



Interviewee: George McLeod
Dates: 1997
Role(s): Technical Specialist
Union Representative



Interview summary:

00.00 Interviewer Christina Sommerville (CS) invites George McLeod (GM) to describe his varied background and what attracted him to come to Stirling. GM explains he got a temporary job many years ago at the University of Bournemouth to deal with COSH regulations – Control of Substances Hazardous to Health - which had just been brought in. He replaced a colleague Paul Neller. The University assumed a chemistry technician would be able to handle this within 6 months. It became clear that health and safety would be a full-time job. There was a lot of chemistry taught in the University and GM was then employed as full-time chemistry technician with Paul Neller as Safety Officer and GM as his assistant.

01.40 In 1996 GM saw a flier sent out by Stirling University saying they were looking for a micromorphology technician to replace one who was retiring. GM had to look up the term in the dictionary. GM had studied at Aberdeen but spent time visiting a friend who studied at Stirling, so knew the campus, Murray Hall, Airthrey Castle. When he looked up micromorphology he decided it was interesting. Also, he had been in Bournemouth for 6 or 7 years and felt it was long enough and had also always intended to return to Scotland. He applied and was interviewed just before Christmas 1996 in the Environmental Science Department by Donald Davidson (DD) and Muriel McLeod (MM), who was the technician in the lab at the time and whose job was being replaced.. There were many other candidates, from an archeology background, as micromorphology is a main tool of archeology, and much younger than GM. He felt unlikely to get the job because of the salary he would need, coming from a post where he ran 4 laboratories and had 3 staff. He was therefore surprised to be offered the job and asked for some time to think it over. In doing so he decided it was a step backwards in his career as he was running an analytical lab in Bournemouth with state-of-the-art instruments, whereas he had seen on his tour of the department at Stirling that it was very poorly equipped in comparison. He phoned Donald to say he had decided not to take the post. Donald was rushing out to Midnight Mass at Dunblane Cathedral and suggested GM take the weekend to think it over for longer. Over that weekend GM's wife suggested he re-think to avoid wondering 'what if' in future. Their daughter was 4 years old and about to start school in an area GM did not really like and he wanted a better quality of life for her. So he phoned on the Monday to say he would accept the job. DD said 'I knew you would', that is all.

07.30 DD wanted MM to train GM in the techniques of micromorphology, which is highly specialized. Making soil for the sections is an intricate process. University procedures did not allow for an overlap but DD was able to fund this overlap thanks to consultancy funds and employed GM for three months so that MM could train

GM. He and Muriel shared a surname but were not related., although, amusingly, some people had assumed she was his mother, passing on the role! Muriel was also a chemist so they had much in common and as she prepared for retirement she taught him the techniques she'd built up over the years. The key researcher in the department at the time was Donald Davidson. Head of Department, who had come from Strathclyde with his postgraduate student, Ian Simpson, later Professor Ian Simpson. Later Paul Adderley joined and these were the prime users of the laboratory. Dr Claire Wilson, who still works in the department, was later GM's first assistant Postgraduate in Micromorphology. Another postgraduate of the many who came through was Stephen Lancaster.

10.58 CS asks GM to explain the technique of micromorphology. He explains that, whereas a thin section of rock for use in geology can be made in half an hour, a soil thin section takes 3 months. GM explains the many phases of the process developed at Stirling to remove moisture from the soil and prepare a soil thin section. Very few laboratories do this work. Many archeology units would like to use micromorphology but don't have the facilities and look around the world for labs that would do this work. Many years ago Stirling University decided to commercialize it and provide this service to archeology units, universities and researchers around the world. It's a costly enterprise because it is time-consuming and labour intensive. By the time GM left, it cost £150 per slide. GM built up a reputation for the work and Stirling became effectively the European centre for this work. Later he and his colleague Claire Wilson developed the use of an electron microscope in the process. He also received soil samples from Australia, US, Israel and Africa. Many universities were closing down facilities and running down geology departments. As a sideline, GM trained several geology technicians from other universities over the years to make thin soil sections. Unfortunately, this micromorphology service is no longer available. After GM and other staff retired, the person appointed to his post was not a geoarchaeology technician. As far as GM is aware, the laboratory and very expensive equipment is still there. GM and CS discuss how interest in subject areas goes in cycles and become popular again.

21.10 CS asks GM about his involvement with students' projects. GM was initially involved only with postgraduate research and academic staff research. Later he did some teaching as he had experience in teaching the LRSC in Chemistry during his earlier time at Bournemouth University, which is a Licentiate of the Royal Society of Chemistry. So, later, GM became involved in undergraduate teaching in two modules with both Paul Adderley and Ian Simpson. He talked to the students about thin section production and had them analyse thin sections in the laboratory using the scanning electron microscope. GM felt it was valuable to give the students hands-on experience in the lab and enjoyed teaching. GM recalls that he had also been involved with some undergraduate teaching in his early days at Stirling for Environmental Science. He and another technician, Helen Ewan, took on teaching in place of a laboratory teaching technician, Chris Anderson, who had left. GM and his colleague had experience of the instruments and the expertise to teach their use to students. GM recalls a lot of contact with students doing their dissertation projects through instruments.

25.38 CS asks GM about the general atmosphere in the department at that time. GM remembers a relaxed and friendly environment in Environmental Science, recalling especially celebrations for retirements, for a good research assessment score or when students successfully completed their viva. Departmental 'grand days out' were organised to the West Highland Way or Loch Katrine, for example. There was also an annual departmental ceilidh at the Sword Hotel. The ceilidh is still taking place. Donald Davidson was the Head of Department, then Dr Ian Grieve, who was HOD when the university decided to merge the department with the Biology Department which had been struggling. GM recalls this as a tough time, as neither department wanted to merge. There were difficult issues, especially dealing with overstaffing in certain areas. There was a generous voluntary severance scheme, with 1 and a half year's salary, but staff still found the situation very difficult. GM did volunteer and was interviewed by David Hopkins, interim Head of what was to be the School of Biological and Environmental Science in the new structure. GM was turned down on the grounds that he would have to be replaced as the lab would have to continue and there would be no cost saving to the university. GM was motivated to apply mainly by frustration and was unsure of which direction to take in his career, for example, go back into chemistry or analytical work. However, many people from Biology did leave and those left felt less comfortable than before, less valued. GM felt that some of the team spirit and camaraderie was lost for a while, although people did build it up again and it evolved into a unit that is functioning well. They managed to get procedures in place. Difficulties in the merger arose because they were merging two technical teams with different structures. Working practices were very different. Environmental

Science had a flat structure, whereas Biology had a hierarchical structure. Eventually, these points were ironed out. Then, the university decided to change the structure from Schools back to Faculties, but without departments, replacing them with divisions.

34.20 The primary aim of the second iteration of in the new Faculties was that there would be no departments or heads of departments. Professor Ian Simpson fought for the retention of departments from an administrative point of view, because the Faculty as a unit was split across the campus. It now included Aquaculture in Pathfoot, Psychology, Biological and Environmental Sciences, and Computer Sciences and Maths. Psychology was no longer a STEM subject, so deciding on its location was a problem for many universities.

36.06 CS asks GM to describe how his role as health and safety officer developed. GM had been assistant safety officer at Bournemouth University and he felt that at Stirling there wasn't enough focus on health and safety in the laboratories or field work and offered to take it on. He discovered there was a Faculty Safety Committee and served as the Environmental Science Representative. He gradually encouraged risk assessment and achieved a more positive health and safety attitude in Environmental Science which carried on into SBES where GM continued as safety officer. He later left this role as he felt he didn't have the resources and support he needed.

40.35 CS asks GM to talk about his involvement in the Framework Agreement. GM describes this as a once in a generation change in Higher Education and was a major upheaval. The UK government realized that equality legislation could potentially have a serious impact on local government, the NHS or Higher Education and leave these sectors open to major equal pay and damages claims. As a result, the government asked these sectors to score and evaluate every level and every post. In the NHS, this was called Agenda for Change, in Higher Education, Framework Agreement. Stirling University used the HERA scheme, an acronym for the Higher Education Role Analysis, which had a 14-point system. GM describes the input of the individual in a role, who would score the post for communication, teamwork and other aspects. This response was then evaluated by role analysts, from HR and the Unions. GM recalls this as a period of good collaboration. The operation took place between 2004 and 2006. As a Unite representative at the time, GM was involved in evaluation. He recalls the system developed where a role would be given a white circle, if scored at its current level; a green circle if it warranted a higher grade; a red circle if the role scored lower than its current grade. He outlines the mechanisms adopted to handle problem cases sensitively.

49.09 Asked by CS if technicians felt correctly valued, GM explains the same evaluation process was completed for technical staff and confirmed his expectation that technicians in the university sector as a whole had been undervalued. Like academic staff, many were also doing teaching, research and admin. The evaluation process brought to light cases that needed to be rectified. CS asks about career progression for technicians and GM notes that across the university sector in the UK there was no clear career progression for technicians. GM became involved in 2004-2006 in the initiative HEaTED – Higher Education and Technicians Educational Development, started by Matt Levy at the University of Plymouth. The aim was to gain recognition for technicians, to promote technicians as professional staff and to provide career progression paths. A key moment was the first conference at the University of Manchester which underscored the need for a structure to value technical staff. Afterwards, GM spoke to Martin McCrindle of HR at Stirling and the university signed up to HEaTED, with GM taking the lead on that for many years.


56.46 Another initiative was the Technicians Commitment Initiative –TCI. After HEaTED had been in place for some years, those people involved realized that further impetus was needed to get recognition and professional status for technicians. The TCI initiative was the idea of a technician at Nottingham University, Kelly Vere, who was later awarded an MBE for services to education and technical sciences. Funding was obtained from funding councils in England and HEFCE for a questionnaire across the UK to find out the current situation of technical staff. Government statistics at the time showed a severe lack of technical staff and technical expertise in not only higher education, but in industry. There was a high demand for technicians. At the time, the Higher Education system was not producing technicians. At the same time, many of the technicians across the country were an ageing population, approaching retirement and with no succession planning, their expertise set to be lost. As a result of the findings, the TCI, working with the Science Council, generated professional qualifications for technical staff such as the RSci Tech and the RSci Registered Scientist and Chartered Scientist. Initially you had to be a member of a professional body, like the Royal Society of

Chemistry or the Institute of Science Technology, which GM joined, to get this registered scientist qualification. GM went to the inaugural conference where he heard an inspiring speech by Sir Paul Nurse, now Director of the Crick Institute in London. On returning to Stirling, GM spoke to Martin McCrindle and Stirling got on board with the TCI.

1.00.10 CS notes how interesting it is to have the different perspective, the non-academic staff perspective and asks if there is any further points GM wishes to make. GM explains that the term non-academic was itself something that was an issue many years ago. There were two negotiating committees in the university. One was the JNCC, the Joint Negotiating and Consultative Committee for the academic union. Then there was the Staff Consultative Group, which had representatives from all 3 campus unions. Only one sector of staff within the university had any negotiating rights, the academic staff. At that time, the university referred to staff as academic and non-academic. GM, as a union representative spoke to the director of HR and the University Secretary at that time, Kevin Clark, to discontinue the term non-academic as it defined the largest group of staff in the university by what they didn't do. Following this, the phrase support staff was coined and, nowadays, the term professional services is used. GM also pointed out the disparity between the unions' negotiating rights, with the Staff Consultative Group not having negotiating rights. It was agreed that those committees would be merged under the title CJNCC, the Combined Joint Negotiating and Consultative Committee, giving all 3 campus unions have equal negotiating rights on the same committee. GM likes to think he played a significant part in that.

1.03.27 CS thanks GM for talking about the various things he has been involved with in the university.

Ends

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