

M19: JOHN COTTON INTERVIEW SUMMARY

Interviewee: John Cotton [pseudonym]
Interviewer: Dr Barry Hazley
Interview summarisers: Dr Jack Crangle and Prof Liam Harte
The interview was recorded as a single audio file with no section breaks

M19: John Cotton	Start time: 00:00:00	Finish time: 01:36:09	Duration: 01:36:09	Brief description of content:
00:00–09:59	Born in 1954 in Carrickfergus. His father worked at Courtaulds factory and his mother was primarily a housewife. Recalls happy memories of growing up in a terrace house in the town and having ‘a very safe, a very warm and very caring sort of childhood’. Father was an active trade unionist and a member of the NI Labour Party. John attended the local Presbyterian church and went to Sunday school, and was also a member of the Life Boys and Boys’ Brigade.			
10:00–19:59	Remembers Carrickfergus as a predominantly Protestant town where there was little sectarian tension prior to 1969-70. Recalls seeing an Orange parade as a child and disliking its ‘jingoistic’ aspects. His father shared his aversion, finding the Orange Order ‘too extremist’, even though he came from a unionist family. Mentions his father’s experiences in Palestine as part of his British Army national service. John attended the local grammar school and had ‘very happy times’ there, both in the classroom and on the sports fields.			
20:00–29:59	Recalls discussing the NI civil rights movement with his father, who supported its demands, but was concerned about the potential for violence. Family moved to Wrexham in the early 1970s, where his father continued to work for Courtaulds. In Wales, John ‘found out more about what it was to be Irish, cos suddenly you were in a different community where you were the odd one out and where even the language wasn’t the same’. Met his future wife, a Welsh Catholic, at a school dance in Wrexham. Recalls her parents being apprehensive about her visiting NI with him during the Troubles.			
30:00–39:59	Describes his difficulties adjusting to Welsh life and culture and feeling dislocated without his NI friendship group. Recalls university debates about NI politics and objecting to ‘simplistic’ and ‘unnuanced’ views of partition and internment. Studied social studies and education at Edge Hill, then moved to Manchester in 1977 to undertake further training in social work. During this time his parents moved back to NI when his father got promoted to a post in Dungannon.			
40:00–49:59	Recalls following the news from NI as the Troubles escalated in the mid-1970s. Mentions visiting his parents as a student and finding Dungannon to be a more divided community than Carrickfergus. Recalls an upsurge in anti-Irish sentiment following the 1974 IRA Birmingham pub bombing. Settled in Stockport, where he worked, started a family and continued his studies, eventually attaining a PhD and moving into academia. Visited NI annually with his wife and two children.			
50:00–59:59	Recalls his children enjoying holidays in Castlerock, where his retired parents lived. States that both children incorporate ‘a degree of Irishness’ into their identity, but display little interest in NI politics. He himself is a confirmed Labour voter who regarded the NI peace process as a ‘watershed’, but now thinks that it did not achieve its potential. Reveals that he voted to remain in the EU in 2016 and feels that Brexit may threaten the progress made in NI since 1998.			
01:00:00–01:09:59	Believes that while English people initially showed ‘some interest’ in the Troubles, they soon concluded that that ‘all they’re doing is killing each other’			

	and 'just want[ed] it to go away cos it was spoiling things on their TV'. Recalls learning that a social work client of his was a former member of the IRA. Reveals he and his wife have considered moving to NI, but do not wish to weaken their family ties in GB. States that they 'probably feel settled' in England, but for him Carrickfergus is still home and the place where he wishes to be buried.
01:10:00–01:19:59	Describes Carrickfergus as the place where 'my values were set, [...] a special time that set the foundations for what's happened since'. Reflects on his evolving attitudes towards the Troubles and his dislike of simplistic narratives of the conflict. States that he has 'become more critical of both sides' and that 'the politics is still too aligned to religion'. Discusses the broader relationship between religion and politics and expresses support for a form of Christianity that acts as a political resource to challenge poverty and social inequality.
01:20:00–01:29:59	Reflects upon the impact the Troubles has had on his life and how they have made him reassess his childhood memories. Speculates on how different his upbringing might have been had he been born into a Catholic family. States that he 'never actually felt myself as an immigrant as such, although you could argue that I was' one. Feels fortunate that the English student community he became a part of was diverse and open-minded. Expresses ambivalence about Irish reunification being the solution to the island's problems. Discusses how misinformed and negative English perceptions of NI persist in the present.
01:30:00–01:36:09	Expresses pride in his identity as a Carrickfergus man and explains that he considers himself 'Northern Irish cos that's where I call my home, [...] but I don't say British'. Feels an affinity with people from the ROI, 'especially when we're in the crowd together at the rugby', and reflects that 'there's still a lot of shared understanding and a shared history' between NI and the ROI 'in relation to England and the [...] things they did on both sides of the border over the years'.