

Interviewee: Alistair Reid (AR)	Interviewer: Julia Muir Watt (JMW)
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AR: I remember my, our household habits, my father...I always have this extraordinary memory of going to church. I think...we were four children in...well, then we were only three children in the manse, I was the third in our family and I always remember when we were, I think we had to take...we had to do church every third Sunday or something like that. We were given our pennies to put in the collection, which was the first time I had ever handled money in my life, and the extraordinary memory I have is about money in particular. My father never carried money and I remember that we had an account at the big Denton's, the bakers on the corner, and Charlie Coyd in the butcher's shop which had the first elegant façade when he put these tiles above it.

JMW: Yes.

AR: And Charlie Coyd was quite a character and his son Rutledge was a schoolmate of mine and we...we knew...the extraordinary thing looking back is...what I remember more is the way Whithorn worked in these days. It was peculiarly, and what really comes back to me more than anything is the radical difference between the late '20s and now. There was no, what we now call domestic technology and when you compare that past with this present you realise the extraordinary changes. For instance cars, when my memory...my father had a...my father was in the First War, was wounded in the Second Battle of the Somme.

JMW: Oh right.

AR: And he came back from the war recovered and he...I used to ask him tremendously about the First World War, which he didn't like to talk about, but we did that for a bit and we had no technology to speak of. When I think of then and I see all the cars in Whithorn, which is such a difference, such an extraordinary difference. And you realise now the amount of domestic technology we've taken on since then. When I think back then, the technology then was the population.

JMW: Yes:

AR: And we had people who worked, who came and did the washing and people who came and looked after us, as children, and so we knew by name, and well, most of the population of Whithorn, it seemed then.

04.07.06

JMW: Yes.

AR: And I had a very staunch relationship with a wonderful woman called Mrs Muir, Mrs James Muir, who lived in 26 George Street, across the street, next to Alves who had the Jeweller's shop.

JMW: Right.

AR: And she looked after us and I was very devoted to her because she told us endless stories and I loved her and I, when my father came and told us, when I was six, that we were leaving Whithorn, I was heartbroken.

JMW: Yes.

AR: And I pleaded with him not to go and he said 'No, but it's not like that.' And I couldn't be comforted and he said 'Well, you know, you can always come back here' and I held him to that, constantly, and so they allowed me to come back in summer when we were out of school and I would stay with Mrs Muir.

JMW: Oh, really.

AR: And she told me all these extraordinary stories, she used to get a newspaper from Christie's, up there, and she would read me the newspaper and tell me...and her version of the stories in the paper. And she was an endless source of...she remains one of the most vivid people from my childhood altogether. And she had an extraordinary house there that had one of these long backs and the garden going right, quite a way back and she had...in the outhouses, she had a hayloft and a stable which must have been very useful before that generation. And it was a magical playground for me then, so I came back alone, I was allowed...this was my deal, my part of the deal, that I could come back and I would spend a month with Mrs Muir in the summer and we'd go to the beach, to Monreith occasionally and I loved that house and I have the fondest memories of that time. I went back once to the house and it was all there. I haven't dared to go this time but I don't know who lives in it now but-

JMW: I'm trying to think what number 26 is.

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AR: 26, it's just two doors down from what used to be the Alves, the jeweller, and he was an optician, I think, at the same time. And so that was my...I think my memories came from these returns more than from my beginnings.

JMW: Yes.

AR: But at the same time I was conscious of the fact that we knew so many people in Whithorn. Now when I come into Whithorn, apart from you and Archie Taylor and a couple of people, I don't know anybody in Whithorn, nor do I know what they're doing here.

JMW: Yes, yes.

AR: And we knew what...everybody had a function then because the farms were...had to be populated and Whithorn being so central to the surrounding farms, we were more or less in tune with what was going on all the time. But it all came from word of mouth, the Galloway Gazette was an event then, people read it meaningfully because that was what they knew about their area. And that thing about money, for instance, I remember the first time I became conscious of money was when we...when I went to Whithorn School and we had a lesson in money and I came home and I told my parents 'We've had this exciting...do you know about money?' And they looked...and I remember going to my father once and saying to my father 'What is a pound? We hear about a pound in school and it's twenty shillings and all the rest of it, but I've never seen a pound. What is a pound?' and he went to his library then, took down an 'Everyman' book, I remember it well, and he opened it and he

had a crisp pound note in it and he showed me the pound note and I looked at it on both sides, and then he brought me a pencil and paper and I drew the pound and the figures in it and so on where it said 'a pound' and when I...and then I turned it over and drew the back and gave it back to him and he took it carefully and put it back in the book and back on the shelf. And I remember that my father never carried money and I think that what happened was we would have an account with Denton's, the bakers, and the Martins and the butcher and grocer and he would go to the bank and take out enough money once a month and pay the...my mother used to say to me, go down to Denton's and ask them for a pan loaf and I would go and I'd say 'My mother wants a pan loaf' and he'd say 'Oh yes' and he'd wrap it up and gave it to me and I took it home. And I thought that's how things worked and so on. I'd no awareness of...and I think it was essentially that...imagine a town like this functioning on just trust like that.

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JMW: Yes, I'm sure.

AR: And that was a common currency then. It was very much a kind of a communal self-help in a sense and it ran like that on what we might call civic trust now and to me the great difference between then and now is the fact that there was no domestic technology to speak of. The asset really was other people. And people helped one another and it survived like that, as indeed an agricultural community functions best in a...in conditions like that. So...and the other thing is that we had no...my father got a car, I think my mother's father was a doctor, as my mother was, died and left her some money and the first thing was that my father got a car and I do remember that vividly from my childhood when he had gone to Glasgow to get the car and he was coming back that evening and we were allowed to stay up and at a given time, long past our bedtime, the car drew up and we got...all went out and we sat in the car and looked at it but it was one of three cars, the doctor, McQuirter, who brought us all into the world, he had a car and what was the other? There was another car that somebody had, probably Catchins the lawyer and my father's car and there were three cars in Whithorn and that was it, there weren't going to be any more.

JMW: Yes.

AR: And so...but we were told...the car was something that was kept in the stable down from the manse and we never...it never came out very...it only came out for a reason.

JMW: Yes.

AR: For a purpose.

JMW: Yes.

AR: And so we had that kind of a...and when you see it now, with parking problems in Whithorn, it's outrageous to me and kind of offensive somehow, against the nature of the place. And I can remember washing day was boiling water and doing the sheets in a big thing, stirring it with a paddle. We had a Mrs Jones who came to do the washing and she used to have wrinkled fingers from...and they were known as 'Mrs Jones' fingers' and everything had a kind of local...the vocabulary was entirely local and what did we think of the outside world? Well, we knew Newton Stewart because I had great friendships with...well, we knew...the farmers were always known by their farm...I remember the...not

the names of the farmers but they were referred to by their farms. 'Oh, Broughton Mains is coming for supper' and things like that.

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JMW: Yes, yes.

AR: And so we were...we knew a lot about the locality but we knew nothing about the outside world at all, nor were we...nor was there any curiosity about it at all, it was just the kind of...local society functioned as we understood it and it ran along these lines. I don't know what general gathering of information was then but it was fairly sparse....you knew your locality well and it didn't change, people didn't come in or didn't leave and of course all that was going to change with the mechanisation of agriculture, tremendously, which meant...the population was shrivelling and Whithorn now, I've no comprehension at all of what all the people in these [?] houses do.

JMW: Well, yes. Some of them don't.

AR: Some of them don't, I think.

JMW: Yes.

AR: And so it's a...to that extent it feels to me now, coming back, as a very left behind place that doesn't have the kind of intimacy that it had then. The fact that we used to know the names of all the people and when we...and people would greet you-

JMW: Yes.

AR: -because they knew you and so on. And of course there was no corresponding development within the locality in terms of employment or prosperity or anything like that and it must have become more isolated as time passed whereas it had tremendous functionality then, in these days. And that's why you wonder about...I think that it feels like a place that's been left behind in time, to me, very much. And the cars don't make a difference, the cars mean that we're more connected but mainly they're more connected for reasons of shopping and getting to other places but we counted then very much on buses and bus services. When we went to Newton Stewart we always got the bus and the buses were very efficient then. And so that was my first...and what I realise now, looking back on it, was that on leaving Whithorn was my first experience of loss in life. And in a sense it was my first experience of time because the time here seemed eternal it was just seasonal, we knew that things would change, the food would change with the seasons, so would everything else but change was calculated in expecting and well known and then to suddenly to...anyway that contin-...that was a continuum that didn't vary and of course we were not subject to the outside world very much.

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That's why I find very offensive here, when we come back now and we get the newspaper every day, it's terrifying to read The Guardian in the morning now. And it intrudes in a way in which it never previously intruded. But going on from there, I came back in...it must have been in the '30s in '32, '33, '34 when I was about eight, nine and ten when I would spend the month with Mrs Muir and go back into this world that I knew much better. I didn't like, at all, the move...my father had moved to a charge in Selkirk, in the Borders, and I didn't take to Selkirk. I instinctively disliked it from the beginning because it wasn't like Whithorn.

JMW: Like Whithorn, yes.

AR: And people were very grumbly and the Borders are really a nasty part of Scotland where all the Border towns hate one another. And this entirely put me off so I longed to get back to Whithorn then and did. But then the other change came when the war broke out and we had always been very close to Harry McCreth, farmer at Broughton Mains, who had an extraordinary wife who was a member of the Crawford family and she...Harry McCreth, the farmer, said 'You must come and stay with us and help with the harvest' so when war broke out I came back twice in '41 and '42 and stayed at Broughton Mains and we worked on the farm, we did the hay and then we did the harvest, and the McCreth's had three children, Margaret and Janet and Tom, whom I stay with now in Garlieston and I have conversations with Tom about all the shops in Whithorn. I can remember all these shops and (coughs) in the High Street that were very familiar, Cathie Hughes who had the sweet shop, Denton's the bakers and they were all family, if you like and we knew the people and we could always go and...and then we had local characters, there was a man called Robert John Conning and he had been in World War One and his mind had been afflicted somewhat but he turned up every day outside The Grapes and sang hymns.

JMW: Right.

AR: And people just came by and put a penny in his pocket but he was there and he was a local fixture. And he was cared for, fed and looked after by the populace, there was no question about...

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...and there was one doctor, Dr McQuirter, who continued to see me and he looked after us and his children were great friends, I've been in touch with them subsequently and met them and we sometimes go over Whithorn and so on but in these two wartime years (coughs) we went back to Broughton Mains and I remember very vividly (coughs) it must have been (coughs), excuse me Julia.

JMW: Can I get you some water?

AR: It must have been '42 when Italy had capitulated and there were Italian prisoners in Whithorn and when we had the grain harvest in August which was a very busy time, we went out early to the fields and stooked the corn and everything, the...a truck would come by from the prison camp and leave two Italian prisoners who helped us with the harvest. And to our great astonishment they sang all the time and we loved them, we thought they were the most kind of...it was like having a circus delivered. And these wartime escapes to here were joyful and full of enthusiasm...as the outlook became gloomier...there was no trace of that in Whithorn at all. And that was the time when Baldoon opened as an airport and there were all kinds of movements and there was...in The Isle, up on the heights, there was a camp too and there were lots of military, there was lots of military presence here. (Coughing)

JMW: Can I get you something to drink?

AR: No, no. I'm fine. And that was the last kind of...and then I remember once I went into the (coughs)...into the Navy and I was on a, stationed on a frigate in Liverpool and...in '43...and I had a leave of about four days and, instead of wending my way home, I came up and stayed in...and got to Whithorn and I remember having a meal at The Grapes Hotel

which was still open then, where I ate a meal that I'll never forget in my life, all the things we couldn't get outside, they were there. And Whithorn really came to life in the war in a curious way like that and it's never left my memory as a kind of idealised landscape and the mode of setting the year according to the agricultural round. You...summer was glorious, the harvest, you looked at the sky a lot and calculated the harvest and thanksgivings and so on and the...a great...there was always a...the time here was agricultural time.

JMW: Yes.

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AR: Which is entirely set by the progression of seasons, which is a way of life that has never left me and I've always sought out places that still I live by the agricultural round because it gives a far greater sense of reality to the passing of time if it has a substantial realisation in what's happening at your feet and around you all the time. Just as it is thus spring, like today, for instance, it's an extraordinary day and the weather has a great effect on you all the time, you're aware of what's happening and you look at the sky a great deal, we still do. Do you find that here?

JMW: Yes, I suppose so because one lives outside more, being in the countryside. But I wonder...the church season, if you like, also followed-

AR: Of course.

JMW: -and you had the thanksgiving services in the autumn and heading into Christmas and so on, so you must have been aware of that timetable too.

AR: We always were and I have a very vivid memory of going to church because my father was very...a whimsical and endearing person and we would go to church and my father would appear robed and he spoke in a language and on a level (coughs) that had very little to do with his daily self. And so when we would go to church we'd get back and I remember getting out of my good clothes and going down to the bottom of the walled garden because we knew at a certain point he had to stay behind after the service, probably counting the money or whatever and with the vergier, the deacon, and then at a certain point he'd come across, and it was a short walk across the field behind the church, and he got to the end of our garden and he vaulted over the wall and landed in the thing and then he changed from this curious figure, this lofty figure in the pulpit and he became our father again.

JMW: Yes.

AR: And this was a kind of amazing kind of alteration in him to me and so I had this disconnection between his formal self and his real self. And I was never...church was, I suppose, like going to the theatre, in a sense like that, I never really was very religious because I...all that stuff was beyond me. I understood it, more or less, in terms of time and physicality and my father was not a particularly religious minister, he was far more intent on...he was a peacemaker, people would come to see my father and he would resolve disputes and everything like that.

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And I was very perturbed because my mother, although she gave up practicing when she married my father, she served as locum because when the doctor was away and there was another doctor in Sorbie, I think, and she would do his patients while he was gone and she...when people came to see my mother, because occasionally shepherds in the country...if they had an alarm they would come to the manse and ask to see my mother. And my mother had a room off the kitchen in the manse there, that was a kind of surgery, and when people came to see my mother she would see them in the surgery and sometimes she would come into the kitchen and stir things on the stove and then go back in wearing a white coat and occasionally there would be all kinds of sounds and even screams from the surgery and when people came to see my father they would go into his study and there would be a low...murmur of low voices and they'd go away and they'd always thank him and so on and I thought what's the difference? Why don't they all...do that and I was perplexed by that and there was a long stone corridor in the manse, I think it's still there, and I remember being outside and coming in and thinking on one hand there was my father's study where everything would be very quiet and at the other end the kitchen and the surgery where all hell could break loose (laughter). So these are the things that lodged deeply in me. They're really rhythms of life more than anything and I never lost these rhythms and even today when I have...I divide my life between being in New York sometimes and being in centres of civilisation, and looking out from villages which are at the opposite end of that, which still go by the agricultural round. And the more...this summer has been...this spring has been very alarming because of the way of the world is falling apart and has become so global and I find that the life that's enshrined or incarnate in this part of the world is disappearing.

JMW: Yes.

AR: And so Whithorn is a place where people go to escape from that. And I tend to go back to that simpler rhythm and it's pretty well doomed, I think.

JMW: Yes.

AR: In fact it's so alarming now I think the fact that we've globalised human life to the degree that we have now means that we're subjected to the outside world. We know far more about...the outside world has nothing to do with the realities of life here and yet it intrudes by way of the news and there's a...there's such a contradiction between these two things.

JMW: Yes.

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AR: So, I...and when you compare Galloway in general with the rest of Scotland it's far less afflicted by that intrusion but nevertheless that intrusion is present here now.

JMW: Yes, yes.

AR: And there's no way of stopping the onset of this incredible domestic technology on the one hand and knowledge of the outside world, like it or not, on the other that means that the isolation or the kind of self-perpetuating life here is ever going to survive that, it's going to be intruded on all the time.

JMW: Yes. Well, you have the awareness of the outside world but not accrued any of its advantages.

AR: No, not at all.

JMW: Yes.

AR: And...the idea that the realisation now that we're all plugged into the same wavelengths and so on, there's no way of avoiding that. It's a kind of...it's kind of sad in a sense to see this world disintegrating.

JMW: Yes.

AR: But I think that this makes Galloway, in itself, a kind of museum, in a sense, of a way of life that we'd lost and had. Because I don't see any way of that coming back.

JMW: No.

AR: And even agriculture...if you take milk, I remember always the creamery at the end of Whithorn there, and it was a delicious place to go. One of my jobs as a child when I was old enough, about four, five, was to go from the manse across the fields, not coming through The Pend and down but go across the fields to the creamery with a little aluminium can and say 'I've come for the milk' and they'd fill it for me and I'd walk back across and this was tremendous and of course the creameries were one by one closed down and then the milk is collected, not by the churns at the end of the road, as it was done in our day, to be collected by a great [?] what do you call it? A great syphon that sucks it up and beams it even across to Ireland. I remember just last week I was waiting outside Newton Stewart and truck after truck, milk laden, was making for Stranraer and Ireland to-. The other thing that I do remember too was the time when this part used to be called 'Little Ireland'.

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JMW: Yes.

AR: And the Irish came for the harvest and they were great fun, we always looked forward to the intrusion and all of that has changed tremendously.

JMW: Do you remember any of the Travellers coming, any of the Gypsy families?

AR: Yes, indeed, the Gypsy...as opposed to the Gypsies they weren't Gypsies they were Tinkers.

JMW: Yes, the Irish Tinkers.

AR: Irish Tinkers and they were either...what was the thing... they were blacksmiths one hand and whitesmiths on the other and the tinkers were whitesmiths and they came to the door and they would say 'Have you got any pans that need fixed?' and they would hammer out the dents in your saucepans and you'd always give them old clothes and they had their little cart with the dog fastened to the back.

JMW: Right.

AR: And they disappeared, they just moved on. They were great events, great excitements and so on, but they were built into the system and they were not looked down on at all, they were just expected and welcomed and they were on their way and so. I always loved

to watch the tinkers because I thought 'what a great-'...they had their house with them and they just moved everywhere. They affected me greatly in my life, I've done much the same thing.

JMW: And what about the top of the town, that was-?

AR: Ah well, now it's very interesting for I've been suffering lately from shortage of breath and when in New York the doctor said 'Well, if you're going to Scotland you'll be lucky because that COPD, as it's called, is treated far more intelligently in the UK than it is in America. And so I checked into the NHS here and I got a very intelligent nurse who's helped me enormously and she was called Karen and I thought 'I'd better find out Karen's name' and I looked it up and she was called...she's called Karen Jolly.

JMW: Oh right, yes. I know the name.

AR: And the Jolly family goes back to my...before me etc.

JMW: Yes.

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AR: And they were famous top of the towners.

JMW: Yes.

AR: We always thought the top of the town was a little raucous and The Calcutta Inn was the...we rolled our eyes at The Calcutta Inn. But that was...there were no what we call additional Whithorns tacked on to the ends there as there are now. That's always distressing about Scotland now that happens. And they'll never be taken down, I'm afraid.

JMW: No, no. And were you allowed up to the top of the town or were you-?

AR: Oh yes.

JMW: Yes.

AR: That was the thing about ministers and doctors which was very lucky, I think, always was that they were classless. In other words, as children, when there were birthday parties they could be birthday parties up and birthday parties local and we went to all of them etc.

JMW: Yes.

AR: And so we were freed of that notion of some people are better than others. Which is...there was very little of that. Landowners were the people who counted, not...there was no kind of birth right or claim to superiority at all.

JMW: Your father probably had status, though, in that people knew, everybody knew who he was.

AR: That's right, he moved easily. My father was a great...as a minister he as a great visitor, he visited the parishioners and he was welcome everywhere, I think, because whenever they had problems they would call in my father and he would sit them down and settle things. And, yes, that was very pleasant, that part of...as long as you didn't have to kind of overdo the church attendance...which was a chore we had but our-.

JMW: And did he have much to do with the landowners, the families like the Johnston Stewarts?

AR: Well, the...yes he knew them...as long...if they were members of his church he would be in touch. Yes, my father knew everybody, I think, because that was...he felt his function was to know everybody.

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So it was a very pleasant part of society that was occupied...everybody was the same to lawyers too, like...although we had a...we had strange lawyers, Catchins, for instance, a figure that Tom McCreth and I talk about a lot. He was a real scamp, Catchins, I remember his farm very well. And the other thing is the extraordinary freedom we had vis a vis the landscape, when we would go to the sea...if we had a free time we would walk to Port Yerrock, for instance, which didn't seem much of a...it's about two miles down to...from down by the school and we wandered around, and we knew the farms, you were always welcome at the farms. The farms really were the essence of the Machars because they had the people were the farmers, for instance Harry McCreth was know as Broughton Mains and Arbrach, I can't remember the farmer's name now, but he was know as Arbrach. And, as a matter of fact, one thing I do to...I always give thanks to this day because whenever I have to do a password on the computer I always use the names of the farms (laughs)-

JMW: Do you (laughs)?

AR: -in Galloway, which means my record on the computer is impenetrable to other people. Sciog is one of my favourite passwords.

JMW: Yes. Well, the farmers would have been probably coming into town to church and also to Drape's ironmongers and so on.

AR: Absolutely.

JMW: Whereas now they don't actually have to.

AR: Of course not. And they were great figures, for instance George Drape who had Drape's and so on, and his son Ian, were crucial figures and they were...and we had...George Drape was an extraordinary [?] jovial man, we all loved him and we'd go into his shop and he would always sit us down in the shop and we got to-. That was the nice thing that I do remember as a child, we knew the people who had the shops and there were three sisters, the Christies who had the main newspaper shop and we got to go into the Christies and I remember the smell of fresh newspapers delivered and we would have little chairs and we would sit there and we got to sit in the shop. John Colquhoun who was the Registrar then...and he had a daughter called Marjie Colquhoun who had a shop next to where the bank is now. And we got to go in her shop and got behind the counter and everything like that, which you always wanted as a child but never were allowed to do.

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So it was all very...very much...it was a town that...without any fears to it, childhood had no ghosts or fearful events or evil manifestations. It was almost an ideal society and it still remains, in a curious way, the ideal kind of equilibrium with work and survival and so on.

JMW: Do you remember the public houses...I know The Commercial Inn would have been at The Pend when you were around?

AR: It certainly was, I can remember by the door of the...what is now your bookshop, I can remember the smell of ale, which is a smell you don't know what it is when you're a child, but it smelled strongly and the Misses Martin ran it then and they were intensely disapproving of drinking and alcohol in general but they ran the pub, none the less, with reluctance, I think. But yes that was a bizarre time, how The Pend became transformed into a...it means that...when did that stop?

JMW: The Commercial? I think it was about 1935 or something but I-

AR: It didn't last into the war?

JMW: I don't think so, I think then it became rented accommodation.

AR: Because I knew them, the three, there were two or three Misses, Miss Martins, and they had a nephew called Henry Martin who was a great friend of mine and so we were in there quite a lot and I always thought it was a strange place etc. I don't remember much raucousness and I wouldn't have been aware of it then particularly but I don't think there was much low life in Whithorn.

JMW: It was perhaps under control.

AR: I'm sure it was...I'm sure there were...was a certain population that must have been accommodated by them.

JMW: There was a Town Council which managed almost everything and there was also Justice executed here, wasn't there, with the prison and-?

AR: Right, right. And then The Grapes Hotel was very important then because it was...the kind of commercial centre in a way, where people met and it was until...and it survived the war-. When did The Grapes begin to go down? In the '50s, '60s?

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JMW: I would probably think the '60s. The '50s was still quite prosperous, maybe even the '70s.

AR: And is it coming back as a hotel?

JMW: No, no, I think it will be housing. The death of the hotel on the Machars is an established fact.

AR: Really?

JMW: Even in my time there were, perhaps, five or six and I can only think of The Monreith Arms. And if you...well, you can count The Steam Packet as a hotel, I suppose.

AR: But that's sad because that's exactly what Wigtown lacks as a book town. If we'd had a very good restaurant and a couple of hotels it would make the book town entirely different.

JMW: Yes, difficult business to be in, I think, as you can see from the Ford Bank Hotel up there going bust and so on.

AR: Except that there is a...because of the intrusion of e-books, believe me, which is a horrendous thing, and I go through a lot with now, the second hand book shop, new books

shops are falling fast but the second hand book shops are gathering momentum because for people who really love books, continue to love books, they have become invaluable.

JMW: Yes.

AR: I keep telling Sean, in Wigtown, that...not to give up because his time is coming. I think that's true. But things like that, I have an agent in New York and he comes to see me once a week, always with more bad news about how the contracts have to be revised with e-book people and e-book people know very little about books just acquisition is what they're-

JMW: So did you learn to read and write at Whithorn School-

AR: Yes indeed.

JMW: - or was that at home?

AR: No, well both at home and I certainly...we had ferocious teachers whom we respected tremendously. We had one savage teacher, Miss McHarg and if we...if you survived Miss McHarg's year you got Miss -, I can't remember what her name was, and...which was the reward for having gone through the bad year, then you got a good year.

0.54.33

Yes, I had a very cheerful time at Whithorn School, I liked it very much. You got to go, you didn't have to be a certain age, you just got to go if you were ready to go. So I went to Whithorn school, I think, when I was four and read constantly and then the...I was trying to think of things that happened. There was a film, there was a theatre down...I can't remember which street.

JMW: Is it King's Road?

AR: It was King's Road, that's right, and the theory was that when you...if you didn't have money you could take jam jars and pay them in jam jars. Anyway, I don't know if we ever did that but we believed it, certainly. But I don't think there were many attempts at opening new businesses here. I think they were more or less continuous and faithful.

JMW: Yes.

AR: And the people were known and respected and so on.

JMW: I think a lot of the shop owners would be on the Town Council.

AR: Absolutely, because they were public figures, people saw them every day and-. The Dentons, I remember, were a very respected family and they all worked in the shop and so on. And what was the grocer? There was a very big grocer's shop where the dig office is now.

JMW: Yes, well, at one time there was AK Muir, I don't know if that was the name in your time. And, oddly enough, at another time, I've seen a poster where the name is Manuell which seems awfully Spanish.

AR: Really?

JMW: Yep. With a double 'l' and I've actually got a poster to prove it. It's 'A Manuell', and 'Purveyor of Fine Foods' and it gives the address George Street.

AR: Really? I didn't know, that name's not familiar.

JMW: No, there was certainly Muir's and later McEwans ran it but that might have been after the war but it seems to have had rather high class food. It seems to have been a sort of-

AR: I don't think that was in my time.

JMW: Right, ok.

0.57.15

JMW: And there was a grocer down where the newsagent is now, I think, it became Provost Arnott's shop, but before Arnott it as somebody else.

AR: So, is there a...the equivalent of a listing of the businesses from year to year, that you can go back to?

JMW: There are various publications, there's Piggott and Slater's Directories, they go away back into the 19th century and you can look up....various names start recurring, such as Drape and Conning and various others. However they didn't publish every year so you then have to go to things like local guide books and you see there's an advert for The Grapes or an advert for Martin's shoe shop, Brown and Charters, that was a drapers, do you remember them?

AR: Yes I do, yes I do, a drapers, now we don't have drapers shops anymore.

JMW: No, I've even got a billhead, in fact I think it's here, it says something about mercers and family mourning, it says, provided. If I can find it (paper rustling) I'm making a lot of noise here. I think what's interesting is the way the professions, the trades, rather, had a sort of real standing. Now, that is Martin's Boot and Shoemakers. That's well before your time, that's back into the 19th century, but obviously they kept going.

AR: Really? I love these receipts.

JMW: Aren't they lovely? This one is John Charters: Mercer, Draper, Hatter, Hosier, Glover and General Warehouseman, Family Mournings.

AR: A glover?

JMW: So, obviously that business continued, cause that's, again that's 18??

AR: Fourteen, you say?

JMW: It does look like fourteen doesn't it? In which case it survived well over a hundred years.

AR: My goodness.

JMW: This one is a Robert Kerr: Grapes Hotel and it says '1868, Hire to Newton Stewart, one horse'. And that was ten shillings.

AR: But look at this, this bill is printed so they've gone to the trouble to have their-

1.00.09

JMW: Yes, their billheads.

AR: -billhead prepared for them.

JMW: Yes.

AR: How elegant.

JMW: Yes. That, again, is 1868.

AR: Good heavens.

JMW: But one could imagine you'd have to hire a horse to Newton Stewart because pre-railway, the railways only came 1878.

AR: Now, the railway is interesting. There's a very good booklet...the man who's...reproduces the photographs, that one of the railway stations is marvellous. Mill Isle for instance has a siding. Now I just gave, I lent it to Tom McCreth, the other day who oohed and ahed over it. I've very good conversations with Tom, remembering the shops.

JMW: Yes.

AR: I mentioned Cathie Hughes' sweet shop the other day and he said 'Oh, did you ever get the black and white balls there?' and (laughter) so on and so on. He lights up when these people come, and oddly enough, if you can remember the shops, a lot comes back through that because they're common currency.

JMW: Oh yes.

AR: Everybody knows who ran them and so on. I remember John J Colquhoun very well, who signed my birth certificate, the father of Marjie Colquhoun, and he was quite a figure but he had an extraordinary face, he looked like a hawk and it was Mrs Muir who said she was a cousin of his for some reason and she thought he was so pompous and she mocked him all the time and she said 'He looks...have you ever thought of it, he looks like a bald eagle' and he was known as 'the bald eagle' for...because of that. And people had nicknames too, which was a very common local fondness because the nickname was a kind of endearing characterisation of them.

JMW: Yes, yes. Were you aware much of poverty in Whithorn? Were you aware that there were children without much?

1.02.44

AR: We knew it from school, some of them came without shoes on and the other thing is that people walked a long way when there were no public transport. The bus service was pretty good but it ran along pretty predictable lines and so people would walk into Whithorn and, yes, and we certainly were aware of that and you knew it from school class when...when people would...there were no uniforms or anything like it and far from it, people turned up or didn't turn up in school. I can't remember...I can't remember, I don't think we had anything like school photographs then, I don't think they would do that in Whithorn but-

JMW: Perhaps later.

AR: It must have come later. That's going back an alarmingly long time now, I suddenly realise to my-

JMW: And were you aware of activities like poaching that might have happened...there was a lot of game that came into the town?

AR: We knew that from...occasionally at the manse, rather latish in the day, there'd be a knock at the door and you'd go...I remember once going and there'd be a man with a package under his arm and a tail looking empty, 'Would your father like any fish?'

JMW: Right, yes.

AR: And I would call my father, I'm sure he bought the fish and so on. Yes, of course there was poaching,

JMW: Yes.

AR: Which was a rite then, really.

JMW: Do you remember Doughty's Fish and Game Merchants?

AR: Yes, indeed.

AR: Because Davie Doughty's still alive.

AR: Really?

JMW: Yea.

AR: The great, the other great family that I was very fond of were the Birchmans.

JMW: Oh yes.

1.05.23

AR: Jim Birchman...Mrs Muir had a son called James Muir who latterly...he worked in the bank where the Royal Bank is now, which was then The National Bank, and James just had to cross the street to go to work and he would always be-. James was a great cheerful soul, he subsequently became manager of the bank in Newton Stewart for a long time, was much loved and then retired to Kirkcudbright. I kept up with James over the years and sometime in the '60s, I think, I went to visit him in Kirkcudbright and he and Jim Birchman were the greatest of friends, they were both Scouts and Rovers and everything like that, and they went and they used to go camping in...at that beach, Clerksburn, next to Monreith, and I got to go camping with them and I had a great time I remember. But Jim Birchman was an extraordinary bright guy and funny and then he went into the Colonial Service and he came back and he did a great deal of work going round collecting names from the cemeteries.

JMW: Yes, I've seen that.

AR: After he had retired and come back here...I went to visit him too in latter day visits and the Birchman family were a very solid bunch and there were lots of...two of their daughters were nurses. I remember meeting one of them in St Andrews once. And they were a pillar really, we liked them a lot.

JMW: I think one of them taught didn't she, at the school?

AR: I'm sure there were about four daughters and two sons, I think. I've just passed the house coming in this morning where... the Birchman's house. And then, of course, there was the railway. Because my fa-, there was a time when my father...it was a big day when

he would get up and he'd get the 6.00 train that left Whithorn and he got to Glasgow about 10.00 or 11.00, which allowed him to go and do whatever he had to do in Glasgow with a lawyer or something like that and then catch a train back about 4.00 or 5.00 which wended its way down and would get in about 10.00 but he could go to Glasgow and back in one day.

JMW: Mm, amazing.

AR: And it started at Whithorn with just one carriage with two compartments and that would be enough to take the Whithorn...and then it would...and milk etc, and then it would gather momentum and passengers as it went to Glasgow, wound its way up. But when you look at a railway map then it was a phenomenal how the railway served practically the Machars entirely. Dunragit Station, for instance, had great importance because Dunragit was a big change, you took the train to Glasgow and then you got off at Dunragit and took the local train down into the Machars.

1.09.32

JMW: Right.

AR: And Alan Little, who's a good friend of mine, Alan was born in Dunragit and we meet quite a lot and the first time...he's married to Sheena and Sheena...the first time I met Alan with Sheena I asked him where he was from and he said 'I was born, you will never have heard of it but I was born in Dunragit' and I said 'We must be related'. Alan comes back with great regularity. He's...it would be very good to talk to him.

JMW: Yes.

AR: He's coming later this month, I think, his mother lives in Glenluce.

JMW: Right.

AR: And he's got very clear memories.

JMW: Yes, yes. And I guess the...social life strikes me as quite vigorous, there are a lot of clubs and activities that existed, certainly prior to the sixties.

AR: Really?

JMW: Are you aware of people having quite a sort of social life, sports days, Women's Institutes?

AR: Whist drives, things like that.

JMW: Church picnics, perhaps?

AR: No, I don't remember that too much, I remember it far more on a day to day basis, just a...going...there was nothing strange about going into town because you knew people on all sides and so on. When I...talking about the lack of fear...childhood does have a lot of fears built into it but I can remember none of these. It was nothing but a very pleasant and joyful...there were gloomy people. Now, I remember Jeannie Donnan.

JMW: Yes.

AR: Who was the poet.

JMW: Indeed.

1.11.51

AR: And I remember going to be taken to Jeannie Donnan's house and seeing her. She was a little wizened lady and she sat in a big armchair but I do remember that I was...I had an audience with Jeannie Donnan.

JMW: Right.

AR: I haven't revisited her poetry but-

JMW: No.

AR: -I don't know if it's survived the years, but anyway she was...imagine a...she was known as a poet.

JMW: Indeed, yes.

AR: You don't do that nowadays.

JMW: And do you remember the Catholic Church being attended.

AR: Yes, indeed, I do remember it because of the Catholic minister...my father and he liked one another very much and he used to come and have supper at our house. And it was, I remember two ministers, there was a man called Campbell who had what is now the garage and the...what's his name who has it now?

JMW: You mean Lawrence Bell's-.

AR: Lawrence.

JMW: Yep.

AR: Well, that was the Free Church then.

JMW: Right.

AR: Something Campbell was the minister and he was a great, very jolly person and he used to visit my father all the time. So the Catholic priest and the Free Church minister and the Church of Scotland minister were all friends, which was not always the case.

JMW: No, that's unusual, I think, yes. Was there a church down King's Road as well or was that not functioning?

AR: No, I don't remember one there, only the Free Church-

1.13.43

JMW: Right.

AR: -which was then working.

JMW: Maybe had amalgamated by that time.

AR: And the Free Church didn't last all that long.

JMW: And the congregations must have been good to have three churches going simultaneously.

AR: Compared to now.

JMW: Was it sort of, not exactly compulsory, but was it pretty much viewed that you would be going to church at some point?

AR: Well, I must say...I realised then that church attendance was expected and it was dutiful, I think. I don't know that there was much pressure. I can't speak for the Catholic Church but I don't think that...it was more a social occasion and certainly the church had a, had a far more of a civic function then that it's ever had since. I think that it started wizening after the war and was not-.

JMW: Well, noticeably, when the welfare state comes forward and your father must have done many jobs that really now would be a social worker's or a-.

AR: Exactly, very much so. In fact he was as much social worker as he was minister I think.

JMW: And was there much stigma attached to being a Catholic, do you remember, because-

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AR: Yes, indeed. The school was separate and they were called 'them' and I never felt any of that myself, it never came down to us, but I was aware that it was the case, but more poisonously so in the Borders than here. But it's quite true, that was an unfortunate division to come on that need not have occurred at all but...and I remember my father talking to us about that and he said 'Well, there are differences' and so on but we were not...there was no enmity and so on but there was separation.

JMW: Yes. And this tin church being out of town almost suggests...I don't know if they were not allowed within the town boundary or they just happened to have land up there but-.

AR: Who knows when all that set in, probably considerably earlier.

1.16.43

JMW: Yes, I think the Marquis of Bute owned that farm, hence it was available.

AR: I see, I see.

JMW: But it was what, only the 1950s when they built the Catholic church in the town.

AR: I think Tom McCreth has a much more extensive memory than I have because Tom's been here all the time.

JMW: Yes.

AR: And...the last great Whithorn accent that I can think of, because it's going-

JMW: Yes.

AR: -was Tom's father, Harry McCreth, he was pure Whithorn.

JMW: Right.

AR: And I used to love to hear him talk and he had...if there were ever a recording of him, of his voice, I would love to have it because it was a very...it was very...it had a good part of the Ulster accent in it and...but it was a very...it had...it had a lot of diminutives in it and it was a very kind of endearing accent, very much a domestic accent, the kind of accent used to talk to children and small animals with and so on. It was a lovely voice he had. I doubt...I don't think I've encountered anybody, latterly, that still has it in that pure-.

JMW: No, probably not. Mrs McLean is alive, she's ninety-five, ninety-six, and she was a Jolly, she lives opposite, I'm hoping to record her but she has remarkable memories and she remembers buying the rabbit skins from the households for a penny.

JS: Really?

JMW: And then she and her mother would put them in a pack and put them on the train to Glasgow. And she was told that the children didn't want to hang their coats next to hers cause it was covered in rabbit hairs-

JS: How funny.

JMW: -and a penny for a rabbit skin and twopence for a hare skin.

JS: Wow.

1.19.20

JMW: And just occasionally, Mr Hannah, I think it was, one of the chemists said 'You don't have to pay me today Jessie' and she said to me 'I could have danced' and she must only have been perhaps six or so, tramping up and down with these rabbit skins. So there's a lot that she could tell me.

AR: Good heavens, in other words that's a huge further jump backwards. The war did animate this region, though, quite a bit because it brought more people in.

JMW: Oh yes.

AR: And consequently work.

JMW: And you saw different people, all the airmen came into the cinema, troops at Burrow Head.

AR: And the Poles for instance.

JMW: Yes, yes.

AR: The Polish names in the cemetery in Wigtown revealing about that. Baldoon was the...I remember Baldoon as an airport...as an aerodrome. It was very exciting up there.

JMW: I'm sure.

JS: A lot of flying over and...constant flying...because it was a training aerodrome there.

JMW: Do you remember any tearooms in Whithorn, any cafes?

AR: That's interesting, there were The Central Café has always functioned but it had a kind of slightly lowlife aura to it. I don't remember...well, probably The Grapes Hotel did teas.

JMW: The Grapes, yes.

AR: The Grapes Hotel certainly had a restaurant because I do remember having that extraordinary meal there.

JMW: Yes, yes.

JS: But, no, I don't think...it's hard to think now, I don't think...having tea out was a [?] but people didn't have lunch and dinner at restaurants, they had tea.

JMW: Yes.

1.21.52

AR: I always remember Edinburgh had lots of teas shops in it. And one foreign restaurant and people would say 'Ooh'.

JMW: Do you remember much awareness of the Whithorn antiquities, the sort of crosses and so on from early Christian times, do you remember people taking an interest?

AR: Yes, I do, because of the proximity of the museum there.

JMW: Of course, yes.

AR: When it started, I remember that, and we obviously knew the people there because they were on the way too town. But, no, I don't know much about the movement behind it.

JMW: And there must have been a sort of small tourism industry in that one comes across the postcards, Whithorn, Port William, Isle of Whithorn, there are quite early postcards showing that people were visiting. But you don't remember much impact of tourism?

AR: Well, Glasgow, there were, for instance, my mother's brother married the daughter of Alves who had the jeweller's shop on George Street, number fifty it must be, and so people from Glasgow came down, mainly because they had some connection.

JMW: Yes, yes.

AR: I can, no I can't remember...we never used the word 'tourist' then.

JMW: No, I'm sure.

AR: And nor thought of, but I've always been astonished at the propensity with which people in Scotland took holidays in another part of Scotland. And they did that systematically and quite a lot. But we never thought of them as tourists, they had places they went for their holidays and so on. My father had a delicious arrangement with a minister in Arran and they would take a month in summer where they would swap.

JMW: Right.

AR: And I think they made a private arrangement where my father would take the month there just looking after the charge and he would take Whithorn and so we got to go to Arran for a month in the summer, which was fine.

JMW: Very nice.

1.24.41

AR: But I never particularly wanted to go, I went when we were...when I was on...staying on a farm on Broughton Mains, I went with Tom's father to the land sales in Newton Stewart, that was very exciting. And...farmers were really the power figures.

JMW: Yes.

AR: They were...their opinions counted and, of course, they were steady employers and at certain times of the year they had to hire extra hands so they were among the power people.

JMW: Yes, certainly. And you must have come under The Pend every time you went out, do you remember the coat of arms, do you remember sort of querying why it was there or-?

AR: All of that, and we had to learn about Ninian and everything like that and we knew all that stuff.

JMW: Yes.

AR: By rote.

JMW: Yes.

AR: And I was not exactly awed by all of that but I was fascinated by it. It certainly...you had this feeling that well...this is where it all began and everything like that. My father always thought that the luckiest thing that had happened to him when he came back from the war and finished at Glasgow, he got the charge at Whithorn and he thought 'This is an unimaginable stroke of luck' because he took that very seriously and it was indeed...if you have to have a church you can't get a better one than this. It's remarkable how similar the church is today to the way it's always been, size and location and appearance and everything. Of course it never had to grow.

JMW: And did you have oil lamps or how was it-?

AR: Yes, one of my earliest jobs, we had...I remember two things about the manse, first of all we had no flushing toilet and we had no running water. But there was a scullery with one of these pumps like a village pump and there were two buckets filled with water and you went to the lavatory there and you flushed it by pouring down one of the buckets but you had a moral obligation to fill the bucket you'd emptied and if you were caught leaving an empty bucket, you were punished.

1.28.10

JMW: Right.

AR: And so there was that and then the other thing is, one of my earliest jobs was to go round the house in the morning and gather all the lamps and bring them to a table in the kitchen and then my father would take off the shades and show me how to clip the wick so that it was even and ready for the night and then to fill them when they needed filling. This was very important, this was a daily chore.

JMW: Yes, yes.

AR: (Coughs) So the manse was not heated, had fireplaces, and it had all these lack of technology, as we would say nowadays.

JMW: And did you have any staff who lived in or were-

AR: No, no.

JMW: -they just came in.

AR: We had a...but at one time when, I think, when my young...when my younger sister...youngest sister was born, (coughs) we then had a maid who stayed in, who came from the country and went with us to Selkirk when we made the move, stayed there for a while and then came back. But no, that was not so much the fashion although the farmers

always had help because they had cottages and I remember Jessie McCreth there, she always, at harvest time she would get...she and the people who worked for her would spend the morning baking and they'd bring down to the field, at mid-day, a hamper with freshly baked food for our lunch and so we would sit in the field, stop working and have an enormous lunch, we always loved that and I do remember these two Italian prisoners singing their heads off. We thought this was the greatest thing that had ever happened, never believed that you could sing while you worked.

JMW: And I suppose, although you had a car, horses must have been a real part of the local scene when you grew up.

AR: When we had what?

JMW: Horses must have been a great part of what you saw even although you had a car?

1.31.05

AR: That's right, certainly, certainly. But then again, Tom and I were talking just a few days ago about that, and it was nothing for us from Broughton Mains when we got...we weren't doing anything in the field to decide to go to Whithorn and just take...and you just made beelines, we didn't take paths or roads, we just pointed and went, climbed over a few dykes or fences. But it was very common, walking.

JMW: Drapes, I think was a saddler as well as an ironmonger. Do you remember saddlers working there?

AR: Really? Did he have the saddlery on the premise?

JMW: I think it may have been in the back, as far as I-

AR: Could have been because he had that big shop and it was such a welcome shop, he was so bluff and great and he stood in the doorway often and greeted everybody. He was a tremendous figure, George Drape, and so was Ian, subsequently. And then John Wylie, who had the white house at the bottom of the town, was a grain merchant and he had the mill, the storage mill, in Garlieston, on the pier, and the Wylies we knew, Dorothy Wylie and (Frances or Francis?) Wylie, John Wylie, they were a family that we knew always and I'm sure more names will filter in.

JMW: Yes.

AR: But I think Tom is...and Tom has always kept notes and-

JMW: Yes.

AR: -as he refers to them, often.

JMW: Yes. Well, do you want to call it a day and have some lunch?

AR: Well, that would be fine.

JMW: Right.

AR: If you have some lunch.

JMW: Oh, yes, yes. I'd better say it's the 18th of June 2012 and it's Whithorn and I've been talking to Alistair Reid and I'll sign it off.