

Interviewee: Brenda McIntosh (BMcl)	Interviewer: Caroline Milligan(CM); Mark Mulhern (MM) also present
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**Key words: Childhood 02m 37s; Family Life 04m 49s; School 12m 24s; Women 18m 23s; Girl Guides 23m 52s.**

CM: Perhaps, Brenda, you could tell me, first of all, when and where you were born.

BM: I was born in 1932, in Castle Street in Dumfries. My parents lived four miles out in the country and from Castle Street I was taken to Moat Brae House, which is now J M Barrie House so I spent a few days in J M Barrie House, without knowing it.

CM: What was the reason for that? was that just-?

BM: I think my mother was what you would call, nowadays, 'a mother at risk', she was in her forties, yes.

CM: Were your parents both from Dumfries and Galloway, were they both-?

BM: No.

CM: No.

BM: My mother was from the Peak District, she was a farmer's daughter and my father was seriously disabled in the First World War. So, he was from Renfrewshire, Bridge of Weir in Renfrewshire, although his parents didn't really belong to Bridge of Weir in Renfrewshire, they came from Aberdeen [*laughter*]. That's how life is. So, when they met in Manchester, it was my mother's place of work, and it was my father's first job as a blind person with only one leg to start work. He was helping her in the dye firm's office that she was working in, she was in charge of correspondence and she had French but she didn't have German, my father didn't have French but he had German, so he used to go one day of the week to help her with her correspondence, and that's how they met and married, and consequently tried to choose somewhere which was midway between his family and her family, so that's how they came to live in Dumfries, on one of the disabled soldiers, well, disabled ex-servicemens', small-holdings.

CM: Ok.

BM: So, I was brought up in a community of disabled men who were being supported by their wives.

**Childhood 02m 37s.**

CM: Ok. So, can you tell me a wee bit about what your early years were like? Was there a school as part of that, you know, were there other young families around?

**02m 51s.**

BM: Yes, there were one or two people my age but it was one of the things that I missed as a child was not having somebody to play with [*laughs*]. My sister was ten and a half years older than me so she wasn't interested in playing with me, she had to look after me from time to time, but she was going out to school and I was left at home so we had two big Airedale dogs that looked after me because my mother could, she was having to watch my father all the time, who was determined that he was going to do his part in looking after poultry and animals and so on, so I was looked after by these two big dogs, boy and girl. They were very, very bossy and my mother used to mark out the space that I had to be in, while she was out of sight, and I had a little swing there and a little old

saucepan with water and sand and the things that children get at nursery school nowadays and they had strict instructions that if I stepped over the, my mother used to go round and mark out the area every time and give them the instructions, and I would listen to her and think 'Mm' [*laughter*]. And I can remember once stepping over the border to see the postman, the postman came in and he approached us you know, and said 'Where's your mother?' and I stepped over the line and the dogs, immediately one knocked me down and sat on me [*laughter*] and the other ran for my mother and I think the postman got a fright, I think he thought I was being attacked. So, what can I say about my childhood? I was good at amusing myself.

**Family Life 04m 49s.**

CM: I was thinking that, you know, if your sister was much older and you were around the house much more, do you remember your Mum's daily or the routines that there would be in the house?

BM: Oh yes.

CM: Did she do a lot of baking and things?

BM: Yes, oh yes. They were up and out very early, about four o'clock they were out, and during that time I was supposed to stay in bed and my sister was supposed to, I suppose, keep me where I was. And I don't know how it happened but one day I thought I would make the breakfast for everybody so my sister must have been out as well, or she'd gone to school, don't know, but I got a chair, and climbed on it and of course it never dawned on me that my mother must be around because our stove had been lit, we had a wood-burning stove, and I got the frying pan, pulled it from the wrong end to the right end, and my mother arrived just as I had broken an egg into it for breakfast. And it was the only time I can ever remember my mother going completely berserk, you know, mad, she was furious with me. And I was so upset because I'd been trying to help [*laughs*]. But, however, I certainly never went near the stove again until I was much, much older. She did, she baked every day, we had fresh bread and we had scones every day and then of course the War came along and occasionally she wouldn't have enough bread flour, it was very difficult to get everything we needed, and my sister would have to get on her bike and rush into Dumfries to get a loaf from Mr Chicken who had his bakery at the Buccleuch Street Bridge, the New Bridge, as it was called then.

**06m 48s.**

CM: Was that his name or was Mr Chicken was that a-?

BM: No, that was his name, yes.

CM: That was his name [*laughs*].

BM: Yes, he was a lovely gentleman, he still was going out on his bike, he used to take his constitutional every day on his bike and even when he must have been in his late eighties, he might have been ninety and he was still managing to pedal a few hundred yards up the road and back again.

CM: I was just going to ask you a wee bit more about the domestic life at home when you were wee. Did your Mum do washing on certain days or was there-?

BM: Yes, she had a washday. She had a washhouse at the end of our bungalow and it was cold and generally wet, you know, it was a concrete room and it echoed and I didn't like it very much but I had to go with her when she was doing the washing.

CM: Was that just for your own home or was it for -?

BM: That was just for our own home.

CM: Just for your own use.

BM: Yes, but because of my father's, if he had got, caught an infection or anything like that, it would have been very serious matter, in fact any of us, because it was before the days of inoculations, anything like that, my mother was fortunate, her mother had been a midwife and she'd helped her mother out a great deal. Grandmother was a midwife to the shepherds' wives in the Peak District and Mum had learned a great deal about nursing and she had hoped to become a VAD [Voluntary Aid Detachment (*nurse*)] and she'd taken that course and by the time she'd finished the War was just ending so she was never able to use it but she started going to all the classes again, when the War started we had First Aid classes and Home Nursing classes and so on, run by the Red Cross, I think it was. And I used to go with her because Mum couldn't leave me with Dad. When I was small, when I was about two, I think, or three, there'd been a snowy day and Mum had left Dad sitting inside because he couldn't manage with his artificial leg and his sticks so she'd left me sitting on his knee, probably my sister must have been at school, and a cinder came out of the fire, bad coal, and stuck on my neck.

**09m 49s.**

Now, my father was blind, he couldn't understand what was happening, I was screaming and writhing and by the time he got to the door and shouted for my mother and she eventually came he was really distraught, so she said she never, ever left me alone with my Dad again. I had a scar for many years, I've lost it now, thank goodness, lost in the folds. What else can say about that? The one thing, one of my duties, in the morning, from when I was quite small was to go into the bathroom with my Dad when he was washing and I had to be with him in case he needed help, he had a huge routine of salt water up his nasal passages and down again and he also had to wash his artificial, his glass eyes every day and from time to time one of them would slip and I would have find it or help him get it out the wash-hand basin. But I had to use that as an excuse one day when I was late for school, I must have been about seven or eight at the time, cycled into school every day, And often the weather was so bad that I was late, this particular day we had a new teacher, from Shetland, and she was absolutely ferocious and she said 'And why are you so late this morning?' And I said 'I had to get down and look for my Dad's eyes on the floor because he'd dropped them' [*laughter*].

CM: Did that silence her [*laughs*].

BM: Yes, there was an absolute complete silence and I thought 'Oh, what have I said?' [*laughter*] That's how it was but she didn't question me but it was a very, very long silence and she stared and stared at me. And looking back on it, after a few years, because it stayed with me that stare and she was a ferocious teacher, you could never forget having her and I had her two years running, and I often thought 'What did I say?' and it did come to me one day, of course, that this was not the customary thing for little children to do but to me it was, it was just part of the everyday routine.

CM: Just the usual routine for you. What about, I mean that teacher was quite a dragon, she sounds like she was quite a dragon. But more generally...

BM: Oh she was.

**School 12m 24s.**

CM: ...was school quite a happy time for you?

BM: Not really, no.

CM: No?

**12m 30s.**

BM: I was different.

CM: Was that, did you have nice teachers as well, or were they-?

BM: Yea. No, I had nice teachers too,

CM: What did you like at school, what subjects were you-?

BM: Oh, everything [*laughter*], I wasn't very good at arithmetic, but my father was brilliant numerically and he used to help me, every Sunday. It became a bit painful when it got to algebra, later on, but just with a straightforward arithmetic he was a great help to me but when it came to really advanced maths he knew what he was doing because he'd been brilliant at maths and he wasn't a good teacher, let's put it that way, he couldn't explain how I could get the door open to what he already knew. So, no, maths finished arithmetic, but I loved geometry, that was good, I, in primary I just loved English, reading, poetry. Hymns were a complete mystery to me because we were an atheist family and my mother had been to church, as a child, four times on Sunday she said, they had a long walk and yet they went to every service on a Sunday, there was a huge family of them and she tried to explain religion, faith, the Bible. I quite liked the Bible, it had lots of interesting stories in it, which I tried to fathom, it was like a mystery, a present-day mystery story, who did what, you know, to whom?

CM: Did your parents chose to send you to a faith school then or was that just that that was the local-?

BM: I went to the Dumfries Academy, which was, they had a little service every morning where they had a prayer and a hymn, as I said I liked hymns, prayers meant nothing to me. That was all there was to it, my father wouldn't discuss religion and my mother was wary of discussing religion, let's put it that way.

CM: And what about when you were, you know, as a schoolchild what were you thinking that you would do when you left school, did you have, were you already thinking about the future beyond your school days?

BM: Yes, I had an ambition that someday I would climb Everest [*laughter*]. I know it sounds ridiculous but it was something my father read, he got Braille books delivered every week, he had books, he chose a new language every year that he was going to study, very often they were languages that were related to each other like the central European languages are. But he would also chose all these books that were related to whatever he was studying that year and one year, I must have been fairly young, I must have been pre-school I think, and I began to learn about Everest from my father.

**16m 20s.**

He had a book about who had attempted Everest and who was going to attempt Everest next and the journey there and how many days it took and what you encountered on the way, in the way of climate change and boundaries you crossed, he had so much to explain to me about the world, and so I thought I would climb Everest, I would try it anyway, because he said only men had tried to climb Everest [*laughter*] and he was very, very respectful of what women could achieve. My mother had been, her mother, my grandmother and my mother had both belonged to the Suffragette Movement, members of the women's movement and had run birth control clinics in the Manchester suburbs, so she was very supportive of anything my dad told me about or said to me. I think I was taught to be somebody who would have to look after themselves, but look after other people at the same time, I was nurtured as a carer but I was also nurtured as a strong carer and able to make decisions and choices. Choices and decisions, yes.

CM: And did your parents, were they quite settled in Dumfries?

BM: Yes.

CM: Yea, they liked it.

BM: Yes, well, they had to [*laughter*].

CM: Well, I was thinking, it was quite a big thing for them to move there initially wasn't it?

BM: Yes.

#### **Women 18m 23s.**

CM: And I was thinking, you know, you've described your very feisty mother and your father as being a very dynamic man and I thought, you know-.

BM: He had spent five years of the War in St Dunstan's in London, in hospital there, and the women who took care of him, many of them were from titled families, wealthy families, they were women with brains, intelligence as well as the caring side of it, and he had not had to diminish his understanding and his compassion, because he was very compassionate towards the enemy as well as his own, the people, the men he fought with. He was in Gallipoli and he talked about the Turks as if they were real people, he could hear them laughing and talking in the trench next door. And my mother was an intelligent person, she was the second eldest of a very, very big family and she had had to put her ambitions aside, I suppose, she was somebody who today would have gone to university, become a graduate and used every bit of herself, probably still in the care of others, so the two of them were well matched but we were in this community of disabled, other disabled soldiers and their wives and they had to do what they could there, with their talents and they did.

#### **20m 32s.**

My mother had a little bag that she had all her birth control, Marie Stopes information, in and, as a child, one day a week my mother used to go and visit somebody who had just had a, yet another baby or was pregnant or didn't want to be pregnant and my job was, if there was, she would take me if there were little children in the family, this was before I went to school, my job was to go off into a corner of the room and keep these kids happy with a toy that my mother had given me to take with us. She also used to take, she had some well-to-do relatives and friends in Manchester who sent her parcels of clothing for babies and if there was a new baby Mum would take that as well. So, you know, it was a business of unpacking to keep the toddlers happy, you know, look at this and look at that. So, I learnt to entertain little children quite early on, which was nice for me because I had nobody to play with at home or even in the road there was nobody to play with. All children there in the community if they were old enough had to stay with Dad who was disabled. That was our, that's what we had to do. Occasionally I met, when I was cycling, once I started cycling to school, I would meet one or two of the children on the road and cycle to school with them. So, my mother would be talking away about birth control, I had no idea what it was she kept in her bag, I wasn't allowed to see, I didn't know what it was about. So, one or two of the women she visited were Roman Catholics, the ones with the biggest families, I was supposed to keep an eye out the window for a man with a long black frock [*laughter*] because in those days they were very, a great many priests, you know, now we have one priest for, oh, I don't know, not even one priest for one parish now, we have one priest for the county, I think, but then they were frequent visitors and the wives were always terrified that either a) their husband would come home or the priest would arrive and want to know who my mother was and what she was there for, so, yes, I was a little look-out [*laughs*].

CM: Yes, and from a very early age you were...

BM: From an early age, yes.

CM: ...participating in adult environments all the time.

BM: Yes, adult things. All the time.

CM: So, perhaps at primary school you were, you know, you were already...

BM: I was different, yea.

CM: ...because you weren't so concerned with childish things.

BM: I wasn't going home to play with other children next door, or anything like that.

CM: So, did that change when you went up to senior school, when you went to secondary school did you-?

#### **Girl Guides 23m 52s.**

BM: Yes, sounds terrible but I joined the Guides, my father suggested it because, yes my father suggested I join the guides because I was given time off, on a Saturday I was always supposed to have time to myself. Sunday, he helped me with my arithmetic [*laughter*]. But I did a lot on the, you know, looking after the animals and so on. Anyway, I joined the Guides and I found my niche there because I could teach other children how to do things, girls were, to me, they were very helpless, other girls. In primary I mainly made friends with the boys, and I played with the boys in the playground, I had boys' boots, instead of shoes, and so I got playing with the boys. So, then I got hold of these girls at Guides and taught them things because they didn't know anything, you know, they didn't know how to tie a knot, they didn't know how to, well, I began to wonder if any of them knew how to put their ties on, so I rose in the ranks very quickly. I was put in charge of a Patrol, I was a Second for about a month and then I became a Patrol Leader and that was great and then I just went on from there because, you know, as a Guide you could sit tests, well, I knew how to cut down a tree and I knew how to do everything to pass tests and then you get more responsibility and I just loved that. And then, one day, my mother said to me 'I see you've put your name down for Child Nurse Badge' she said 'What do you know about nursing children?' And I said 'Well, I don't know, but I'll read a book about it'. And she said 'No I think you'd better go and get some experience' so she, my father and she gave me a week's holiday to go and work at Dr Barnardo's, which meant I had to stay away from home, which I'd never done before and learn how to look after toddlers, little children. There were lots of them, children who had been evacuated, they didn't know how old I was at Barnardos, it was quite good.

CM: What age were you then?

BM: I think I was thirteen.

CM: Gee wizz.

BM: Because I remember the Matron asking when we were saying goodbye and she said 'How old are you?' and I said 'Thirteen' and she said 'Oh, I thought you were sixteen.' [*laughter*] But, anyhow, I got going again the next year and by then I thought I knew everything there was about looking after little children at that age. I was really sorry for those children because they couldn't talk because the nurses were not very, they were not really educated girls and they didn't talk to the children, they just did things to them and with them, and so I tried to teach the children words.

#### **27m 23s.**

Anyhow, it was a great training, got my Child Nurse Badge and also it was great training for having my own children in later life and teaching other people about what to do with their children, so I sort of moved towards becoming a teacher at an early age.

CM: And that's what you went on to become.

BM: That's what I went on to do. I had two aunts who were teachers, two maiden aunts, and one, well they both married eventually to my surprise, to everyone's surprise but neither of them had any children [*laughter*].

CM: Did you go straight to teacher training from school?

BM: Oh no. I went to Glasgow School of Art, my sister had gone to Glasgow School of Art.

**End of interview**