INTERVIEW M16: SUSAN MCCAUGHAN

Interviewer: Dr Barry Hazley
Interviewee: Susan McCaughan
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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.

BH: Okay, brilliant. Okay, so it's about seven minutes past two on the twenty-ninth of September 2020 and I'm here with Susan. So first of all Susan, before we begin, I just want to say thanks very much for agreeing to do the interview. It's taken us a while to set a date, but we've got there in the end.

SM: It has indeed, yes. You're less clear than you were earlier, Barry.

BH: Am I less clear, okay, maybe I'm further away, I'll move a bit closer, is that any better?

SM: Yes, that's better, yeah, thanks.

BH: So, as I said, I'll begin with some questions about your memories of growing up in Northern Ireland. So first of all, when and where were you born?

SM: I was born in Coleraine in 1961.

BH: And what did your parents do?

SM: My mum had originally worked before she got married for the agricultural board, so she was very interested in things, all things governmental because of that, and then what happens in the civil service, I suppose it was, I don't know, forties or fifties, you left if you got married, and my father was a businessman in terms of, you know, he had a garage, sold cars in Coleraine.

BH: Yeah, so would you have said that you were–?

SM: It's a middle-class family, definitely a middle-class family.

BH: Yeah, that was what I was, my next question was going to be, would you have considered yourself relatively well off?

SM: Yes, in the context of the fact that we were a big family, there were five of us, so I'm the youngest of five, which was quite unusual in a Protestant family, we, I was brought up as a Protestant, but comfortable I suppose you would say, reasonably comfortable in terms of sixties and seventies income.

BH: Yeah, what schools did you attend? Did you attend school locally in Coleraine or further afield?

SM: Yes, I went to Coleraine High School all of my life until A-level period. I hated school, I was rea-, I really, really hated school, but I'd been sent to the kindergarten with my sisters, I was one of four sisters and a brother, and there's, they didn't know it then, but there's a history of dyslexia in the family and I was, the girls basically went to the kindergarten because my mother felt that the education was better than just cramming children for the eleven-plus, so she was very keen that we have a broader education, but actually looking back on the context of that she got into doing voluntary work in adult literacy, there was an adult literacy movement in Coleraine and she was one of the forerunners of that, and I think it was one of those things that wasn't particularly talked about at the time, but my brother is dyslexic, I'm dyslexic and my three children are very dyslexic, so anyway I went to school, but I had a very unhappy time at school, and then was allowed to go to do one of my A-levels at a school in Ballymoney which had much more of a mixed community, and I did religious studies at that school, so I came and went between Coleraine High School and the school in Ballymoney and that was seen as being really unusual, but probably that demonstrated how I was, tried to think differently from a lot of people.

BH: Was that a technical college in Ballymoney or was that an integrated college?

SM: No, I'm just trying to think what the school, no, it was an ordinary secondary school, it wasn't Dalriada, it was, I'll have to think what it was, I can look it up on the internet, it's, you know, it's just one of the schools in Ballymoney, but it was the only one that did religious studies, which I think is interesting as an A-level subject that there wasn't one in Coleraine that I could do.

BH: Yeah.

SM: So I travelled up to Ballymoney on the train or the bus or even got lifts or even started driving, when I started driving I used to go and get the car from the garage and then drive up to Ballymoney.

BH: And was the dyslexia the main source of the unhappiness at school or was the school experience in general not good?

SM: That's an interesting question. I think that looking back on it now, because I was the youngest of five children I was just expected, I went to school early, I was mature as a four-year-old and I was sent to school the year earlier than I should have gone, but obviously wasn't mature enough and didn't keep up or catch up with what was going on and I think that then hindered me the whole way through the sort of the primary school bit of the education. I didn't mature academically until sixth form, when I was happier, and I think

children learn better when they're happier. But that's looking back with perspective on it now I think. I had an awful lot of sickness and would be sick in the mornings, you know, just thinking back to how one of my own children would have behaved at school, a lot of tummy trouble in the mornings and evenings, thinking about school and then going into school, so from the age of maybe six or seven I was kept at home a lot.

BH: Really? Right.

SM: And then I ended up going to an educational psychologist at, somewhere in Belfast, a big old-fashioned clinic in Belfast, and at that point I was basically told she's got schoolitis and [laughs], great assessment, and then they continued, you know, they did the right thing for them at the time, they just sent me back to school and if I was sick in the mornings dad would come home from work and take me to school at eleven to try and get me back into it, and I think at the, you know, as a parent now I would have been looking at changing the school environment for the child, but in those days they just persisted, they did what they thought was the right thing.

BH: And was that nausea, that sick, was that anxiety based, yeah?

SM: I'm sure it was, yes, cos my daughter experienced that as well throughout her whole school period, for similar reasons, but, you know, we did take action and tried to be supportive and got her into a supportive school, but I think just the school environment can be very stressful for children if, if the whole learning process is, baffles them.

BH: Yeah, I'm sure, yeah.

SM: Which is ironic that I now work in a university, so [laughs].

BH: Yeah, yeah, what about where you lived then? Did you live in a housing estate with Coleraine or did you live somewhere suburban or was it out in the countryside?

SM: We lived, I don't know whether you know Coleraine, but lived near the river Bann.

BH: Okay, yeah.

SM: Sort of on the banks of the Bann basically, nice bit of Coleraine, you could walk into town, there was a, you know, housing estate nearby that I had some friends in during secondary school, but not at all during primary school, it was a very I suppose secluded, private type of nurtured home environment until secondary school, when you get a bit more independence.

BH: Right, so it wasn't the kind of neighbourhood where people were in and out of each other's houses kind of thing?

SM: No, it would have been, but not the housing estate, there was a row of houses that, there would've been a very community-spirited feel about it and, you know, you'd have gone and had tea at someone's house or been playing out all day long down at the

riverbanks and someone's older sibling will come and get everyone in to come in for tea, but it was definitely a middle-class experience and I know that when I compare that to how other people were brought up, and I have to say that just thinking about the sectarianism of the time, my, I've got, I'm the youngest of five, so my two eldest sisters are a different generation to me, and they both would say that when they went, one of them went to Queen's and one of them went to Stranmillis, and literally around the corner at home were girls that **[00:10:00]** they'd never come across before cos they went to different schools and then they met them in Belfast.

BH: Is that right, yeah?

SM: And they were just completely, you know, gobsmacked that because they went to different schools, had different religions, parents kept people separate, that they'd never had contact with them and that would have been during the, I suppose sixties and early seventies.

BH: Right, that was potentially I suppose a time when the segregated nature of people's upbringings was maybe being intensified.

SM: Very much so, yes, yeah.

BH: What about your own upbringing then? Was it more or less segregated do you think?

SM: It was segregated during my primary school years, sorry, I'll put that in a different context, the family were segregated, the family were definitely Protestant in terms of how they approached things. My dad had been brought up in Ballycastle, so he had much more of an open view and an open nature than my mother. My mother would have been much more bigoted I would say looking back on it and how she viewed things. That would have been the same for all my siblings apart from me because I got involved when I was about ten or eleven in a swimming club in the town.

BH: Oh yeah.

SM: And swimming was then one of the very few non-sectarian sports that children did, if you think about how sports would have been divided in schools, that swimming crossed that divide and that opened me up to a very different lifestyle than any of my older siblings because I was then embraced and I embraced the difference I suppose, and would have been, you know, we would have been on, I don't know, from a very young age we'd have been taken off on swimming club trips to, sometimes to England and Scotland, but quite often to Dublin or various other bits around the North, and you would end up staying in other people's houses and then you'd be taken to a different church on a Sunday, you'd have been part of their culture that weekend depending on what you were doing and you were maybe sharing with another girl from the club, who would have been a Catholic, so then I'd have been opened up to to that lifestyle in a way that my sisters never would have had that.

BH: And was that swimming club, was that something which was particularly targeted at more middle-class children or was it open to everyone?

SM: No, it was open to everyone, I don't think I ever got the sense that there was a class basis. I mean, if you had your costume and your goggles and you could turn up for training, that was what you, there was a real family spirit in that, but interestingly my parents didn't get involved at all, I think that they probably had had, I was the fifth child, and they probably had fatigue in bringing up so many children that literally they just enjoyed the fact that I went off and did, went to swimming club, swimming club on my own, and sometimes my dad would have given me lifts, but usually lifts were organised for us.

BH: This was something that you did voluntarily of your own volition?

SM: I think maybe I just started at school and they did some swimming lessons and I was good at swimming. We were always taken to the beach, we were all strong swimmers, we had surfboards, you know, that sort of a, encouraged to swim and keep safe, and then for whatever reason I was good at swimming and I think probably my parents were keen, if you're not good at school, they want you to, they wanted to encourage me to be good at something else, and I know that from what I've done with my children, if they've been struggling in school you want them to have excellence elsewhere in their lives, and I think that was possibly one of the reasons why they encouraged the swimming, but they didn't have any notion of the cultural sort of narrative of the swimming club, that it was very inclusive, non-sectarian, the families, you know, a very diverse group of people, and I don't know whether you know Corrymeela?

BH: I do, yeah.

SM: And the Corrymeela sort of experience sprung from the swimming club, there were some of the older members of the swimming club would have been involved in going to Corrymeela–

BH: Ah right, okay.

SM: And then they would have encouraged some of us younger ones to go and then that sort of became a bit of a theme, that if you weren't at the swimming club and away at a weekend you'd have gone to Corrymeela.

BH: Ah right, okay.

SM: And that would have been obviously mixing with people from all over Northern Ireland, I mean, that was what it was set up for.

BH: And did you filter into Corrymeela via the swimming club then?

SM: Yes, I think it probably was through that, I was trying to think about how that first came off, and I've a very close friend who I'll mention, there's significance around her family, and it was her older sister, she had, she was probably about three years older than me, but she

would have been a very dominant personality, for the right reasons, in the swimming club and would have encouraged us to get involved, and at that point there were things like, I don't know what you called them, there were police, blue light, that was it, blue light discos in Coleraine to try and make, to try and basically keep people off the streets and getting into trouble, and I'm pretty sure that Corrymeela was the same way, that you would encourage your children not to be hanging around the streets at night. We were encouraged, okay, if you're not swimming why don't you go to Corrymeela and there would have been lifts arranged and sometimes my dad would have taken us, but generally it was through older people that my friend's sister knew.

BH: Yeah.

SM: So it's a social life, but looking back on it it gave me a completely different insight into the world, not just the Northern Ireland microcosm, but the bigger world as well.

BH: You sort of suggested that your parents weren't necessarily actively involved in the swimming club. What were their attitudes to intercommunal mixing?

SM: Never really, they never really would have stated anything, I mean, they were, both would have been members of the local church, Presbyterian church, so there's always the, or there was always that framework of church around us as well, and one of the things that I would have I suppose debated as a young person with them was about how you can hold such very strong views about religion, but there, then there's all the fighting around religion and the vilification of Catholic people, because my mum would have voiced quite a lot about, you know, any of the terrorist things that went on. She was completely absorbed in the news, the radio was on constantly and then there'd be, her narrative would have been, you know, about the IRA and being very negative and, my dad didn't really enter into that, he would have had a more open, broader view of things.

BH: Were they interested in politics in the sense of either unionism or the Orange Order or anything like that?

SM: No, nothing of extremist, but I suppose, well, what was it that, my dad was involved in the Lions Club, which was a business thing, he would have gone to Lions Club meetings which would have been about charitable, helping, you know, that sort of aspect, but he wouldn't have been involved in anything to do with the Orange Order at all, whether that was a belief or a class thing I don't know actually, but my brother who would have been, as I was ten he would have been sixteen, seventeen, and I know that they were very worried about him being out at night-time. He had a little motorbike that he'd have gone off in, they weren't sure where he was going **[00:20:00]** to and there was a lot of discussion around whether there was any, cos Coleraine was a Protestant town, whether there was any sort of encouragement by local gangs to get him involved, and then I have some memory of that discussion, but not much, but then a decision was made that he leave home and he joined the RAF, very, very early, and he went in, I'm trying to think what age he was, I think he started A-levels at the local, his local, the local boys' school, and maybe within a month realised that because of his dyslexia that this was impossible, an impossible thing for him to do, and within a very quick time he was off and away, and that was, in retrospect that,

looking back on that that was their way of making sure that he wasn't going to get involved in trouble or, you know, not going to be encouraged down that line, so they, they actively made him leave home, and then my mum suffered for that because, you know, her only son, she'd four daughters and a son, her only son was away, he became quite, or he is, I mean, he still lives in England, he's became quite anglified, I think the, he's not a traditional or was never a traditional service person, he was very much outside of that framework, he's an artist now, so, you know, stayed in the RAF as little time as possible before he could leave, but he definitely was not seen as, you know, he couldn't return very often, I don't know whether you've any understanding of that, but there was occasions when he had leave and if there had been any sort of advance warning that there might be some sort of terrorist activity then his leave was stopped, so my mum would get really built up, I mean, obviously there are others in the family were keen that he come home, but it was my mum who would have been built up for the visit home and then it would be cancelled, and then I remember there was a period of time where he was given a service wig, so he had to travel back, backwards and forwards with his wig on–

BH: My goodness.

SM: So that he wasn't identified as in the services because we were told that, you know, he could look like he was in the army, even though he was in the RAF, and therefore he'd be at risk, so all of that went on for me as a young teenager, thinking about all of that.

BH: Following on from that, what kind of place was Coleraine, in that respect? Was there a lot of signs of the conflict in Coleraine? For example, do you have any memories of the conflict or sectarianism tension?

SM: The news was on constantly, so that narrative that my mum would have had would have been very, very clear. We had some major car bomb in the early seventies, I was at secondary school, so maybe it would have been '72, '73, probably '73, and the car bomb took place near our school. We were all kept in, basically locked in the school premises for hours until they worked out what had happened, people were killed during that, that was a major, major thing in the town. But prior to that, I think it's important that I tell you this because it's a child's perspective, I mean, I was a teenager then, a child's perspective, I must have had some very strong view of what the Troubles were whenever I was about five or six, that sort of age group, because I can remember my father being stopped, the car being stopped by it turned out to be the B-Specials, so this was the early sixties or mid-sixties, I don't know when, and I was the fifth child, so there would have been seven of us in the car and I would have often lain across the two front seats, you know, there would have been, those old-fashioned cars where there was only one long seat at the front, and I was lying with my head in my father's lap while he was driving, the others were all crowded into the back, and we were stopped by the B-Specials, it was dark and I can remember they had a lamp swinging backwards and forwards, and he gave his name, he was asked his name and asked to show his driving licence, and he gave his name as John. Now his name, he was known as Jack, but his name, formal name was John, but I didn't know that, I just knew he was Jack, so I spent months and months and months thinking he was in the IRA because he'd given the wrong name, and that's stayed with me, you know, that unsettledness about what was my father really, you know, was he going to work, what was he doing.

BH: Yeah.

SM: And then the other thing that I've remembered, cos I was, this was one of the things I was talking to my son about, about memories of the past, is that we used to go up to Belfast regularly, we had grandparents in Belfast and very good friends, and the very good friends had, their house overlooked a main road, so any time I was at the front of their house I used to crawl along the floor in case I got shot through the window.

BH: Right [laughs].

SM: Again, I must have been under ten to have gotten away with that sort of behaviour, that no one would have noticed that, you know, there was obviously our big family, they had a reasonably big family, lots of children running around and no one would have noticed that I was anxious about what was going on, so obviously I carried that anxiety with me.

BH: Yeah, so you had built up a perception that Belfast was an unsafe environment?

SM: Yes.

BH: Yeah [laughs].

SM: [laughs] So that was pre, you know, that was primary school age, and then secondary school age there was the major incident in Coleraine and that really marked Coleraine as a, you know, how the impact of that, the Troubles were with us, and then later on when I would have been maybe fifteen, something like that, I was working in a coffee shop in Portrush, just, you know, a summer job, and that was, there was a whole series of incendiary devices left in different premises in Portrush, but that coffee bar went up and another friend of mine was working in a chemist and the chemist went up, and I think they might have found one in Barry's even, there was maybe six of them across the whole of Portrush, it was a, you know, a concerted attack on a small seaside town, and that, I didn't have my summer job then, I don't know what time of the, whether it was July or August that summer, but no job, and obviously the impact on everyone was distressing, no one was hurt or that, it was just the destruction of the premises.

BH: There were obvious–

SM: It would have fed into all of my parents', particularly my mum's, narrative about the IRA and what they were doing and they were ruining the country and etcetera, etcetera.

BH: Sure, so that kind of thing, incendiary devices being planted in Portrush when you were fifteen, at the same time as that you were beginning to meet Catholics at your swimming club–

SM: Yeah.

BH: And starting to–

SM: At the same time, I mean, the Catholic interaction would have been from maybe about eleven.

BH: Oh right, okay.

SM: Swimming was eleven till seventeen.

BH: So how did you find that then at that time, meeting sort of Catholics for the first time and again these kinds of things happening in the background? How did you find that negotiation?

SM: No one talked about it.

BH: Right.

SM: Conversation was avoided.

BH: Right.

SM: And things were glossed over, normalised, you know, you wouldn't want to start analysing anything in case you put your foot in it and said the wrong thing.

BH: Sure, **[00:30:00]** and was there ever a stage when you, when people kind of went past that?

SM: Not during that, not during teenage years, no, I think that that would have been, that, I suppose becoming more aware and articulating things would have been when I was a wee bit older cos I, I don't know whether I, I did say to you that I'd started school a year young and was young then throughout the whole of my year and was too young to go to university, so I worked for a year in Belfast before, after I'd done my A-levels and before I was old enough to go to university, so I worked for a year in an organisation called Voluntary Service Belfast, which was a non-sectarian organisation, and at the time I had been really keen to work in London, I thought that would have been really big and exciting, but when the push came to shove I just couldn't quite have the confidence to move to London on my own, I think I was only seventeen at the time, so, but I went to Belfast and actually got accommodation living with the sister who I'm nearest in age to, she was at Stranmillis, she was the second sister that had gone to Stranmillis, and there was a room in her student house, so it all became very easy to arrange at the very last minute and I ended up working for this organisation, it was, had a whole ream of young people from all over Ireland, north, south, and also some from abroad who were, had been sort of encouraged to join this organisation to, I don't know, I suppose be volunteers in whatever way that the organisation enabled us to become involved in projects all across Greater Manches-, Greater Manchester, Greater Belfast, so I did that for a year.

BH: How did you find out about that organisation? How did you become kind of attracted to it?

SM: I think probably through Corrymeela.

BH: Right, okay.

SM: I think the Corrymeela thing had talked to me about the homeless and projects in London that would have maybe had roots in Irish organisations that supported homeless people in London, and then when I didn't quite get there, they then suggested Voluntary Service Belfast, a similar sort of ethos, but probably, well, I didn't know it at the time, but VSB would have had a more politicised workforce and they were, Corrymeela were very much sort of religious stance, whereas Voluntary Service Belfast staff would have been more political in terms of social justice.

BH: Right, okay.

SM: And, you know, that would have been the era of political protest and, you know, people who were involved in that organisation would have been much more proactive in Belfast, in Belfast politics, and I came in as, you know, a Coleraine Protestant girl and I'm sure they probably thought she's not going to cope, well, I think I was told that, after I had settled in and was coping, that they thought I wouldn't cope because I was, they perceived that I was young and naïve.

BH: Yeah, so was this a, sorry, what were you going to say?

SM: No, sorry, go on.

BH: Was this a left political, in the sense of being left wing, or political in the sense of being republican left wing?

SM: No, left wing, I think they wouldn't have been allowed to align themselves with republicanism, but we worked in small teams and my team leader would have definitely been republican, and he was the one that said to me he thought I wouldn't last.

BH: Right [laughs].

SM: But I did.

BH: You did, were any of your sisters who were then at Stranmillis, were they involved in these organisations?

SM: No, they thought I was completely mad.

BH: Right [laughs].

SM: And they still do.

BH: Yeah, and would you say that was an important experience that year out?

SM: Yeah, transformative experience in terms of all the things that I ended up doing. I mean, there would have been a very nice, what I'd have called nice, visiting older isolated people, doing a bit of decorating for them, having a cup of tea, baking, you know, those sorts of volunteering type tasks, and then there would have been other stuff that would have been much more close to the political sort of scenario. So, for example, there was a, we did a lot of decorating of housing exec houses where the people didn't have any funds to improve their homes, so we would have been given painting stuff and then two of us would have gone off with our, all our stuff and got stuck in, but part of it was that you didn't just do the decorating, you were there to befriend the people that you were working alongside, and on one occasion, it was down in the Markets area, and we were moving things around to decorate the sitting room and under the sofas were a whole load of guns.

BH: My goodness.

SM: And I just looked at the man, he looked at me, and we just moved, I just moved the sofa, so we covered them up again.

BH: Is that right? [laughs]

SM: And we never talked about it.

BH: My goodness.

SM: And I eventually, I went back to my team leader, but not immediately, cos I thought if I say anything then I might get into trouble that I haven't disclosed it at the right time, but I felt it was better to protect everyone not to talk about it.

BH: Yeah.

SM: So I didn't, and for weeks and weeks I didn't mention it to anyone.

BH: Yeah, and then eventually you did mention it to someone?

SM: I did, and they just sort of said that's Belfast for you.

BH: Yeah.

SM: But I think, you know, if I was to have, looking back on it now I could have said the wrong thing and got into a lot of trouble, you know, if I hadn't been aware enough not to say the wrong thing.

BH: Yeah.

SM: And then I also got involved in a probation project, working with offenders, with young offenders, so they would have been fourteen to sixteen-year-olds, that sort of age group, in a group work setting, and I would have done that maybe one evening a week and that was

through VSB, but it was a specific project that the probation service wanted a volunteer for, and that, again, that was part of my I suppose transformative learning because I then became a probation officer.

BH: Right, okay, as part of that transformative experience did that involve you becoming politically conscious at that time or was this more about social justice, social work and so on?

SM: Bit of both.

BH: Bit of both.

SM: A bit of both, but I think probably more the social aspect of it because there was still the family narrative going on alongside that, particularly because I was living in a household of, you know, trainee teachers, and I very rarely went home, you know, a lot of people think that if you're in Belfast, to Coleraine people, I think students these days in Northern Ireland go home a lot and that always surprises me cos I didn't do that and I know my sister didn't do that, maybe travel was different then, I don't know, but I think it was more the social aspect of it because I think that then the, when I came to England that was when I became more politically sort of, as in terms of left politics, became more aware, so there was a foundation there of social justice.

BH: So that was your year out. You had done your A-levels before that, is that right?

SM: Yes, yes.

BH: And then you were planning presumably on going to university, is that right?

SM: Yeah.

BH: So what did you study at A-levels and what and where did you want to study at?

SM: I did the A-level religious studies at, it was Loreto College–

BH: Oh yeah.

SM: In Ballymoney and I did art, no history of art and English, so I did three A-levels **[00:40:00]** and did far better than anyone expected.

BH: They're very, very wordy subjects.

SM: Yes, they are, yes, for someone who struggled at school, but I did fine, I did well at them, and then I had applied to various polytechnics in England to do social work and got a place in Sheffield and then they checked my date of birth and said I was too young to come, so came back a year later and started in Sheffield at Sheffield Poly.

BH: Right, why did you not elect to go to university somewhere in Northern Ireland?

SM: I wanted to do something different from my siblings. There was never any discussion either at school or at home about going to Dublin or Cork or anywhere like that, that was seen as a foreign country, whereas the expectation from my point of view for a long time was that I was going to go to England.

BH: Okay, so you weren't attracted to, for example, going to Queen's?

SM: No.

BH: Or even near where you're at, the University of Ulster?

SM: No, the university had, the NUU was opening up and running then, but apart from going to concerts and things I wouldn't have dreamt of going there.

BH: Sure, and whenever you chose Sheffield were you planning on going over there with somebody else that you knew or were you going to go on your own?

SM: I actually travelled with a friend who, she went on to Nottingham, but it was only cos we happened to be on the same ferry at the same time, so no, there was no one else going to be in Sheffield. There happened to be someone there in the year above me, because I'd been there in the different school year she'd started, but she was, she had originally come from Coleraine, then moved to Belfast, but I'd still maintained a wee bit of contact through the very significant friend that I mentioned earlier, and she was, had already started the social work course, but that was chance I ended up, you know, arriving, and Sheffield was like a foreign country to me. I'd been over for my interview the previous year and that was it.

BH: Yeah, you said that, you know, you wanted to do something different from your siblings. Why was it important to you to do something different? What did that mean?

SM: I think I'd spent my whole time at school being the youngest McCaughan sister who was hopeless [laughs], and always, the only thing I was good at doing was talking, talking and swimming [laughs], and, you know, I don't know, I just thought I need to get out of here, it was restrictive, but I didn't really know why it was, cos I didn't have that understanding of why I felt the family was being restrictive. But that's what happens, particularly in Ireland, I think families have a lot of influence.

BH: Was that a frightening experience or an exciting experience, moving on your own to quite a large city in the north of England?

SM: Both, I mean, both because you're there and you're thinking wow, this is amazing. I got criticised a lot for being too friendly.

BH: For being too friendly?

SM: Yes.

BH: Right [laughs].

SM: And the people that I met, you know, the way you meet people, went to a halls of residence, would say I used to get them all into trouble because I was the one that was too friendly with whoever was around, not, whoever that happened to be, and I recall that I was asked, probably in one of my first lectures, in a really big lecture theatre, someone asked me very directly are you a Protestant or a Catholic.

BH: Really? Right.

SM: Yeah, very directly. So I would say I didn't temper my friendliness for months and months because I just, that was just the way, I don't know, maybe I felt very positive about meeting lots of new people, whoever they happened to be, and the social work course that I was on had a lot of diversity in terms of age group, colour, gender, so there'd have been a lot of gay men on the course, so I was just being opened up to a whole new way of thinking and, you know, that sort of, if I hadn't had the Belfast experience it would probably have been overwhelming, but the Belfast experience really, you know, allowed that to, allowed me to embrace it.

BH: When that person asked you in a lecture hall if you were a Catholic or Protestant, was that an English person asking you that or somebody else?

SM: Yeah, it was an English person, yeah.

BH: Yeah, and how did you answer?

SM: Probably not v-, I didn't, I don't think I replied or I wasn't assertive, I just was very non-committal, but I think that I sort of thought then that's, I've always remembered that whenever I'm, I don't know, got black colleagues and they're asked questions as if they are the voice person of every black person, offender or community member, whatever, that I've always thought of that and thought well, I'm not going to be representative of all things to do with Ireland in this group of students.

BH: Sure, I'm wondering–

SM: Does that make sense?

BH: It does make a lot of sense, yeah, but I suppose that's quite a hard thing to do when you're quite young, to be able to see it in such a sophisticated way, you know. I'm also wondering about, on a social work course, presumably there would be quite a lot of people with liberal and left-leaning perspectives?

SM: Yeah, it was a very politicised course, that's why I picked it because it was seen as being a very progressive, lefty, had a very community-based way of working with people in terms of how social work was seen, which is ironic that I then wanted to go into probation, but, which is not community based [laughs], but I would have been involved, I'd been introduced

to a lot of the politics at the time, you know, there was the women's movement and Greenham Common and, you know, me and my friends would have gone off to do that, we had a really interesting time getting involved in feminism, you know, the early eighties, feminism, just in terms of being introduced to that.

BH: Yeah, what about people who are on the left and liberal-leaning in England, their perspective of Northern Ireland? My experience of having read some of these perspectives is that very often the conflict is seen as a consequence of Protestant bigotry and very often it's seen as a product of the Northern Ireland state itself. Did you encounter that sort of viewpoint?

SM: I think I felt that a lot of the problems were due to segregation and that if we could change that then things would progress. But I felt that people, and I still feel that people in England don't understand the history of Ireland, they see it very much from their own perspective, but then Northern Ireland Protestants see things from their own perspectives, they don't see things from a whole Ireland perspective. So I eventually realised that I didn't have a very good grasp of Irish history **[00:50:00]** because I'd been taught in a Protestant school. In fact, the only time that we were only involved in sort of looking at Irishness was through Irish literature, our English teacher would have been really, would have selected I suppose Irish literature from whatever choices they have in terms of teaching and he taught that and that was, you know, something that would have been very important, to read all of that literature and be introduced to it, but apart from that the history was very limiting, so I actually got involved in an organisation called Irish in Britain Representation Group.

BH: Oh I know it, yeah.

SM: And they did Irish history courses at the Irish centre, so I went along to that with the friend from Northern Ireland who had been in the year above me, so she and I went along to that as, you know, we're obviously politicised enough to know that we were doing something that was probably not going to be seen favourably by our families, and in fact the, there was a faction within the group, not a faction, that's too, that sounds as if it was segregated within the group, there was a group of people who were older within that who were definitely involved in the Troops Out movement, and that, again, had led me to feel some sort of uncomfortableness around that because I would have had the, you know, understanding of the history and, you know, oppression and Catholicism and all of that, but that would have had, just made me feel uncomfortable about being, almost identifying as being a Protestant.

BH: Sure, and were you able to be explicit about that at for example meetings and things?

SM: Eventually, yes, my husband now, he's been my husband for a long time, he came along to those and he is second-generation Irish, but brought up in Manchester, so he came to those meetings, not, I don't think he attended the history ones, I think it was just Rosemary and myself went to those, but he would have come along to some of the meetings and I think I almost felt that gave me validation because he was definitely a Catholic, and that again made feel uncomfortable.

BH: Hmm, I mean, I recall reading, there was some of the monthly publications of the Irish in Britain Representation Group, and seeing interviews and things with Gerry Adams, it was a very strong pro-republican line of interpretation in there.

SM: Yes, and I wouldn't have talked about that back at home.

BH: Yeah, did being involved in a group like that recondition or reshape your own understanding of Northern Ireland or did you continue to kind of read the history of Northern Ireland in a different way?

SM: I think it shifted it considerably and made me think [inaudible; recording temporarily cuts out] things from their own perception rather than actually looking at it as how partition has caused a massive problem, you know, and lots of loss and lots of sadness and real difficulty for the country to heal, despite, you know, the Good Friday Agreement, I don't know, it has, it's still there and the undercurrent's still there, and I think that that, that's had an impact personally because of something I'll tell you in a minute, but also then in terms of how my family perceived my then boyfriend, who is now my husband, cos he was the personification of a Catholic person with very strong views on united Ireland and that was tricky to navigate that, all of that at that time.

BH: Do you recall the first time you brought your would-be husband back to Northern Ireland?

SM: Yes, well, I had to introduce him as not only a Catholic, but also as a father of a three-year-old [laughs].

BH: Right, okay.

SM: And that did not go down well. They, my parents are no longer alive, my father became much more warming towards my husband over the years, with some funny stories about, he was the only son-in-law that was, my dad used to take to the pub, and he loved the chance to take anyone to the pub because it wasn't seen as the right thing for a, you know, a Presbyterian man to be visiting the pub, but he could take his English son-in-law to the pub, you know, that sort of thing. But my mum, took my mum many years to sort of overcome those feelings of how she perceived him to be and they did, they rubbed along, that's how my husband would probably describe it, they rubbed along in terms of their relationship and they would have come to us in Sheffield a lot, when we had children they were very supportive, then when we moved to Manchester, you know, the visits lessened because they got older, but, you know, there was a couple of things that were tricky, but the one significant thing that probably I need to mention is that that friend who was very significant as a tee-, in my teenage years, I mentioned that the older sister had been the instigator to us joining Corrymeela activities, well, their brother was a reservist in the RUC, that's it, I was trying to think of the word reservist, much younger than us, so we would have been in our, I don't know, twenty-seven, twenty-eight, that sort of age group, and he was younger, so he was twenty and he was shot dead by the IRA after leaving one of the bases, he was I suppose no longer working, driving home, and he was shot by a sniper, and that was in 1988 when I was living in England, but was still very good friends with that family, and then the

impact of that whilst I was trying to make sense of what was going on in Ireland and then to have someone that I knew to be involved, you know, that was the most direct involvement of the conflict really, and that has continued to have some tension there for our political views and how Mike is viewed by our friends, even though we're very, very close friends, sometimes it's easier not to talk about it, you know, to gloss over things because of the distress and hopelessness around that.

BH: And is that tension purely between on the one hand your family and friends who had obviously identified with the RUC reservist who had been shot, and on the other hand your husband, or are you caught in the middle of this as well?

SM: Probably I had a more simplistic view of it in my twenties than I do have now from a, you know, much more mature age and in terms of realising the impact of that within one family, and how that's played out over the years, and then how that trauma, that's what I'm trying to think of the word, the trauma that that one incident caused to so many people, and then if you magnify that across the whole of Northern Ireland, the whole country I think has been traumatised, but it, because people don't talk about things and there's still the glossing over of everything and the, you know, normalisation of conversation that never mentions anything to do with the conflict, there's no recovery in that. **[01:00:00]**

BH: Yeah, it sounds then like your kind of thinking about all this has gone through at least two different shifts, a shift possibly when you moved to England and became involved with groups like the Irish in Britain Representation Group, and then more recently a rethinking of that position again, is that right?

SM: I think probably I've got more understanding of how trauma has an impact on people, and I mean trauma from all sorts of conflict, you know, I've got more understanding of it professionally, personally, you know, how people recover from any sort of trauma, whether that be in a war situation or from a personal experience, and I think that the sort of mental health aspect of war has a massive effect on everyone and that that actually is a generational thing and it's not just to do with the person that it affects, so, I don't know, if you think about the example of the Holocaust and how that has resonance through the generations, I think that the Northern Ireland conflict is probably, continues to play that out, and I don't know how that will change or heal or, a very good friend, she also went into the probation service, we've had a very aligned sort of trajectory in terms of what we've done with our lives, so we did our swimming together, we went to Corrymeela together, but she stayed in Belfast and then she got, I would say pushed a bit to get involved in victims work because they obviously knew her background and knew what she had experienced as being a victim of what has happened, and there was times professionally she was pushed too much to take that responsibility as a person who could make sense of whatever was going on in the, you know, peace talks or things like that, but, whereas obviously I'm in England, so that's been, I've had a different view of that from, I've observed that rather than been part of it.

BH: Right, do you think has that made things easier or more complicated to observe it from a distance?

SM: I think it's just the way it has been. I think we, we went through a phase in the early nineties of thinking that we, well, I would return and work in Northern Ireland and my husband was very keen to be involved, do that and make a change and we, you know, we went through the whole process of selling the house, I got a job and all, you know, we had it all in place and then the screening for, it was basically a probation role that would have been a really interesting job in Belfast that was, if you could have a job description for me it would have been that one, it was working with women offenders in Belfast and, but the screening for the security checks took for absolutely forever and we wondered whether it was to do with the Irish in Britain group.

BH: Oh really? Right, yeah.

SM: We didn't know that, the screening took so long that we actually missed the boat sort of thing, we decided that it wasn't going to work out, and the main reason why we made a decision not to carry on with that was they changed the job because they couldn't, they needed to fill that post, it was, you know, someone needed to be running the programme, so they gave the job to someone else and then they put me or they said they would put me in Portadown, which is obviously that very loyalist area, it was during the real heyday of the marching time.

BH: Drumcree?

SM: And, yes, and my parents said that it would be dangerous if they knew that I was a Protestant, had a husband back living in Belfast, back then, by then I had, we had two small boys, we had sons living, one of them has an Irish name, and they said they felt that we would be too, we could be targeted, so we basically drew a line on it and said okay, we're not going back, so that was–

BH: And is that something that you regret?

SM: Quite significant, say that again.

BH: Was that something that you regretted?

SM: No, I think that we'd done, we'd probably spent maybe twelve months going through that whole process and it just hadn't happened and we said there's a reason why there's a barrier here for it, so we sort of then invested more into living here. We'd moved from Sheffield to Manchester, Mike's family were living in Manchester and in fact at that point his father died suddenly and we ended up doing a lot of looking after of his mum, so as that year progressed it was more evident that his mother wouldn't have coped if we hadn't been still in Manchester, and that's I, I often think well, that's why we were, we stayed here because she would have been very isolated.

BH: Sure, whenever you applied to do that, even though it didn't turn out the way you initially wanted it, what underlay your motivation to go back to Northern Ireland?

SM: I think honestly most people who live in England think they're going to go back to Northern Ireland at some point [laughs].

BH: Is that right, yeah? [laughs]

SM: I think there's a real narrative around that about going home, and it was, maybe it depends if you're in a family how your partner feels, but my partner would have been probably at times more interested in moving over there than I would have been, cos I felt that I would have, as you know Northern Ireland isn't a very diverse culture to live in, and I thought that I would, I would miss that bit of Manchester and Sheffield that, you know, I really enjoyed, whereas he would have been much more thinking about bringing the children up as Irish, he had a, you know, developing their identity more as being Irish.

BH: Yeah, earlier you talked about kind of the apprehensiveness on the part of your parents in relation to your husband. How did you find his parents, being from a Protestant background and everything that goes with that?

SM: They were really, well, his mum would have been a very, embraced me because I was the new partner who was quite happy to be involved with, at that point my stepson would have been three or four, and she was very glad that I was interested in being involved with that, because he was living with his father at the time, he didn't throughout some of his childhood, but he did for a part of his childhood, and I think Mike's mum felt that that was, someone would never get involved with Mike because of that, so she, and the Catholic thing, she definitely very, brought up as a Catholic, brought her children up as Catholics and had that framework around her, but she wasn't, it was more the Irishness of being a Catholic living in Manchester that would have been more significant for them rather than the religious bit, whereas my family it was more the religious bits, you know, they went to church every Sunday and their social life was around the church, whereas Margaret's would have been, Mike's family would have been more around seeing family and spending time with grandchildren, **[01:10:00]** that sort of aspect.

BH: I was going to ask as well there about sort of if your other interactions with other Irish people in England, obviously you were interacting with people at the Irish in Britain Representation Group, did you, for example, notice differences between Southern Irish people and Northern Irish people when you were in England, how they reacted to you and/or their views about Northern Ireland?

SM: One of my very close friends in Manchester now, we were at Sheffield Poly together, she was, it was the, a four-year course I did and the first year we did it in across all the social sciences and she was in the social science bit, she wasn't in the applied social work section of it, but she came originally from Dublin and her family then emigrated from Dublin to Manchester when she was a young child, but she would still have, she still does today have a bit of a Dublin accent, and her, we, I would be very much involved with her family as well, though not recently because of Covid, because they've got an older, much older mother, but we'd have seen her and her sisters over the years, and she actually was caught up in the Irish Catholic view about pregnancy, and she had a pregnancy when we were all at university together, and she's a tiny bit older than me, and she was whisked off by her

family to Liverpool to be in one of these homes for young single women and then she had her child, and that was in the 1980s.

BH: My goodness.

SM: She was the first of my friends to have a child and that was definitely, her choices were affected by being a Catholic.

BH: Okay, I should have asked you more about this, but you mentioned earlier that part of your learning when you came to Sheffield was learning about feminism. Could you say something about that? How did that come about and why was that important?

SM: I think it was the course that I did, the university, or it was a poly course that I did, and then I joined, very quickly got a job in a community centre that worked with young unemployed people. Sheffield's a very progressive, lefty city and they were, I did a lot with the young women in that centre. It was my first job, I wasn't a probation officer then, they didn't have vacancies at the time in the probation service, it was one of these austerity moments, so I basically got a job as a community worker and through that I met another range I suppose of Sheffield people who were involved in, that would have been the time of the miners' strike, so the sort of theoretical stuff around feminism then moved into the, much more of the this is what it's like to be a woman in society and we did an awful lot of fundraising events with the, you know, the mothers and the wives of miners and got embroiled in all of that, but that's what triggered a lot of discussion around feminism, and then quite quickly I got a job as a probation officer, and I don't know whether you know Sheffield, but Derbyshire probation service was very much on the border of south Yorkshire and I got a job with Derbyshire where I'd been a student on placement and worked in Chesterfield, and Chesterfield would have had, the Chesterfield courts at that point were choc-a-bloc with miners who were in court for all their, I don't know, obstructing the police type charges, so I went from being on a community project to observing what was going on in a very sort of the law setting and that was very strange as well.

BH: Right.

SM: So the fem-, so you were asking about feminism, I then did a women's studies course, so it was at University of Sheffield and it was probably a two-year taught programme and then a dissertation, so thinking about it now in terms of an academic course, it was not just a postgrad certificate, but they didn't have the validation for it to be anything more than that, and that, again, introduced me to more about the theoretical perspectives, but also about how that worked in society today and, you know, I was very interested in female offenders and how the prison system worked for a woman, you know, women got, and still do get sent to prison very quickly compared to male counterparts, and that's where I did the study that I interviewed a number of women about emigration.

BH: Ah that's really interesting, so that study, that's something where those interests overlapped then.

SM: Yeah.

BH: Women's studies and feminism on the one hand, and Irish identity.

SM: Yeah.

BH: Could you say something about that? What motivated you to undertake that study?

SM: You had to do, you had to pick an area that interested you as your dissertation and obviously rooted in the theory, and for whatever reason, I don't really know, I think possibly the probation service is, or was at the time, it's not like this now at all, but was at the time, it was quite a small national organisation and any of the conferences or training that you went on, there was a very strong feeling that a lot of people came from Ireland.

BH: Right, okay.

SM: Now that is, I think if you look at that historically there's a lot of ethos around Catholicism and wanting to help, you know, the old sort of, I don't know, nuns and priests helped everyone and, you know, that's how social work, a lot of social workers are seen, you either go off to be a social worker or you go off to be a priest, and the probation service definitely has that, or did have that culture and in fact we had, I had a couple of colleagues who used to be priests and then they left, they'd left and married and, you know, had a family, but they worked in the probation service. So I think I was interested in (a) how history is very much from a male perspective, or was then, less, I don't have knowledge around that currently, I think it should be broader by now, but at that point there was very much anything I was reading around about Ireland and identity was very much from a male perspective, and even stuff that you would have read about in terms of Irish resistance, it would have been very much male perspective, and I was more interested in what women felt, and feminism enabled people to talk about day-to-day things and see the value of those in a way that probably hadn't been I suppose articulated before. So I did that and I interviewed or had a couple of colleagues that I interviewed and then one of my colleague's mother came from Ireland and she introduced me to her, so I was trying to get an age range because I thought that'd be useful in terms of, you know, trying to get themes of people leaving and what people felt, so I managed to do that, I got quite an age range and unearthed it when we were moving house [laughs], so it was quite funny to look at again.

BH: Yeah, I'd definitely like to see that at some point.

SM: Yes, I actually have a scanned copy cos my son wanted me to scan it, so I've got scanned copy.

BH: Excellent, can I just ask you a bit more about the Troubles in England? **[01:20:00]** We've talked a bit about the Irish in Britain Representation Group. Obviously in addition to the educational side it, one of the motivations for the setting up of that group was things like Prevention of Terrorism Act, the idea that Irish people were discriminated against in England during the period of the Troubles. Did you experience any hostility while you were in England?

SM: Yes. The probation sort of setting, there would have been, there were a lot of prison visits that I did and there were occasions that as a young female you would have had to be cautious about, you know, interacting with prison officers and things, but there were occasions that there was definitely a racist element to that, you know, if you were booking and you constantly had to say your surname, spell it out, be asked where's that from, and then if there'd been any terrorist events or anything going on there would have been some like, there was one occasion where it, actually in Manchester at HMP Manchester, where I was going regularly, so if you visit a prison often you still have to go through all the protocol of being searched, but there's a bit of a more, less formal I would say, interaction between you and the people on the gate or taking you to the wing or something, just because you're there so often depending on your role, and at one point they started to joke about the fact that my ID wasn't current, and you have to have your ID up to date because you aren't allowed into a prison without it, and then they were saying well, okay your ID's not up to date, so we're going to strip-search you, and that was a direct result of something that had gone on that weekend, and my Irish accent, and I tried to put a complaint in, but was told by the probation colleagues who were based in Strangeways that if I did that then I would be, what's the word, never get through the gate or it would be so much of a struggle to get through regularly that it would make my job not worth it, and again, that was around, you know, them viewing me through that lens really rather than as a probation officer, they just vilified me because I was Irish.

BH: Right, and did they distinguish between Protestant or Catholic Irish or was it just–?

SM: No, no, no, the accent I think just, you're just Irish, and that would have been the case after the Manchester bomb. I worked in Trafford and, in the probation office there, and probably for weeks and weeks afterwards I can remember servicer users, colleagues giving me more than just banter, but real sort of criticism about being Irish and what happened in Manchester and, you know, making me feel responsible for it, and, you know, as an Irish person you can be quiet and keep your mouth shut and not distinguish yourself, so that makes me even more think about, you know, the Black Lives Matters movement, people can't be quiet and can't hide and what that must mean to people in terms of absorbing all that tension.

BH: At that time how did you respond to those implications or those conversations?

SM: Obviously, you know, tried to talk to people about the fact that, you know, it was, I would never have gone down the line of this is a political statement, I wouldn't have followed that line of conversation with anyone because it was obviously so horrendous and had such a huge impact on Manchester and, you know, when it is on your doorstep it leaves you reeling, it's quite, it's easier to talk about things from a political perspective when it's not happening on your doorstep. But I chose not to travel on buses around that time because I didn't want to be I suppose in, you know, maybe only for about two weeks, but it was still, I can still recall that, that I didn't want to, I needed to be more careful because there is, there was generally a backlash to Irish people in Manchester at the time.

BH: That was obviously a particular event, 1996, the bomb coming up to really negotiations for the peace process. More generally, when you were living in England, what do you think

English people's attitudes towards Northern Ireland was? Were they generally hostile or how did they generally relate to Irish or Northern Irish people?

SM: [pauses] That's quite hard to say because I probably have quite a lot of social networks with Irish people in them. I think probably a lot of English people see it as a financial drain on the country in terms of purely the money that's poured into it, never mind all the loss of life, etcetera, but I don't think English people really think about Northern Ireland or Ireland, I think they see it as a very different place, almost, they don't understand it, so they can't untangle what's going on there, I'm sorry, I don't really know.

BH: Yeah, yeah, no, I mean, I–

SM: I don't know.

BH: I think that observation has come up quite a few times, almost a kind of apathy about it.

SM: Yes, that's a good word, really good word that, indifference, that would be another word, indifference, that they don't, they're not bothered, and many people would say that, you know, even though it's so near they wouldn't think about going over to see the place, or younger people might be more interested because of *Game of Thrones* or things like that, but generally there wouldn't be any reason to visit unless you had some sort of familial tie with it, which actually I don't mind because it means that when you go the beaches are quiet [laughs].

BH: Yeah [laughs].

SM: But indifference and apathy would be really good words, yes.

BH: You said there obviously that, you know, quite a lot of your social networks in England were act-, had actually quite a lot of Irish people within them. Did you have any social networks which were more English? Did you have English friends?

SM: Oh yes and I have people where I live now, am I the only Irish person that, I think, no, there's a few other people because there's been a discussion around getting Irish passports, you know, with, through Brexit and things, so there's, no, I definitely have English friends, definitely have English friends, and I have a, you know, a social life that isn't around politics now in the way that it used to be. I think that when I had children that changed because you'd only really have energy for children and work, and I worked for many years full-time, and then I was able to reduce to being part-time and I had a third child, you know, that sort of thing and you just have, don't have the energy to take that on board, too much else happening, so I suppose the, a more political lifestyle that would have taken me in a different direction isn't going to happen now, and particularly not going to happen now because of Covid, because there's no, no opportunities really.

BH: During those years, presumably you continued to follow events in Northern Ireland, so what were your views on the peace process once it emerged and as it evolved?

SM: I think that my family, I would have wanted to have done more talking to them about that, but they were–

BH: Your family back home in Coleraine?

SM: Family back home, yes, I would have wanted to have talked more to them, but **[01:30:00]** the opportunities to have those sorts of discussions didn't happen because you were over and you were busy with children or parents were getting older, but there was a real, real sense of movement and relief and I know from, you know, the perception of someone like Tony Blair and how he, you know, dealt with that, that was really positive and I think everyone just thought hopefully there will be recovery, and it's only as time's gone on that I've realised that that isn't happening the way it should be, because of the trauma and that everyone experienced that trauma. So I think that my, I felt it was a safer place to go to, I suppose that was something, that it definitely felt safer, so we would have been going as a family regularly, but there would always have been that slight anxiety about the Troubles and obviously then that has changed and has become much more relaxed and don't think about it in the same way and, you know, hopefully the family are, not hopefully, but my family in Northern Ireland would have experienced it the same way too, but they've, my sisters who still live there have experienced their children not being able to live there, they've left and emigrated as well, so the social context hasn't really changed, that pattern has continued of people leaving, and I think that's one of the debates I would have with my sister who's a teacher is that, you know, the schools, there is the integrated education, but that that's, if that is, if that, that has to be the only one that's working, if there continues to be the segregated schooling then that, how can I put it, there's still the hierarchy of education in Northern Ireland and there's very much the which school have you gone to and then you make all sorts of assumptions around that, whereas if all the schools are integrated then that takes that away from it and then that segregation will lead to change, or that should lead to change, but as a teacher she's invested in that, so we do have some debate on that but then we just have to agree to differ.

BH: Yeah, broadly speaking then you perceive the peace agreement as a positive thing?

SM: Yes.

BH: Yeah, what about your parents? Being from a, presumably a unionist background, did they also see it as a good thing?

SM: Yes, they saw it as a good thing in terms of protecting peace, but they would not want to have conversations about how quickly there would be a united Ireland, and any of times that we've tried, we tried to talk about that they didn't want to engage with it, and that would be the same with my sisters who are the generation older than me, my brother-in-laws, one of them in particular, would have very fixed views, unionist views, and we just don't have those conversations with him about, you know, the, the numbers and the changes and the progress, etcetera, whereas some of the, the younger brother-in-laws have a more open view about that and I suppose can see that instead of it being in the future, you know, down the line, that it could happen within their lifetime, and I think that's quite a powerful change really for someone who, whose identity is about being a unionist, that

they've begun to, begin to think of it, one of them hasn't and one of them would not go there, but the other two definitely have.

BH: Yeah, and do you try to encourage them to think about that possibility?

SM: At times, and then at other times they, it might lead to conflict, depending on how much Guinness has been drunk [laughs].

BH: Oh right [laughs].

SM: You know, it depends on the, on who's there, you know, and there's obviously aligned to that the arguments and families around Brexit and, you know, strong views on different sides about that, and I think that sometimes those arguments, I'm, I'm viewed as the argumentative person, so sometimes I just have to back off.

BH: And do they, does your family now perceive you as a nationalist? Is that what you tell them you are?

SM: Probably without using those words, yes [laughs].

BH: Yeah, yeah, and have they accepted that?

SM: Yes, I think they, they see me as, just someone who was a bit unorthodox as a young person, and my father, actually I need to tell you this, it's a sort of a family joke, my father, whenever my husband got to know him and, you know, the, I don't know whether, I don't know what age you are, but that thing about whenever you ask the father-in-law whether you can get married.

BH: Sure, yeah.

SM: That was done during a Live Aid concert that was on on the TV, so it was that era in the eighties, and my father was given a whiskey by my husband to celebrate and he said to him, very directly, well, I thought that she was going to marry a black person and you're just a Catholic, so that is a family sort of joke, that dad always said I'd marry a black person, but Mike's only a Catholic, you know, so that was how I was perceived by the family.

BH: Yeah, so he, he–

SM: And I'm very, and I am extremely ordinary person though, I don't have any, it was just that it was, I was so different from my four siblings, if that makes sense.

BH: It does. I suppose the obvious question to ask there then is why do you think that happened? Why do you think you turned out to be so different from the rest of your siblings?

SM: I think I had a very strong view of being, of the other, the whole way through my childhood and I don't really know why that was, and then particularly when I, the

experiences of the swimming club and Corrymeela really, really, you know, gave me a different perspective.

BH: Right, and your sisters and your brother didn't, they weren't involved in Corrymeela or anything like that?

SM: No, wouldn't have been interested.

BH: Right.

SM: Theirs, they had, if you're involved in sport you're not involved in going out and drinking, you know, and doing that sort of social life, whereas they were definitely involved in the culture of going to the pub and, you know, all of that.

BH: Right, so just a final few set of questions I think, cos I think we've covered quite a lot of ground now. So, you know, one thing really, did you know any other Northern Irish Protestants when you came over to England? Did you meet any Northern Irish Protestants?

SM: The person who I knew vaguely from Coleraine, who then moved to Belfast, who then was in the year above me, yeah, she was a Northern Ireland Protestant, and she came to the Irish history class.

BH: Right, okay.

SM: We were the two, we sort of stuck out as being middle class and Protestant, but we had Mike with us who legitimised us [laughs].

BH: Right [laughs].

SM: I'm trying to think who else.

BH: Did you meet any of the more **[01:40:00]** I suppose, anyone from a more staunchly loyalist background in England?

SM: No, but I probably would have avoided them if I had, and I think that, you know, Sheffield would have been, because it was so lefty and the people that I mixed with, because it was, you know, social work, probation, there wouldn't have been anyone with that thinking involved in it. There probably is someone that I know from schooldays who I know here in Manchester and she would have a more sort of England's the mainland, you know, she would use Facebook and put a lot of stuff on about celebrating partition, you know, the hundred year anniversary and things like that, whereas, but she and I don't discuss it, I think she's had some debate with my husband, but I've, I've not discussed it with her particularly.

BH: What about Southern people then? Because obviously there was a generation of people from the South of Ireland, particularly the west of Ireland, who migrated to England in the forties, fifties and sixties, who kind of I guess make up the more traditional Irish community

in Britain. Did you have much interaction with that more traditional, Catholic, working-class Irish community in England?

SM: Probably through my work.

BH: Through your work.

SM: Which is a very different perception, so in Sheffield I would have worked with a number of Irish Travelling families and also in Trafford as well, Trafford has a Travellers' site that I would have done, you know, if there would have been a, I don't know, a court report or referral from social services or anything like that, those would have been given to me cos I would have seen to have been at least to have some entrée into that community, so in fact the women's studies course that I did, I did a lot of work around Irish Travellers within that course, just, and I may have pursued that, but I then went on to the looking more at emigration, so I had a real interest in Irish Travelling families because they also are overrepresented in the criminal justice system, and then in Manchester there would have been a range of, not so in Sheffield, I don't think Sheffield would have had the same older, I'm stereotyping here, but older male or female who would drink heavily and would have that Irish background. Sheffield wouldn't have had that, but they definitely would have had in Manchester and, you know, in the women's groups that I would have been involved there would have been quite often someone from that sort of background who would have been involved in a whole range of very, I don't know, basically drink-related offending, older men and older women who would be quite vulnerable, and there's the, oh what's it called, Irish Community Care.

BH: Oh yes.

SM: Do you know that organisation?

BH: I do indeed, yeah.

SM: There's that organisation in Manchester as well that I have had some contact with in the past, and my husband is more involved in that, you know, from an older person's perspective, trying to support older people I suppose.

BH: What does your husband do by the way? Is he a social worker as well?

SM: No, no, he's a lecturer at MMU, in the art department, he's, but he's got a very active interest in Irish history and Irish identity.

BH: What about your children then? I think you've already kind of touched up on this, was it important for you to bring them up with a, some sense of an Irish identity?

SM: Yes, we called our first son, I've got an older boy from Mike's first marriage, but our first son is called Patrick, but it's spelt the Gaelic way, and my mother, when we phoned her from the hospital in Sheffield, her first reaction was he'll be seen as a gunrunner for the IRA [laughs], I did tell you she had very strong views, and she found that very difficult. I have to

say that Patrick also finds it difficult as a older, sort of eight, nine, ten, everyone or anyone at school spelt his name wrong, completely wrong, and when he started secondary school he said I'm just going to spell my name the English way, but when he went to university he went back to the Gaelic spelling, and his professional name, he's got the Gaelic spelling of it, which is great, the other two have got more straightforward names [laughs].

BH: [laughs] Did you send him to any of the things like Irish dancing, Irish music, any of that kind of stuff?

SM: No, it's interesting cos my daughter has said why did we never do that. We have our middle boy, was, well, he still plays football, but was a very good footballer as a teenager and he actually, he was the one that was asking me about, questions about the work that I'd done, he ended up playing football for Northern Ireland.

BH: Really?

SM: Through me, you know, through, cos he played at such a high level when he was a teenager, so basically Anna's childhood was spent going from football ground to football ground, so she missed out a lot on that, the music and dancing culture that my friend, the one that originally came from Dublin, Sinéad, would have got us involved in various things in Manchester and we would have done them on an ad hoc basis, whereas I think that she would have been, she'd have loved it if she had gone regularly to Irish dancing lessons, but we were looking after my mother-in-law, taking one boy to football, managing an older boy with lots of other issues and then had a little girl at the same time.

BH: My goodness.

SM: And it was just chaos, those years, but my middle son played for Northern Ireland as a young player, he would have been about fifteen, I think fifteen, sixteen, and then he joined the adult squad for, not for very long, so he's got that sort of identity of, he played I think a couple of games for the Republic of Ireland and then he said no, he felt more culturally that he was fitting in better with the Northern Ireland set-up.

BH: That's very interesting, that's actually what I was going to ask next. Do they have a sense of themselves as Northern Irish as against a more general kind of Irishness?

SM: They see themselves as having an Irish identity, but they have an affinity with Northern Ireland and they are closer to their cousins who are the Northern Ireland contingent than they are to the Manchester lot.

BH: That's really interesting.

SM: Much closer to them, and we also have, we moved house recently, I said to you we moved house, we've also bought somewhere outside Belfast.

BH: Oh right.

SM: So we've divided our resources and moved locally, so that we, we're still here, but our future, in terms of thinking about investing what we do in the future, will be that we'll spend some time in Northern and some time back here.

BH: Right.

SM: And the children were, I think they were concerned about the finances of it, because obviously for a lot of families that we would know they would, you know, be able to then hand their offspring a sum of money to put on **[01:50:00]** the housing market for themselves, we won't be able to do that because we've put that sum of money into a place in Northern Ireland, so they had some reservations around it, but they don't have any of that now, even though none of them have seen it because of Covid, we literally bought it during lockdown. They realise that for the future it'll be nice to have a base there, even though it's small and, you know, we all, I don't know, we've thought about things like, I don't know, having a tent in the garden and a camper van to fit everyone in, you know, that sort of thing, but at least we know that we have that and even if we only use it for ten years, they will get the benefit of that for the future.

BH: Do they, are they aware of the politics of Northern Ireland, as in the differences between unionism, republicanism and so on?

SM: Yes, yes, they've got a clear understanding of that.

BH: So even though they get on quite well with their cousins, who are presumably from a Protestant background, that's okay?

SM: So would you, are you trying to say that they would perceive themselves as being Catholics?

BH: I just, I wonder wh-, in terms of their–

SM: They don't have any perception of that, their father is totally anti-Catholicism.

BH: Would their perception of what the future of Ireland should be, would they have an idea about that?

SM: Oh they would be the same as us, they would want to be a united Ireland.

BH: And would they say that to their cousins in Northern Ireland?

SM: I think that would be known.

BH: That would be known, yeah.

SM: That would be known, yes, that we would be, that would be our way of thinking, and in fact the family have been, in Northern Ireland, have been extremely supportive and active in terms of encouraging us to buy somewhere over there, which has at times surprised us cos

we've thought well, we're, you know, not the easiest of people to have on their doorstep cos we would, we won't be fi-, we wouldn't fit in with some of the, their social sort of Belfast scene.

BH: Sure.

SM: But obviously sister and brother-in-law and we've always spent a lot of time over there so.

BH: It sounds di–

SM: It's funny, whenever your parents die and that then home base goes, there is a change.

BH: Right, in what sense a change?

SM: Well, I suppose it could enable you to move away from there and think I'm not going to go back as much or, what it's done for me, it's made me realise that I probably want to invest more time in the future there.

BH: Hmm, right.

SM: But not move back, keep a foot in both camps [laughs].

BH: In both camps, yeah, I can understand that. I'm just going to ask the last few set of questions now and these are kind of very general, kind of summing up questions. So do you think the Troubles has had an impact on your life?

SM: Yes, but I think that I've probably become only more aware of that recently. I think I, obviously I knew it had an impact on me as a teenager because of what was going on around me, but in my twenties and thirties and forties even, I probably dismissed it, sorry, the cat's trying to get in, I can hear her, hang on a minute. Come on, quick, quick. So, sorry about that.

BH: No worries.

SM: Sorry, I've lost my train of thought there.

BH: The impact the Troubles had on your life, you were becoming, you've become more aware of it in recent years.

SM: Yes, I think that people try, are trying to normalise what has happened in Ireland and that should not happen, that should be avoided, it couldn't, it shouldn't be normalised because there's a massive impact on all sorts of levels, and that is, you know, you know, the peace process is a process, but there has to be some understanding that [pauses] people need to confront what happened more, rather than just having, being able to I suppose just talk about IRA scum or however they want to talk about the UDA or however people want to say, it's de-, they de-, they can dehumanise the opposition without actually thinking

about well, why do people take that stance, what was the significance at the time, and have you read the *Milkman*?

BH: I have indeed, yeah.

SM: That's, you know, that's just, I thought that, interestingly one of my brother-in-laws read it and he absolutely loved it and I was really surprised that he had read it, he read it before I read it, whereas my sister won't read it because she said it's taking, you know, it's laughing at us, which I don't, she can't perceive it in any other way than that people are being laughed at, whereas he had much more of an understanding of that context. But that, the narrative of that book was about normalising things, but actually it was so abnormal that anyone reading that book would have a real sense of the time in the seventies whenever there was that going on and just, that's not very long ago if you think about the culture of a country or a people and how that passes on through generations. It's very current history, is what I'm saying.

BH: Yeah, do you think moving to England changed you in any way?

SM: I think the, it enabled me to have a broader view of politics and, you know, the, that it wasn't just around being Catholic or Protestant and the limitation of that gave me a much bigger, a much broader perspective on life. I suppose [pauses] I probably felt quite different from English people and colleagues at work who were English, I would have felt differ-, a difference in how I viewed things, you know, and you asked me about my husband's family and they can still remember in Manchester the signs for, you know, no blacks, no Irish, and they would have come from a very Irish, working-class sort of culture, you know, tiny terraced house, the house is in Manchester, and then being moved out to Partington and then being, you know, moved through that sort of housing set-up, and that was a very different insight to how people have been brought up, that's, I don't know whether you remember, but I said at the beginning I know that I had a very middle-class upbringing because I can contrast that to my husband's family where they had no idea what he was doing and, you know, weren't interested, weren't interested in his education or, you know, wanted him to go down the pits, you know, it would have been a good job for him, that sort of thing, so I know from experiencing his family and also from experiencing his wider family when quite frankly we lived, we were living in Sheffield and sometimes I felt like it was I suppose being in work [laughs], it was the weekends in **[02:00:00]** Manchester, in Salford, it was like, my word, I thought this is a different world to me, because culturally I was very different, (a) I was Irish, but (b) I was very middle class compared to white working-class Irish families in north Manchester, who were as ghettoised as black Irish or black families or Asian families are today in Manchester.

BH: Sure, I mean, that awareness of yourself being Irish, some people from a Protestant background might come to England and still think that they're British, but you seem to think of yourself as Irish in England, was, was–?

SM: Yeah, I think my brother would probably would have that view, he probably has a strong view of, he's been in, come to the mainland, joined the RAF, assimilated into, you know, English culture.

BH: Do you think that's something that you, that you were aware of immediately when you came to England or something that you had to think about?

SM: I think I was, it was in my face the whole time cos of my accent and being criticised for being open and friendly and that sort of chat, affinity that people have, Irish people have, and culturally I think there's a culture thing between also, I mean, I think Manchester's more friendly than, say, Sheffield would be, in terms of people chatting to you or, but no, I think it was from day one when I was asked are you a Protestant or a Catholic and then being, having to, or resisting having to explain the Troubles or, I mean, that was around the H-Blocks or, you know, having to be accountable for that, I resisted that, but tried to then learn a bit about it because it was, you know, I needed to know what I was talking about or thinking about, which is probably why I did that history course.

BH: Yeah, and it, I mean, it sounds like when, particularly when you joined the Irish in Britain Representation Group, that that was quite transformative in terms of your political identity, is that correct?

SM: Yes, I think so, I think that it was, it was a different way of thinking that I probably had never been exposed to before, and the Voluntary Service Belfast people would have been, probably would have had those views, but would have been more careful about not promoting them too much with their younger employees I would say. Looking back on that they were very measured in how they talked about things and approached things, so that it wasn't seen as being that sort of activism, it was much more about social justice.

BH: So looking back over the experience of migrating to England, what do you think's been the most important thing?

SM: [pauses] Surviving [laughs]. I don't know, I think there is, there's something about the fact that home is not very far away, so you think emotionally, if you needed to you could get home quickly, but actually in reality you don't, so you still have to plan to go back, but I always say to my children that I've got two homes, and I know that Anna my daughter found that difficult for a while, she'd say oh why do you say that mum, because home's here and I would say well, no, it's, you know, where you belong emotionally is important as well, and I've tried to talk to the children about the fact that that sense of belonging is important, so that maybe that's something that's most significant is that I still have retained that and actually I've now done something more about it because we bought somewhere to live there, and I know friends, some friends have said, you know, now heard that we've bought something and say oh you've got a holiday house, and I've said no, it's not a holiday house, you would never call it a holiday house cos it's not, it's not in, you know, if I wanted a holiday house I'd have bought somewhere in Portstewart or Portrush, because that would be where traditionally you would like to go if you were going for a break, but this is in Belfast, it's just going to be part of being part of my bigger family who still live there, and it's near the airport, you know, and so we can get over quickly if we want to and we don't need to have a car when we're there, you know, those sorts of practical things, whereas actually ideally if I really, really wanted to live in Northern Ireland I'd go to Ballycastle and live there, that would be a lovely place to spend time in, but not practical, and the children wouldn't

come to Ballycastle, whereas they will come to Belfast, you know, cos that's a city and their cousins are there and, you know, they can go to Dublin on the train and probably I'm fantasising a bit, but they'll have a few, you know, weekends with us, but I think they will. But we've now done it, we've talked about it for years, off and on, but we've never financially been able to do it, it was only that, you know, we took the plunge and sold one house and we bought two [laughs], buy one get one free, and we've still got a whole load of unpacking to do because there's no room to put anything [laughs], but, it's really strange having this conversation about myself.

BH: Yeah, it's, hopefully it's–

SM: Doesn't often happen.

BH: Hopefully it's good, as in hopefully it's a good conversation. My very last thing to say really is I've asked a lot of stuff here, is there anything which I haven't asked about which you think I should have asked about, that I've missed?

SM: Maybe a bit more about, thinking about that internal conflict that people have about, you know, the, I thought it was very poignant, some of the people that were interviewed after the Windrush scandal, about how they longed to go home, but they couldn't because they knew they didn't have their paperwork, so if they went they couldn't get back again and that feeling of sort of dissonance between wanting to go, but not being able to go, but actually do they really want to go, will it have changed so much, and I think probably anyone who's emigrated has those feelings, they just articulated them in a very, because they're much older people they're obviously facing, you know, if they don't go in their seventies they're probably never likely to go back to Jamaica or wherever, and maybe that was one of the things that made me think instead of having that internal conflict I can do something about it, cos I've got the luxury of having the finances to manage that.

BH: You resolved the conflict by–

SM: I've resolved the conflict, but I've got into trouble with my children [laughs].

BH: [laughs] You've opened up a new frontier of conflict.

SM: Yes, and it's funny because Patrick my eldest one, we've a very direct relationship, and I've said to him a couple of times, you know, normally it's the parent who's telling the child not to take risks and to calm down and be cautious, but it's actually you telling me not to do that [laughs], because he would be very, you know, quite organised, planned, thinking why are they spending all their money in this direction, but actually now that we've done it they're fine about it.

BH: Yeah, and from their point of view, as you say, **[02:10:00]** they've somewhere to go and it enables them to have an investment over the long term in Ireland I suppose.

SM: Yes, and if the border changes and if there's that sooner than later then that will be fantastic all round.

BH: Yeah, and do you think any of them would ever consider moving there?

SM: I think Patrick at one point looked at doing, he's an architect and he looked at doing his second bit of his degree in Dublin, he actively looked at that, but then the cost of living there meant that rent was just sky high, so he actually moved back from London to Manchester instead, but he probably invested a lot of time into exploring that, and we would have loved it, we'd have been over with him every other weekend, but that didn't come off and he has looked at, you know, getting experience and maybe doing some work abroad and one of the places he's talked about is going to Cork or Dublin, so, you know, he's got that in his wherewithal. The other two are at university, so I would say they're not, they haven't got that in their heads, it's only the middle one who's, you know, who's played football, he's got, he's still actually, see, he's, that's interesting, he still sees socially some of the boys that he played with in Northern Ireland.

BH: Is that right?

SM: You know, across the country, he would go and meet up with them, there's, there must be a resonance there with that group of boys, who are all second-generation Irish, but they played, you know, they'd grown up in England but played in Northern Ireland, and he still has that contact with them, whereas he doesn't have as much contact with the boys that he played with in other teams, so that's interesting, but then they maybe had trips abroad or shared rooms or, I don't know, but just thinking about that.

BH: Yeah, listen Susan–

SM: You've been on for hours.

BH: We've been on for over two hours.

SM: Yeah, that's a long time. Poor you, Barry.

BH: It's not me at all, you're the one who has been, who's been doing all the storytelling. Listen, that was fantastic. I just want to say again thanks very much for doing this–

SM: You're welcome.

BH: And giving me a whole two hours and fifteen minutes. I'm glad I'm not typing it up, but I'll definitely–

SM: Yes [laughs], hope they understand my accent.

BH: Yeah [laughs], but I'll definitely enjoy reading it again, the transcript. One other thing just before we go. You mentioned there two women, first of all the woman in Sheffield who you joined the Irish in Britain Representation Group with.

SM: Yeah.

BH: Are you still in contact with her?

SM: I am, yes.

BH: I wonder was any chance she would be interested in doing an interview as well?

SM: I could ask her, yeah.

BH: Cos that would be fantastic. It's just really interesting, somebody from a Protestant background who has joined the Irish in Britain Representation Group's really, really interesting. You also mentioned another Protestant woman who's much more, I think you said she puts stuff up on the internet to celebrate partition or something like that.

SM: Oh Ruth, yes, yeah.

BH: Is there any possibility she would do an interview?

SM: I'd say less likely, but I could ask her. I did ask a male probation officer friend of mine, who would have come over ten years earlier than me, but he's got some health problems, and I sent him your link at one point, but I don't think he's pursued it. He would have been very interesting cos his father was one of the men that would have come over to England to work in the late fifties and early sixties, and then would have gone back home maybe twice a year to Belfast, sent money backwards and forwards, gone home twice a year to see his family and then the next year there'd have been a new baby would have appeared.

BH: My goodness.

SM: Cos Peter came from a very big Catholic family that then they all moved over to Manchester eventually, so his perception would have been very interesting, and I will ask him again cos actually he sent me a picture yesterday, so I can ask him again if he's interested.

BH: That would be fantastic, those all sound like really interesting people to talk to.

SM: I will keep you posted.

BH: That would be great. Okay, thanks again Susan and–

SM: And do you want me to send over that very–?

BH: Yes, I would love, I'd love you to send that and also–

SM: Very, what's it called, 1989, years ago.

BH: Yeah, no, I def-, I would love to see that, and also if you keep in touch from time to time, if you're interested in finding out what we're doing–

SM: Yes, I would love to know because that's one of the nice things about something like this is that you know that it's going to go into some sort of, I don't know, themes or whatever you're going to do with it.

BH: There will be publications definitely out of it, and then, you know, there's a plan that there's going to be a BBC Four, BBC Radio Four documentary and things like that, so hopefully that will materialise over the next sort of two years, so yeah, if you keep in touch, we've got the website too and you can email me as well, you can send–

SM: Are you based in Manchester, Barry or–?

BH: I live in Manchester, but I actually work at Liverpool University, but yeah, I live in Burnage in Manchester and, yeah, if it hadn't have been for the Covid situation all of this would have been done face to face, which I think there's a bit of a loss to that, you know, I think the face-to-face thing is better, but there's nothing really you can do about it at the moment, like.

SM: No, and I'm sure as an interview some of it resonates with you and then sometimes you think that's nothing like my experience, so.

BH: It definitely, a lot of it resonates.

SM: It's great that you're doing it from the inside, you know, as an Irish person, it would be hard for you to talk if you were from a different ethnicity, I would say.

BH: I think it would, yeah, I think it would and, you know, to get the funding for the project, you know, it had to be sort of written from a point of view of experience to some extent, you know, to put the argument clearly for it, so, but it's incredibly interesting, yeah.

SM: Good, well, thank you.

BH: Okay Susan.

SM: And I'll be in touch if I can put you in touch with the others at any point.

BH: Yeah, if you can do that.

SM: I'm still working on one of them, but.

BH: That would be really great, the woman in particular, the more loyalist inclined woman, we find it hard to get these sorts of people to talk really. If I could hear from somebody like that that would be really interesting, you know.

SM: Okay.

BH: Okay, alright Susan.

SM: Alright, thank you, alright, have a good evening.

BH: Thanks very much now.

SM: Toodaloo, bye.

BH: Toodaloo now, bye bye.

SM: Bye.

INTERVIEW ENDS