

Interviewee: Norman McKinnon (NM)	Interviewer: Betty Hudson (BH)
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Betty Hudson: Right, welcome. This is Betty Hudson in conversation with Norman McKinnon on the 1st of March 2014. Now Norman, I wonder if we could start by asking you about the early part of your life; where were you born and when, and was it a rural or a town environment?

Norman McKinnon: Well, I was born in Cresswell Maternity wing in Dumfries and my parents were in Lockerbie at the time, and thereafter, we... I am a product of a broken home; my mother and father parted when I was... I imagine, 3 or so, or 4 year old, so I then lived with my mother and either her brother or her sister, and that was at Lochmaben, on a farm just outside Lochmaben - Chapelcroft - or out with [1] her sister outside Thornhill at Morton Mill, and that arrangement would last for a good... oh, several years, I would think four or five, and... but my mother became housekeeper to a farmer at Langmire, Jim Russell, when I would be, I suppose, seven or eight...

BH: Right.

NM: ... and I had a happy time there, he was very kind to me, I was, of course, interested in the farm animals, and he would... he had sheep and he reared heifers to sell for dairy farmers, and I remember taking a liking to a little Ayrshire heifer [2] who had recently calved and he was going to take her to Castle Douglas - show and sale, livestock show and sale - and he took me in his little Morris, a Morris 8 or something, and we went to Castle Douglas...

BH: Yes.

NM: ... and I remember this heifer was... got second prize, and she was sold for 108 maybe guineas in those days, I don't know...

BH: Yes.

NM: ... 108 pounds or guineas anyway; and I had a very happy time there for a year or two... and I used to cycle along the pavement from Langmire to Morton Mill up towards Carronbridge, which would be a mile or two along the road, beside the main road on the pavement, on my own...

BH: Yes.

NM: ... and go to school at Carronbridge, which was a small primary school, and there was a very kind teacher there, a Mrs. MacMillan, and she was a vet's wife... [3]

BH: Yes.

NM: ... her husband was with Mr. Kennedy in Thornhill; and then after that we moved because Mr. Russell unfortunately died very young, he was a bachelor, and then I think we would be back at Morton Mill and perhaps at my uncle and aunt at Lochmaben at Chapelcroft Farm, and then when my mother... when I was 11, or... yes, when I was 11 she became a housekeeper to a farmer outside Borgue in the Stewartry of Kirkcudbright...

BH: Listen... sorry; so this involved changing schools?

[4]

NM: Lots of changes of primary schools.

BH: Right.

NM: I've been, yes... quite in... Carronbridge... I started school, actually, at 5 I presume, I don't remember much but I was at Dumfries Academy for the first year I think; but that must be, yes, right, ok... yes, I would start there...

BH: Yes.

NM: ... cos my parents were still together, obviously separated when I was 5 or 6... and then I was at... where would I be at... yes, Cargenbridge at... outside Thornhill, but I was also at Lochmaben Primary when I was at Chapelcroft Farm...

BH: Yes.

NM: ... and then subsequently at Borgue Primary...

BH: Gosh.

NM: ... with Mr. Haugh.

BH: Yes.

NM: And I was then... be in Primary 7; he was a very nice gentleman, Mr. Haugh, [5] I did not, of course, because of all the changes of schooling, I did not enjoy primary schooling at all... I tholed it, I never remember doing an ounce of homework, or anything.

BH: Yes.

NM: And subsequently, after a year or so – it must have been – at Borgue where my mother housekept for Mr. Grierson, at Culraven Farm... and I do remember a bit of the farm, but I didn't really get involved with it; it was a dairy farm, and it struck me... of course, the topography of the countryside was quite different from Dumfriesshire because there are all these rocky knolls around; and they made cheese in the summertime, I remember, and I remember it was a soft cheese [6] which I didn't care for, obviously, because I hadn't been used to such things...

BH: No.

NM: And I remember, even at that age, when I compared this dairy... the dairy cows are all tied in byres, and so on, and I thought, gosh, this is a lot more primitive than it is back in Dumfriesshire...

BH: [Laughs] It wasn't hand-milking though, was it? No, no.

NM: No, it wasn't hand-milking, it would be machines... but hygiene wasn't high on the cards really, at all...

BH: Ah-ha, right.

NM: ... it was pretty ropey I thought; but...

BH: Just to remind us, this was about the late 40s, or early 50s?

NM: No, this would be mid-50s...

BH: Right.

NM: ... '56, '57... because I walked from the school... from the farm to the school – which was about a mile – along a country road... [7]

BH: Yes.

NM: ... past the local vet, Mr. Prentice, but I only knew him by name...

BH: Yes.

NM: ... and I walked with other children from the farm because there were many farm cottages at Culraven, and many young children, you know, farm service children...

BH: Yes. So when you observe farming now...

NM: Oh yes, it's completely changed...

BH: Very different.

NM: Yes, because, of course, the workforce is so much diminished, in these 50 or more years...

BH: Yes, yes.

NM: It's quite altered. And from Borgue, I then... my final... I repeated Primary 7 at Dumfries Academy again because my mother purchased a house in Dumfries, in Rae Street, and was running a bed-and-breakfast... well, a boarding house it was called... [8]

BH: Yes, yes.

NM: And...

BH: So did you... were you involved in that at all, or... you would see the...

NM: No, I kept out of the way...

BH: Really; you didn't come across the people who were staying? Or...

NM: Well, I do remember one or two, but I suppose... basically I was somewhat resentful of these people coming into the house, I suppose.

BH: Yes, yes.

NM: But they were pleasant, and they were usually there Monday to Friday, they tended to be souls working in banks, and so on...

BH: Right, yes.

NM: You know, the bank employees were moved around, and they did a year and, so-and-so and then got promoted, or whatever...

BH: Mm-hmm.

NM: So that was a year there; Primary 7, sat the Control there again, failed it, and I thought 'gosh, I'm going to the High School now, I've another three years to put [9] in before this dreadful schooling comes to an end, and then lo-and-behold at that point... well, my father actually died at that point, in May '57... and I found myself after the summer holidays in '57, being sent to Wallace Hall, which I knew nothing about, but I think...

BH: And where...

NM: ... it would be engineered, perhaps, by my uncles who were agriculturally based, and so I presume they noticed I had an interest in this and they thought 'oh, lets send him there'...

BH: Yes. And where was this and what... so, why was it different to... what was the difference between it and the High School, for example?

NM: Ah well, I didn't... well, I'd no idea about the High School but I could see that it was a pretty rough element at the High School even to my eyes as a schoolboy [10] of 12 or 13, and I thought 'oh well, I'll just put up with it', but no, I went to Wallace Hall... you go down to the Whitesands, you got on a bus, and sat on the bus upstairs for a good three-quarters-of-an-hour, and the bus took us by Heathhall, picked up some children there... usually boys, mainly boys at Wallace Hall, but some girls... and then from Heathhall by the back road to Auldgirth, and picking up, again, farmer's children... farm-worker's children too... and we got to Closeburn just before half-past-nine – the school didn't start til nine-thirty...

BH: Really, gosh.

NM: ... and there was a bus also came from Kirkconnel – in the north – bringing children from Kirkconnel area to Wallace Hall.

BH: Yes; was that later, that start of nine-thirty must have been later than the average... [11]

NM: Ah yes, because...

BH: And was it because of the travelling?

NM: I presume so.

BH: Right.

NM: And intervals and lunch-breaks were reduced because we finished at a-quarter-to-four...

BH: Right.

NM: But this was a new world to me because we moved around... a bell rang and we moved to a different teacher and a new subject, and a new world opened up...

BH: Yes.

NM: And after one term – and there would be exams at the end of it before Christmas – and when we went back in the new year, three or four of us, including one... your maiden name, David Sloan, were asked if we would like to take French, and we thought 'oh well', and this was the headmaster's idea, and we stayed in [12] for a Mr. Donald, the French teacher, gave us some French lessons after school twice a week, or something, for a while til we caught up, and...

BH: Yes.

NM: ... because before that, being an agriculturally based school, we'd had gardening, and when I took up French I gave up gardening, which... I was enjoying

the gardening, the gardening was taken by the school janitor Mr. Gall... one of his daughters was in my class – Lynne Gall – and we had, at that time of year, well... we would be harvesting vegetables, but I do remember learning to double-dig and the basics of gardening.

BH: So the janitor did the training; would you think that was an informal arrangement? Or would he have been... would it have been part of his job description? Not that they'd use that term then, I'm sure... [13]

NM: Oh well, yes I know... well it may have been, I really don't know; I always... I do remember he had quite a smart... it wasn't a gardening coat but he'd quite a heavy outfit of a heavy flannel trouser and tunic which he wore all the time, but... so I would imagine it was part of his job description.

BH: Yes, yes. And was the produce that was from the gardening, was that used for school meals? Or...

NM: I would like to say it was Betty, but I really don't know whether it was...

BH: Right.

NM: They did... [?] the school lunched were a mixed batch... I don't know... I think the lunches were, no... in those days they came, I think there was a... wasn't there a kitchen at Thornhill, or outside... that produced... and they sent them round in [14] these canisters...

BH: Yes, yes, I think so... right, possibly, yes... no, its just it would have been a nice idea to have been... to have used them on the spot.

NM: Oh I know, it would have been, yes... but, of course, the produce may have been used, I would have thought, in the boarding house, you know, there were boarders...

BH: Right.

NM: I was not a boarder so I don't know just how many there were, but they were all boys, but there would be twenty-odd boarders at least...

BH: Yes, yes.

NM: So I presume produce would be used there for their meals.

BH: Yes; and the school was run by the council?

NM: Oh yes, local authority...

BH: There was no private element?

NM: No, none at all.

BH: Not at all?

NM: Not at all, no, no, not at all... and it was unusual in that it was primarily for those earning their living in farming, and it was one of the two schools in Scotland where you could sit a Higher in agriculture. [15]

BH: One of two schools? Where was the other?

NM: I never knew.

BH: Really?

NM: I know. It... always the rumour was 'well, there is another school', but I never found out which... where this other was...

BH: Really? That's interesting, yes.

NM: But yes, we did agricultural... the biology, and agricultural chemistry and physics, I remember.

BH: Were you... with that degree of agriculture... emphasis on agriculture, did you, or did the pupils go to farms?

NM: Visiting...

BH: A lot of came from farming anyway...

NM: Yes, yes.

BH: ... but the ones who perhaps didn't, did they have an opportunity to visit a farm?

NM: I don't remember any such thing, no... the only visit we had was to a hatchery along the road, run by Mr. And Mrs. Haining, and I remember... that would be in third year of secondary school, I think, and they were... we were given a conducted tour, and then we had to write a report on our visit, and... but I don't remember [16] any other such visits, really, no.

BH: No. Yes, so I realise you went on to study veterinary studies...

NM: Yes.

BH: ... at what point do you think you made that decision? Or... you could have gone into farming, but how did you...

NM: Well, I'd really had no idea... I thought I was going to do something related to agriculture, and it was only sitting Highers in fifth year, and going back for sixth, that Mr. Miller, the rector... the headmaster asked me what I was going to do, and I told him and he said 'well, you would get into vet school, you know, Norman', so then, of course, I applied, and that was it, and of course, he would know my father had [17] been a vet, but I hadn't really any burning desire to do it, not really, you know...

BH: Uh-hu.

NM: So I think I sort of fell into it, really.

BH: Yes, yes.

NM: But thanks... it's purely, it is purely thanks to Mr. Millar, the rector, that I became a vet because I had such a poor performance in early schooling in Primary, that I would never have achieved that without the existence of Wallace Hall Academy at Closeburn, and these teachers...

BH: Mm-hmm, yes.

NM: ... so I couldn't, you know...

BH: Your life would have been quite different.

NM: Oh, entirely different.

BH: Yes.

NM: Entirely different, Betty; I would never have... and that's why I find it so sad in today's world because there aren't these individuals in the positions of authority [18] who can pick up souls and say 'look, you could do this, and you could do that'...

BH: Yes.

NM: Because everything is so programmed and regimented now.

BH: Mm-hmm.

NM: And it was... I've been very fortunate...

BH: Yes, yes.

NM: ... to have that; all for free.

BH: Yes.

NM: All for free.



BH: Good. So you decided to study veterinary medicine; that meant moving, of course, from the country...

NM: Oh, yes, yes...

BH: ... a rural environment, to the City of Edinburgh.

NM: Yes.

BH: Can you remember your early days of that?

NM: I found... yes, it was quite a shock because I was a very naïve, unsophisticated, immature lad, and I found myself in Edinburgh – I didn't really know it – [20] I applied to both Edinburgh and Glasgow cos I had no notion to go south of the border; and I knew Glasgow was much larger than Edinburgh, and I fortunately got an acceptance from Edinburgh before... well it came in the day before I had to go to Glasgow for an interview [Laughs]; so, I went to Glasgow a naïve kid, and it was a waste of time, and I said 'well, I've been accepted by Edinburgh [Laughs] so I think I'd better just go there'...

BH: Uh-hu.

NM: You know, I had no idea... coming here was a major shock; I got in... I found myself – well, I wasn't young, I was nineteen – but I found I was with mainly souls from south of the border, they were mainly English, there were only about four [21] or five from Scotland at Edinburgh because most Scots went to Glasgow.

BH: Mm-hmm.

NM: And they were, on the whole, a year or more older, and they'd done English A-Levels; and we were doing physics, chemistry, biology in first year, and because they'd done A-Levels and we'd only had Highers, they'd actually completed most of the first at university in their A-Levels.

BH: Mm-hmm.

NM: I was struggling, and I worked like a beaver, and I thought 'gosh, I don't know if I can get through this'...

BH: Mm-hmm.

NM: ... and fortunately I did, and I didn't get... I felt overwhelmed really, I couldn't believe the pace of the lectures and... but, of course, gradually you get used to it [21] and as long as you got fifty per cent in those days you got passed, and you kept going.

BH: Yes. So when you came to Edinburgh, where at that point then was your mother staying?

NM: Mother was still in Dumfries running the guest house.

BH: Right.

NM: Yes, oh yes; she kept the boarders, and we... and, of course, I would go home on the bus every three or four weeks...

BH: Yes.

NM: ... taking my washing home...

BH: [Laughs]

NM: ... and coming back with it all nicely laundered and wrapped up...

BH: Yes.

NM: ... until in second year I met the lady who became my wife, and very quickly she took on my washing too, so that was rather good.

BH: [Laughs]

NM: So, my mother was relieved of that task.

BH: Yes. Good.

NM: And then we...

BH: So the... going back to your early exposure to farming, presumably when [22] you then studied veterinary medicine there would have been... there would have been a benefit to have had that connection with the farming, presumably...

NM: Oh, yes. Oh yes, I think so.

BH: And did you find that you could think back to beasts that you might have seen that were in need of treatment, or... was it helpful?

NM: Yes, I suppose so... yes, I suppose so, I just like liked working with animals, and, of course, in my schoolboy – younger schoolboy days – I spent Secondary school anyway, while at Wallace Hall for six years, I cycled at the weekends out to Chapelcroft at Lochmaben – ten miles on a Saturday morning – and sometimes stayed on the Saturday night and came back on the Sunday; and, of course, because there were... farm was a mixed farm with seventy-three dairy cows, two byres, [23] and, in those days, two dairy-men for seventy-three cows... and my uncle would

assist at the milking as well; and, of course, there were other farm servants... so you just got a liking for these domesticated animals because you knew them pretty well... they were all tied by the neck in their byre...

BH: Yes. And was... did they all have names?

NM: Not all, no... one or two, not many had names actually.

BH: Right.

NM: Not in this case, but... I've been associated with farms where they were named; but no, seventy-three... no, they didn't have names...

BH: That's a bit too much...

NM: ... but they all knew their stall, and when you let them out they would come [24] back, and there was no difficulty, they just all went to their own spot...

BH: Mm-hmm. So were there farm... so, obviously, some of the dairy-men would have a cottage and so-forth, or the dairy-men... what about, were there servants who lived in the house?

NM: Well, the dairy-man was a bachelor, and he lived – yes – in a room off the kitchen and he was fed and watered, of course, with the rest of us, and his half-brother was the assistant dairy-man... he didn't live on the farm, he lived in Lochmaben; the... no, there weren't many cottages at Chapelcroft, there was a cottage two fields away which we called [Blaur Weary] – I don't know if it was officially called [Blaur Weary] – but it was always known as [Blaur Weary]... it sat [25] on the fairly raised knoll, and a very old couple, I do remember, lived in that cottage when I was a little boy, and they would walk down to the dairy for their milk, and... every day; and they were very elderly, but they disappeared fairly quickly...

BH: Mm-hmm. So they got the milk just straight from the cow virtually... no pasteurising... was there any pasteurisation? I'm not sure what... when did that start?

NM: No... oh well, there would be pasteurisation, the milk, as far as I was concerned, at Chapelcroft, all went to the *Carnation* factory in Dumfries.

BH: Right.

NM: And, there were one or two people who came for milk... neighbours; there was a large tower-house – Elshields Tower, two fields away – and there were people... Colonel and Mrs. Johnson, and she was the honourable Mrs. Johnson, [26] she was called the 'horrible Mrs. Johnson' by us...

BH: [Laughs]

NM: ... cos she was awful; but they kept as... well, I suppose they were minor aristocracy and aristocracy tend to have a liking for pigs, and they did keep quite a lot of pigs... they had a pig-man called Sam, who would be perhaps a soldier with Colonel Johnson I imagine... Sam had that resigned look on his face, he'd seen it all you know; and occasionally we were summonsed – I sometimes went with my Uncle Jimmy over to Elshields – because he would be invited over to castrate pigs.

[Both laugh]

NM: And that was always a bit of an escapade...

BH: So you were the assistant?

NM: Yes, I was there to help hold... and, of course, on the farm, occasionally the [27] vets would come – not very often – I don't remember much illness; there were quite high calf mortality, I used to think, and looking back it was quite high, and I tend to think... I don't... I wouldn't like to miscall my uncle because he was very kind to me, but I don't think he was best at rearing young calves; and he was in charge of rearing young calves...

BH: Mm-hmm.

NM: ... often on a farm, the farmer's wife was better to be given that job because she had more patience.

BH: Yes. Mm-hmm.

NM: But occasionally the vets would come from Lockerbie, and I used think 'oh, that's quite a nice job', but I never really thought much more about it.

BH: Yes. Little did you know so many years on that's what you would end up doing.

NM: No, no. They always came on Volkswagen Beetles... Mr. Pearson was – [28] I never thought it was a particularly suitable car – but he couldn't see past the Volkswagen Beetle, and that was his favourite [Laughs].

BH: Right. Yes, yes. So, well, fast forward, of course, you qualified as a vet; and then...

NM: Yes, yes, in '68... and got married, a fortnight later... and we moved to Lockerbie, where I had seen practice.

BH: Yes, as a student? Like a formal attachment as a student?

NM: As a student, yes. The practice I saw, was the practice that served the farm at Chapelcroft, and I became an assistant there, with Mr. Findlay, because they had this

vacancy, and he provided a house, so we were quite well appointed... a fortnight after starting, Mr. Findlay unfortunately died, and he was the only... I was the [29] sole vet in the practice, so that was a baptism of fire...

BH: Oh gosh.

NM: ... because I was a naïve, very naïve and green... and I got some support, on at least one occasion, from Mr. Kennedy at Thornhill, when I was in difficulty... I would phone him up, and on one occasion he did come and see me, and we were dealing with an outbreak of lead poisoning, I remember, in calves...

BH: Oh. How would that have come about?

NM: Oh, from lead paint, and so on...

BH: Yes, yes...

NM: ... calves licking paint, lead-based paint.

BH: Really, mm-hmm.

NM: And, you know, after they've been fed, and milking, you know, they're always wanting to lick things...

BH: Yes, yes.

NM: So... but yes, that was quite a baptism of fire; and I had...

BH: Mm-hmm.

NM: But we survived and kept the practice going... the practice had to be sold, [30] and... was valued, and, of course, I was asked if I was... wanted to purchase it, but the sums of money involved seemed to be outrageous, and I was naïve, I had insufficient experience, and I... I quite... I've always been quite happy to be led by the older generation, and I'd gone to this position in Lockerbie hoping to follow in Mr. Findlay's shadow for a while to get some experience; and because the soul died in a fortnight after starting, that didn't happen...

BH: Yes, yes.

NM: So, we were happy to keep it going, but Mrs. Findlay sold the practice in... the six months on, in December '68, and then we moved... I became an assistant in Arbroath, which... I didn't know Arbroath...

BH: Right.

[31]

NM: ...but it was a... and there was a vacancy advertised in the veterinary record, and we went to Arbroath, and we were there for three years.

BH: Yes. Did you... so after three years you moved again... did you ever... have you worked back in Dumfries and Galloway?

NM: No.

BH: No. So the Lockerbie job was your first and only... yes, yes.

NM: That was the only... yes; that was the only one Betty, yes, yes; I haven't gone back at all, and, no... we moved to the east coast, to Arbroath...

BH: Yes, yes.

NM: Which... the farming side of it I found... well, I suppose being in Angus it was the fact... well they were a variety of farms, but there were also a proportion of very prosperous farms because the land is highly fertile there; but nevertheless, [32] when we moved brucellosis was... it wasn't really a problem in Lockerbie, in Dumfriesshire when I... as far as I was concerned, in my youth, but it was very much a problem up in Angus at that time...

BH: Yes, yes, yes.

NM: ... in the late '60s; because I spent a lot of time vaccinating cattle against brucellosis... but there were quite a few small dairies around Arbroath... there were at least three small dairies who retailed milk in the town... in Arbroath in the '70s...

BH: Right. Yes, yes. Gosh, yes.

NM: ... early '70s; and it was all raw milk then, you know.

BH: Yes. So what about later links to Dumfries and Galloway – not for employment, obviously – but... and current links with Dumfries and Galloway?

NM: Current links... later links... well, we visited, of course, because my mother [33] remained in Dumfries, and when children were young we would holiday down there, and uncle and aunts et cetera, so... and it kept going really, until my mother died in 1992; and after that things kind of fell away really...

BH: Mm-hmm.

NM: ... and the... my uncle and aunt on the farm had died prior to that, so... and the farm had been sold... and really we... I haven't really any links really now at all...

BH: Now... yes...

NM: Occasionally, we usually have a pilgrimage once a year at least, down there... and note the changes that have occurred et cetera, but...

BH: Mm-hmm, yes. Well, it's been an interesting story... I wonder, Norman is [34] there anything else that you can think of that we haven't touched on... that you'd like to mention?

NM: I don't think there is, Betty.

BH: No?

NM: I think that's pretty much it.

BH: Well, thank you very much indeed.

NM: Not at all, thank you.

BH: Thank you.

(NM: Thank you; I'm sorry I've rambled on a bit...

BH: No, no...)