshire. Explains that his father enjoyed his new job, whereas his mother saw the move as ‘a step backwards’. Says that his mother ‘stuck out like a sore thumb’ in her new surroundings and sometimes had to temper her NI accent. Reveals that his having an extramarital affair while at RAF Coltishall in Norfolk precipitated the end of his marriage, after which his wife and three children moved to Bolton. Speaks of having ‘a guilty conscience, which lives with me until this day’.</p>
01:40:00–01:49:59	<p>Recalls applying to serve in NI in the early 1980s and spending three years there, helping to ‘minimise’ the violence, which he regards as ‘the best job I’d ever done’. Discusses his working patterns in NI, organising social outings within ‘safe zones’ for his RAF friends and his feelings about being deployed to the place where he grew up. Notes that most of his RAF colleagues ‘were there for the money’ and lacked historical and political understanding of the conflict.</p>
01:50:00–01:59:59	<p>Recalls a brief period of heavy drinking when he first moved to NI, which he attributes to his grief at the loss of his marriage and children. Confirms that his attachment to NI has remained constant during his life and unequivocally identifies as Irish rather than Northern Irish or British: ‘As far as I’m concerned I’m Irish, but if anybody has a problem with that, we’ll have a discussion about it. I’ll still be Irish and they can call me what they want’. Recalls asking a staunchly unionist colleague from Belfast to tone down his anti-IRA remarks.</p>
02:00:00–02:09:59	<p>Reflects on how his interest in NI politics deepened as the 1990s peace process unfolded. Praises the Labour politicians Mo Mowlam and Jeremy Corbyn, whose efforts on behalf of peace in NI he believes have been not been properly appreciated. Explains how cuts to RAF pay during the Margaret Thatcher era hardened his left-wing stance. Remembers being rebuked by RAF colleagues for reading the <i>Observer</i> newspaper while serving in NI.</p>
02:10:00–02:19:59	<p>Traces the origins of his leftist views, which he had to suppress during his RAF career, to the counter-cultural ferment of the late 1960s. Reflects on the peace</p>

	<p>process, which he regards as ‘a good thing, whether it works or not’. Recalls being at Aldergrove Airport when the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement was signed and recognising it as a landmark moment in the province’s history.</p>
02:20:00–02:29:59	<p>Reveals that he applied to be posted to Iraq or Kuwait during the first Gulf War, but was sent to Belize for six months instead, after which he left the RAF. Explains that he and the woman with whom he had an affair at Coltishall revived their relationship and had a daughter together. When they broke up again he moved to the Channel Islands and undertook voluntary work for some charities. Describes his lengthy and ultimately fruitless legal battle to maintain contact with his daughter, whom he has not seen for three decades. Criticises the treatment of military veterans, citing their high presence among the homeless population.</p>
02:30:00–02:39:59	<p>Recalls his anger at the IRA bombs in Manchester and London in the mid-1990s, his delight at Labour’s 1997 general election victory – ‘I grinned for a week and my face hurt’ – and being ‘glued’ to media coverage of the talks that led to the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. Discusses English people’s attitudes towards NI, concluding that most people would be content to see NI (and Scotland) depart the Union. Believes that if Ireland ‘was going to become unified, the whole island would have to sit down and have a radical rethink’. Expresses a desire to move to his ancestral home in Scotland, away from ‘bigoted racist England’, which seems to him to be ‘getting worse rather than better’.</p>
02:40:00–02:48:56	<p>Briefly discusses the national affiliations of his four children, none of whom identify as Irish or show any interest in the culture and society that shaped their father. Reflects on Brexit and the uncertainties and challenges it presents for NI. Concludes by expressing his admiration for the analysis of Brexit put forward by the journalist and writer Fintan O’Toole, whose commentary he feels has been ‘absolutely spot on the whole way through’.</p>