

Interviewee: Donald Shamash (DS)	Interviewers: Gordon Cowan (GC) and Mike Duguid (MD)
Date of Interview: 28 March 2018	Ref: DG53-1-1-1T

TITLE	<i>Gordon Cowan and Mike Duguid interview Donald Shamash.</i>
REGION	<i>Dumfries and Galloway</i>
SUBJECTS/KEYWORDS	<i>Kirkcudbright artists' community, community life, Lena Alexander, David Sassoon, Charles Oppenheimer, childhood memories.</i>
COUNTY	<i>Dumfries and Galloway</i>
TOWN	<i>Kirkcudbright</i>
DATE OF INTERVIEW	<i>28/03/18</i>
INTERVIEWER	<i>Gordon Cowan and Mike Duguid</i>
YEAR RANGE	<i>2018</i>
SUMMARY	<i>Gordon Cowan and Mike Duguid interview Donald Shamash about his life in and memories of Kirkcudbright. They discuss the various artists around the town that Donald knew such as Lena Alexander, David Sassoon and Charles Oppenheimer. They also discuss other artists that were well known figures of the town, such as Jessie M. King and Anna Hotchkis. They also discuss the ways in which Kirkcudbright has changed as a town. Donald talks about his views on Kirkcudbright's galleries.</i>

Donald Shamash– DS; Gordon Cowan – GC; Mike Duguid – MD.

Keywords: Early Memories; Lena Alexander; David Sassoon; Charles Oppenheimer; Changes to Kirkcudbright; Kirkcudbright Galleries.

Early Memories – 0h 00m 00s

MD: Well, good afternoon, I'm Mike Duguid and I'm here with Gordon Cowan at Oakley Court, interviewing Donald Shamash for the Artists Remembered Project. So, maybe I could start by asking- well, my first question would be have you always lived in Kirkcudbright?

DS: Well, I was born- I was born in Kirkcudbright and I went to school here, then I went to study in Glasgow for five years and then I went to live in South Africa for four years, and since then I've been back here.

MD: Right.

DS: In Kirkcudbright, yeah.

MD: So, going back to early memories of Kirkcudbright as a place, eh, what would you- what would you say would be your kind of early memories of the place?

DS: It was very- everything was very much quieter. There weren't so many cars. It was- eh, people walked. People did things that... Other than- eh, other than being inside listening- watching television, or obviously not playing with... Eh, telephones and the like. And, eh, yeah, there was more emphasis on doing things, I would say.

MD: Mm.

DS: Yeah.

MD: And in terms of artists then, what would be your earliest memory of any artist that you have come across?

DS: Well, the earliest memory, I don't actually remember it-

MD: Mm.

DS: -but I know from the fact that I had my portrait painted by Lena Alexander when I was about two. In fact, also my three- my three brothers also had theirs done, and my mother thought that two-year-old boys should have- shouldn't have their hair cut, so... So, it looks like there's all girls [*laughter*]... And, eh, yeah. But I don't remember her from that time, I remember her from later on.

MD: Uhuh.

DS: She was a personality.

MD: Was she?

Lena Alexander – 0h 02m 00s

DS: She got around on her bicycle. Was it said that latterly she did have a little... A little bit of a drink problem, but who am I to know these things.

MD: Uhuh, right.

DS: And, eh- but she did do, for old times' sake, we got- my son, when he was a similar age, had his portrait done and I think it was quite clear- I can show you the portraits actually, and it's quite clear that she was better at portrait painting when she did mine than she was later on, in fact [*laughter*].

MD: Aye.

DS: The later on one probably wasn't, eh...

MD: Aye.

DS: Mm, wasn't really up to standard.

MD: Uhuh. And, eh, what do you remember about her, as a personality?

DS: She was... She was a very- very warm person, I thought.

MD: Uhuh.

DS: Ye know, she encouraged you, ye know, because I don't remember her doing me, but I remember when my son- but my son, she was nice to him such that- because, ye know, a two-year-old doesn't sit very still for long periods of time but she, ye know, she chatted to him and she was very nice, very sweet with him.

MD: Mm.

GC: Was she married?

DS: I don't know of a husband but I mean, eh... I don't believe she was but I don't know.

GC: No.

DS: I think not, but, eh... Yeah, her early portraits, I thought, were really good.

MD: Mm.

GC: Yeah.

MD: I suppose her trademark was her flowers, weren't they? The bunches of flowers-

DS: Oh, right.

MD: -seemed to be her trademark paintings.

DS: Yeah. I thought, I mean, I've seen a lot of portraits. You go into peoples' houses here, and there are many of them.

GC: Yeah.

MD: Oh, are there?

DS: People who have been, eh... Who have been brought up in Kirkcudbright...

MD: Mm.

David Sassoon – 0h 04m 00s

DS: Their pictures are there and, eh... And, eh, yeah.

MD: Mm. So, who else then? Any other-

DS: I knew-

MD: -artists that are from the early days?

DS: I knew David Sassoon.

MD: Oh right.

DS: Really well. His son Joey, eh... Worked for my dad, before he went into teaching because we had the poultry farm and he sort of managed the thing but he, Joey, his heart wasn't in it and he, ye know, and he wanted to go and teach and he... And he did a- I think he studied and he became a teacher but, eh... Being Jewish, ye know, sometimes there were celebrations where we- we needed a bit of a Jewish people-

MD: Uhuh?

DS: -and David would come along.

MD: Right.

DS: And he had a- he had a selective hearing problem, I would say. He, uh...

MD & GC: *[laughter]*

DS: Ye know, if you were talking about things that ye were supposed to do, or even about his art or anything like that, he tended not to hear you.

MD: Mm.

DS: When ye mentioned golf, he- he'd... He immediately became animated because, ye know, we were quite keen golfers and he, I think he was quite a keen golfer but, eh- and he had ideas how to play and he thought about it a lot and he would come and say 'is this- what about this bit? Do you think that-?', ye know, and, eh, 'I've been having trouble', he'd say, and he'd demonstrate what he'd been doing with his swings, he says, 'what do you think?' and *[laughter]*... He was a lovely, lovely, a very lovely man. He really was. He was the kind of person that you... Really nice to spend time with. He was very special.

MD: And was there a handicap golf- was he-?

DS: Well, ah. He wasn't a great golfer, I know that.

MD: Right, right.

DS: But, eh... I can't actually remember playing with him. I may well have done but I can't actually remember playing with him. I'm sure- I'm sure I must have done at some point but, eh...

Charles Oppenheimer – 0h 06m 00s

MD: But he wouldn't have been a single handicap golfer?

DS: Oh no.

MD: No, no.

GC: *[laughter]*

DS: Oh no.

MD: Probably a duffer like me, yes.

DS: No, no, he was... I don't believe he was a single handicap golfer *[laughter]*.

MD: And can you remember any of his art, then? Can you remember his paintings? Did you ever go to their house?

DS: Well, I've seen- I've seen many of his paintings. I love his paintings, watercolours particularly. And they were very, very special and, eh... I don't know... If my mum had any or, but eh... He was, as Joey was and Betty, very good family friends.

MD: Mmhm, mmhm.

DS: And so, we did see them from time to time.

MD: Mmhm.

GC: Talking about golf, Oppenheimer played golf as well.

DS: Aha *[laughter]*. Oppenheimer... Oppenheimer played golf a lot. And he was always- he used to his house, where he lived at the time when he died, was behind the first green at Kirkcudbright.

GC: Uhuh.

DS: And, eh, the first green- the first hole at Kirkcudbright's actually called Oppenheimer because of, eh...

GC: Because of the connection.

DS: Because of the connection. And, eh, he always used to play in a white jacket.

MD & GC: Mmhm.

DS: And, eh... Well, he wouldn't, say, hit the ball, he sort of wafted it [*laughter*]. And he always used to- there always used to be the same four: there was Mr Donald who played with him and also, a Mr and Mrs Williamson. And the only one who was any good at all, actually, was Mrs Williamson. She was [*laughter*]... She was a decent golfer, yeah, she was quite good. And she lived at a house that was near where the railway bridge was in Kirkcudbright. That's just at the...

MD: At the Tongland end?

DS: Yes. Yes, just- just... No, not that railway bridge, the other- [?]-

MD: [?]

DS: When they came over the bridge. Is that Burnside...? What's-?

0h 08m 00s

MD: Loaning? Burnside Loaning?

DS: Is Burnside Loaning the one that comes down to the main road?

MD: Yeah, yeah.

DS: Just where the Mayfield Hotel used to be?

MD: Mm, mm.

DS: Anyway, that's where the Williamsons lived. But they used to- they used to... Just gentle- a gentle game of golf. It was- it was really like gentlemen and a lady playing golf. They knew- ye know, they knew their pace and, ye know, we as kids- we were kids and, ye know, we didn't play behind them. Ye know, ye couldn't. They would give you that sort of look that says 'uh, children...'

MD: Know your place.

DS: Seen and not heard, ye know? Yes, that's right. But yeah, she was very good and he was- I believe he was the captain of the golf club many, many years previous to that. But interesting thing with Oppenheimer, because my late father, it was a nine-hole course at the time, and my late father used- he'd want to come and watch us play golf, his four boys play golf, and he would come, drive his car up to somewhere just along the first fairway and from there he was able to walk right up to the top of the golf course. And with his binoculars, he used to survey- and after nine holes, you can pretty well see the whole course from there and, eh, after nine holes, he could more or less tell you what your score had been-

MD: Mm, mm.

DS: -and how badly, or otherwise, you had played.

MD: Mm.

DS: Anyway, em... When Father started to fail and he couldn't get up there, brother Edward had the idea that we would ask Oppenheimer to paint the... To paint... To do a painting from the top of the golf course.

MD: From that view? Yeah, yeah.

DS: And, eh... So, eh, we approached him and he agreed- he agreed to do this. And, eh, I think... I don't remember the exact timing but we never ever saw him up there, ye know, we thought we mebbe would see him up there with his easel.

0h 10m 08s

MD: Mm.

DS: He never ever appeared. And anyway, that- he died – '61?

MD: '61.

DS: He died in '61 and we thought, oh, well, he obviously hadn't got round to doing it but sometime after his death whoever was... I don't know if he had family but whoever was distributing the estate came with a picture that he had started – so it was an unfinished picture by him – and the interesting thing is that he hadn't been there to paint it. But what he had done, he used to do railway posters-

MD: Yes.

GC: Yeah.

DS: -they're very famous and there's one of the Dee, the bend in the Dee that comes in- I can actually show you, I've got it here.

GC: Mm.

DS: And, eh... And he had obviously remembered that – don't need to go up there, I've already done this.

MD: Mm, mm.

DS: And... And you can tell that it's- ye know, it's a copy of the same thing because there are little trees that aren't in fact actually there-

MD: Yeah.

DS: -but he's put in there anyway, ye know, because [*laughter*]... because he'd just remembered. So, what he'd actually done, he'd, uh... He had... He'd just pretty well copied on a big...

MD: Mm.

DS: On a big board, he'd pretty well- he'd started copying what he'd done before.

MD: Ahh.

DS: And he'd got in it- I mean, one of my nephews has the painting... But he, ye know, he'd got the nice sweep of the river as it comes round, it's very... Ye know, they'd obviously thought that was a great place to do the- to do a poster of the... The- ye know, to advertise coming to Kirkcudbright by rail, which is coming down this way by rail.

MD: Mm.

DS: But I don't suppose you can complain because he never charged us anything for it. Ye know, I presume-

MD: Yeah.

DS: -I can imagine it must be worth something, just the fact it was painted by Oppenheimer.

0h 12m 00s

MD: Mm, mm.

GC: Yeah.

MD: I presume there was something on it or that- has it been commissioned by your dad then? IT must've been some connection between him, or the executor, saying...

DS: Well, no, they just gave it. They thought- they thought, well, it's something, it's probably-

MD: But they must've known it was for you? Sort of...

DS: Yes.

MD: It was being painted for a family.

DS: I suppose they must have done.

MD: Yeah, mm.

DS: I don't know how they do that, maybe he had a...

GC: Yeah.

DS: Kept a record of what he was doing, I don't know, I'd never...

MD: So, what can you remember of him as an artist? I mean, did you...? *[mumbling]*

DS: Well, I've seen his work and I mean- and his work has obviously become very, very popular and it is- it is very good. I think he's a wonderful artist and, eh... Made thousands of pounds, yeah, understandable.

MD: So, did you ever go to his studio, for example?

DS: No.

MD: No?

DS: No.

MD: Right.

DS: No, never at all. Eh, I think brother Edward has at least one of his paintings.

MD: Mm.

DS: I think that my... My dad had one that was actually an unusual one because it's a boat painted and it looks as though it's somewhere, ye know, in the Middle East, in mebbe Egypt or somewhere like that-

MD: Mm, mm.

DS: -with a boat in the water.

MD: Mm.

DS: I'm sure that's an Oppenheimer. Most of the ones we've got- Edward has one of- had one of Southernness-

MD: Mmhm.

DS: -at the lighthouse, because-

GC: Oh yeah.

DS: -he was a... He was a former captain at Southernness Golf Club.

MD: Mm.

DS: And, eh, he got that and Margaret has it now, of course.

MD: Mmhm.

DS: Yeah.

GC: What about Jessie M. King? I don't want to date you, but... *[laughter]*

DS: I-

GC: Would that be '40?

DS: When did she die?

MD: She did well, I'll say. It must've been quite early on, I can tell you, but...

GC: Or E.A. Taylor?

MD: You might have remembered her.

DS: I knew of her but I didn't... I wasn't-

GC: Because she was quite a prominent person in the town, wasn't she?

DS: Mmhm, I believe so.

GC: Well, flamboyant.

DS: I believe so but I never knew her.

GC: No.

DS: Mm.

MD: She died in 1949.

GC: Ah.

DS: Ah, well, I was only six years old then, I was born in '43, so...

0h 14m 02s

GC: Because there was quite a coterie of them-

DS: Mmhm.

GC: -down on Greengate's Close.

DS: Yes. Yeah.

MD: Well, Anna Hotchkis. I mean, she's the one who lived 'til ninety-nine, so do you remember her? It was 1984 she died. Ye can remember her? She'd be quite a prominent figure in the town.

DS: Yes, she possibly was but I didn't really know her.

MD: Mmhm.

GC: Yeah, she had a couple of sisters who were also artists, didn't she?

MD: Mmhm.

DS: Mm. Yeah, no, I didn't...

GC: No.

DS: I didn't know them at all.

MD: Yeah, Dorothy Hotchis, wasn't it?

DS: Mmhm. They're the ones- the ones that- they're not at the- the ones that...

MD: Miles Johnston? William Miles Johnston? He used to make these little wooden figures.

DS: Yeah.

MD: I don't know if you've ever seen any birds? Birds-

DS: Yes, I've seen...

MD: Seen them?

DS: Seen his stuff but I've never...

MD: Yeah, no contact with him? The Dallases, who lived next door to the Tolbooth. Um...

DS: I didn't-

MD: Eccentric pair, I understand.

DS: Yes. Yeah, they were known to be eccentric.

MD: But you didn't have any dealings with them?

DS: I honestly didn't know them.

MD: Right, right.

DS: Yeah. I was trying to think of any others that I did...

MD: Mmhm.

DS: Eh, Tim Jeffs. When did he die?

MD: Tim Jeffs, '75.

DS: I think I remember him. I'm mebbe thinking of the wrong person but... Eh, he was a person that you tended to see about town.

MD: Uhuh?

GC: Yeah.

DS: If I'm thinking of the right person.

MD: Right.

DS: And, eh, I didn't really know...

MD: Mmhm.

DS: Know much about him.

MD: What about the Lochheads, the potters? Did ye know Tommy Lochhead?

DS: Well, I know Wilson very well because, eh...

MD: Mmhm, mmhm.

DS: I mean, he's obviously much younger-

MD: Mm.

DS: -and his dad... His dad I remember, ye know, working up in the pottery there and doing stuff. And Wilson's sister has done a thing for Brother Alan, who- Alan had a daughter who had cerebral palsy who died...

MD: Mm.

DS: And they decided to have a wall, a ceramic wall in the gar- he's got a very big garden - he's got this wall with ceramic pieces in. It's very, very beautiful.

0h 16m 03s

MD: Mm, mm.

GC: It is.

DS: It's starting to- I think it needs some repair work done to it but it was- it was, eh...

MD: Tommy Lochhead made it?

DS: One of his- no, it was one of his daughters.

MD: Ah, right, right.

DS: I don't know how many daughters he has. But a daughter of his did it-

MD: Mm.

DS: -a lovely, lovely gem.

MD: Mmhm. Ah. So, I mean, going back to just Kirkcudbright in general then, from the early days, you said it was quieter, less traffic and how would you describe its changes over the years that you've seen since then?

DS: Yeah, eh... I mean, everything is busier, everything is- there are more- are there more people? Maybe.

MD:

DS: Certainly more cars, more bustle about the place. It seemed to be that you could- I could walk from Tongland to Kirkcudbright and-

MD: Mmhm. In the middle of the road [*laughter*]?

DS: Well, I did on one occasion play golf along the road [*laughter*]... From Tongland. I had this project whereby I would play golf starting in our garden, hitting it over Tongland Cemetery and [*laughter*]... And trying to find it in the long grass somewhere else but then playing all the way to Kirkcudbright to the first green. And, eh, I suppose there were some cars. It was a good bit where you could run the ball along the road.

MD: Yeah?

DS: It would run nicely down past the Power Station then. And, eh- but getting it round and over the bridge was more of [*laughter*]... Was more of a problem. But ye know, cars weren't an issue.

MD: Yeah.

DS: Ye know, you weren't thinking 'will somebody be coming round the corner-

MD: Right. I

DS: -because, ye know, there weren't so many of them about and, uh...

MD: So, presumably you cycled. Did you cycle a lot?

DS: No, I didn't cycle at all.

MD: Oh, really?

DS: No, no.

MD: Goodness.

DS: Wasn't a thing that...

MD: Right.

DS: I think my parents would have thought bicycles were dangerous.

MS: Dangerous. Yeah, yeah.

DS: [*laughter*] So, they would come and take us-

MD: A Shanks's pony, was it?

DS: So, yeah, a Shanks's- yeah, but they would take us by car. We were quite spoiled, I think.

0h 18m 03s

MD: Mmhm. So, you lived at Tongland?

DS: We lived in Tongland.

MD: In Tongland? Ah.

DS: Yeah, well... Yes, until my... My father died when I was still there but they lived on there, my brother lived there with my mum, and he got married and Margaret and him- and the first of the children were born there.

MD: Mm.

DS: And then they moved to [?]. But, eh- but that was always the family home.

MD: Mmhm.

DS: Yeah.

MD: Cause historically, Kirkcudbright was always seen as being a town that kind of lacked business acumen and get-up-and-go, and Daniel Defoe writes in the late eighteenth century about this sleepy old town that didn't seem to have any sense of get-up-and-go.

DS: Uhuh. Yeah.

MD: And yet, it's an incredibly attractive place.

DS: Yes. Yeah, I mean apart from the artists, I mean, obviously there's been a lot of farming involvement locally and the fish thing has taken off-

GC: Mmhm.

DS: -eh, with the development of the scallop fishing.

MD: Mm.

DS: And of course, well, we had a bit of business going with the poultry.

MD: Mmhm.

DS: And there's an old- where the poultry factory at Tongland is now, very busy place, must be a hundred people working there, doing fibreglass work.

MD: Mm. Oh right.

DS: Yes, it's a very big operation. It's GPM Limited.

MD: Mm.

DS: And, eh... Yeah.

MD: So, the poultry farm's still on the go, is it? No?

DS: Not- it's still in use but not as a poultry farm.

MD: Oh, I see.

DS: It's used as a fibreglass manufacturing place.

MD: Mm. And what about Kempleton, is that-?

DS: Kempleton is- the buildings are still down there leased out...

MD: Right.

DS: To people doing-

MD: But is that where the poultry farm was?

DS: There were two. There were two.

MD: Oh, there were two.

DS: Yeah.

Changes to Kirkcudbright – 0h 20m 00s

MD: Kempleton and Tongland?

DS: Kempleton and Tongland.

MD: Ah right. Right.

DS: Yeah.

MD: Uhuh.

DS: And, uh...

MD: Gordon, do you have any-?

GC: No. No, no. I mean it resonates, to some extent, with Andy Campbell's comments but the scale of things has changed. He said you could go down Castle Street and you wouldn't have to go anywhere else – you'd get everything you would need.

DS: Mmhm.

GC: Because all the shops would be half a dozen grocer's shops in those days.

DS: Yes.

GC: This sort of thing, and that-

DS: That's one of my childhood memories is, ye know, like ye do, is going with my mum and then go shopping at Cooper's, which is now the Co-op, but it wasn't as it is now. It was a- there was a counter all the way round the outside of it.

GC: Yeah.

DS: And, uh, you would go up to the counter go- and whoever was helping you would say, 'right, some flour' and she'd go rustling off and get the flour.

MD: And sometimes up the steps, probably.

DS: Up the steps and go round and round. And sugar-

GC: Yeah.

DS: -and this, that and the other. And you'd try to be helpful and things, and while you're there, ye know, because you get to know where the things...

GC: Yeah.

DS: Uh, the things were. And, eh- but they were fast on their feet there, to me.

MD: So, it was a real shopping experience then?

DS: Yes. Well, yes.

MD: Interaction with the community.

DS: Yes, yeah.

MD: Aye.

GC: Wait, was there any sort of feeling that the artists had sort of put their stamp on the place or were they just accessories, as it were?

DS: I think there is more awareness of the artists now than there was then.

GC: Yeah, it's been reinvented.

DS: I mean, there have been... Eh, well, you know, since the "artists' town", what's going on at the Gallery-

GC: Yeah.

DS: But other things prior to that: the Tolbooth being, eh, set up in the beautiful way it is.

MD: The Harbour Cottage Gallery-

DS: The Harbour Cottage Gallery.

MD: -being resurrected, yeah.

DS: Eh, Broughton House – all these places. I mean, this has brought the level, ye know, the profile of Kirkcudbright as an artists' town...

GC: Yeah, yeah.

DS: Much- very, very much indeed. And, eh, yeah and it's now an important... Very much more...

Kirkcudbright Galleries – 0h 22m 04s

GC: Yeah.

DS: It's much more prominent now, the art-

GC: Yeah.

DS: -in the area than it was before.

MD: So, what's your thoughts on the new gallery?

DS: I think it's a wonderful thing. I mean, it's eh... One wonders if we've got too many galleries but I don't know if you can ever have that.

MD: Mm.

DS: It's, eh- I'm looking forward to spending time there.

GC: Mm.

DS: And, eh... I'm just impatient for it to open, I guess.

MD: Yeah, I had a sneak preview a couple of weeks ago, inside. We can only do the bottom floor but it'll look spectacular. It's completely transformed inside the...

DS: That's wonderful.

MD: Yeah.

DS: I'm looking forward to-

GC: And we've got the Johnston School, as well, so.

MD: Mmhm.

DS: Mmhm. Yeah.

MD: Mm. So, anything else you can think of, Donald?

DS: Not really, not... Hope I've been of some-

MD: Yeah.

GC: Oh, absolutely

MD: Very useful. Thank you very much indeed. Thank you.