

Interviewee: Alastair Neil Robertson Niven, Dr
UoS Dates: 1970 - 1978
Role(s): Lecturer in English Studies



Interview summary:

Start 00:30 – AN was given a permanent job offer at the University of Stirling in the English Studies Department in 1970. He had been working at Leeds on a temporary contract. He specialised in Commonwealth (now called post-colonial) literature. He knew Stirling had a reputation for being an innovative new place. He was born in Scotland; he had known Robin Mayhead, a senior lecturer in English Studies, in Ghana.

03:30 – On the way to his interview at Stirling AN's train broke down which made him forty minutes late. He describes a rawness about the buildings but it was still beautiful. He worried that it might be isolated. He believes there were maybe 15 people in the Department when he started; they had all worked abroad which was a principle of Tommy Dunn's appointments strategy. He taught in an area that was very new in the '70s and felt the University was courageous for picking up this area of study; he taught African, Caribbean and Asian writing in English.

09:00 – AN was able to meet important writers at overseas conferences, the University paid for his travel. He organised a conference and brought such writers as Wilson Harris, Randolph Stow, Thomas Keneally, Fleur Adcock, Chinua Achebe, and Ngugi wa Thiong'oto the department. He would often host and house the visitors himself.

10:50 – The English Department based its structure on a system from the University of Ghana in which students would study novels, plays and poems. It was unusual for students to be studying the post-colonial texts that they were reading at the time, as Stirling students read a wider range than other British students. The global material in AN's area brought out something in students that wasn't brought out by other material. Many felt they were free to say what they wanted to as opposed to the well-established books. He can recall Iain Banks being a student and getting an A++ on an essay on Wilson Harris, a metaphysical writer from Guyana.

14:39 – AN ran specialist courses that weren't done anywhere else in the UK, courses on contemporary African, Caribbean, and Indian writing. He was able to explore different areas of the world. He sometimes co-ran courses with John Riddy. Dissertations came out of his courses. People would write on particular authors or take a theme. AN was happy that Stirling was ahead of many other English departments in the UK.

17:00 – AN and his wife lived originally in Dunblane for the first half of their time in Stirling. He recalls the 1972 notorious visit of the Queen which he believes was due to the bad behaviour of the students and the crass behaviour of the University's administration. Sir Derek Lang was a bit too sure of himself thinking nothing would happen. After this AN became a warden in Murray Hall on campus where he spent nearly three years. He dealt with students on drugs and those facing personal crises. He recalls the University having a great drug issue. One particular story he recalls is of two men in Murray Hall who jumped out of a top floor window whilst on drugs. It became too much for

him and his wife and they moved back to Dunblane.

21:33 – AN left and took up the post of the Director General of the Africa Centre in London. People thought he was reckless to give up working at Stirling. He couldn't see himself staying there permanently. He later joined the Arts Council of Great Britain and was Director of Literature for ten years and then moved to the British Council, also as Director of Literature. His final post was as Principal of Cumberland Lodge. He always looks back on Stirling with respect and views the English Department as one of the best in the country.

26:00 – During his time at Stirling, AN was a member of the dramatics society, SUDS. He both directed and acted in many productions. He recalls that the professional side of the MacRobert was excellent. Anthony Phillips made the MacRobert excellent with performances by Scottish Opera and many other great companies at the time. One of the greatest productions he remembers was Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*; he saw it in 1973.

32:20 – Extremely sociable atmosphere. People often throwing dinner parties which had great food and great hosts.

33:20 – AN always felt you had to leave the University to experience other exciting things outside of it. There was a little bit of insularity, all people would talk about was Stirling as if it was the only thing in the world.


34:30 – The interviewer recalls going to lectures of fellow members of staff and learning a great deal from them. AN remembers being the junior that wasn't as established as his seniors. He recalls fellow staff such as David Buchan, Alasdair Macrae, Michael Alexander, Norman MacCaig and Robin Mayhead. Felt strongly he learnt from these people. Interviewer recalls the group introducing books to one another at the Allangrange.

38:22 – He felt that he made more of a contribution than he realised to the Department. The '70s were a golden age for people who wanted to teach in a university.

39:39 – The University had a built-in sabbatical system that most people undertook after seven years' service. AN combined his sabbatical with an exchange with another lecturer in Denmark. Sabbatical leave was common at Stirling but not elsewhere. AN sees Stirling as enlightened in a lot of ways.

41:55 – AN looks forward to the 50th anniversary. Many thought the University wouldn't survive the damage that befell it after the Queen's visit, people weren't keen to come to the University. It weathered that and in AN's eyes achieved so much in specialist departments.

[Ends 42:45]

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