

Oral History Interview with Dr. Roger MacDonald
Conducted by Angela Baker, May 27, 1993
Transcription by Anne MacLean, July 30, 1999

RM: So you just go through these after and make notes?

AB: That's right. Make sure there's an outline for people to look at later on.

RM: I see.

AB: Okay. Well, let's start with some background information. Could you state your full name please?

RM: Must I?

AB: You can

RM: Roger Alfred, A-L-F-R-E-D, MacDonald.

AB: Okay. Where's your date and place of birth?

RM: Rumford, Maine, U.S.A., July 30th, 1943.

AB: Okay. Could you describe your educational background?

RM: Going how far back?

AB: University is fine.

RM: University? Saint Dunstan's University, Charlottetown, now part of the University of Prince Edward Island. B.A. with Honours, 1965; M.A., Dalhousie in English, 1968; Ph.D., University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, 1978.

AB: Okay. How many years have you been associated with Saint Mary's?

RM: I started teaching Saint Mary's in 1967. I was 23 years old, when I was first hired here. I hadn't finished my M.A. at the time, I was working on my thesis. So, I've been with Saint Mary's, what? Twenty-six years.

AB: Okay. So how, how's your role changed here over the years?

RM: Not a great deal, really. There isn't any noticeable change.

AB: Okay. So, how have your courses changed? What courses did you teach when you were first here?

RM: At the time, in English, we required two courses rather than one. Now we require only one. So, all of us, at the time, taught a first year, a second year and an advanced level

course. Now, we generally teach one introductory course and two other courses on a higher level. So, most of us have three different courses each year, whereas, well in the past, we tend to take two introductories, either first year or second year and one advanced.

AB: When did that change over?

RM: It evolved gradually. The second English requirement was dropped in the early seventies, about twenty years ago.

AB: So what was it like to be a faculty member, when you were here, in the sixties?

RM: Given that I was about the same age as most of the senior students, it was difficult the first couple years. Specially, I was only two years out of my B.A., at the time, myself. I spent two years at Dal on my masters. It required much more work as every new teacher experiences the first few years, when preparing courses, and so on.

AB: Okay. What did you notice your, in your colleagues? Do you notice a change over time in relation to things like gender and age and ethnic origin?

RM: Well, our department has always been a little unusual in the university. We've always had a fair representation of women when other departments had none. We [had] several, even now. We are all conscious of that now, but we've been conscious of it all along. And when I started here in 1967, Lillian Falk, and Janet Baker were here. They still are. Lillian is just retiring this year. As far as age is concerned, back in the late sixties, we were all young in this department. I think we're all in our twenties, a couple may have been in their early thirties. Now we're mostly all old, middle-aged, although we have a few young people hired in recent years, and by 2000, most of the department will have turned over. We'll have a very young department again.

AB: Okay.

RM: What was the third part? You said gender, age and?

AB: Ethnic origin.

RM: Ethnic origin. We've never really been conscious of ethnic origin in our hiring. Perhaps we should have been. It is just incidental that we have two Jewish people in the English department. We've never had a minority person, in terms of colour. I don't think one has ever applied.

AB: I see. Okay. So, over the years the university has grown in size a great deal. What affects do you think that has had?

RM: Well, in 1967, I think the entire student body was five or six hundred, when I first started here. When women were first admitted in '68 it increased overnight by sixty, seventy percent. At least, probably inaccurate, this is the impression I have from years ago. The

classes, even then, were large my first year, in 1967, even though the student body was small. I think I had seventy or eighty students in one of my introductory English sections. Far larger than anything I have now. Granted the upper level courses, the three and four hundred level, junior/senior level courses were small at the time. Now, they're very lar..., they're too large now. That has been one negative effect of large numbers. [pause] What other affect has numbers had? Well, we've learned to cope with, at least I have, the marking load is far worse now than it used to be, 'cause, whereas before, as I said, first year courses tended to be large, we only had ten, twelve, at most twenty, in our upper level courses. I now have an average of sixty in my upper level courses. So, three times more than before, three times more marking. There's a lot more work involved in grading papers now, than there used to be.

AB: How has the change in size affected your relationship with your students?

RM: I don't think it has at all. I go out of my way to learn every student's name, and address them by their names. It takes more effort, but I don't really find the classroom atmosphere has changed that much. It has changed some. I find that many students are reluctant to speak out in class because the classes are so large, whereas before, in a smaller group the students got to know each other quickly, and they felt more comfortable speaking in class. The main drawback I find is that it is hard to get students to talk in class.

AB: Okay.

RM: But there seems to always be enough of them, at least, who are not intimidated to keep things moving. But it could be a lot better.

AB: All right. Around the same time, in 1970, the school became secular. Did you..., what type of changes did you notice in the nature of Saint Mary's?

RM: None really. The main change I noticed was in, gradually, in perceptions from the outside. Saint Mary's, in the beginning, was regarded as something like a seminary, and gradually through the seventies, that perception changed. I think the reputation of the university gradually improved as well. We got away from the notion that it was just a Catholic school, teaching mainly theology. That was the perception in the mid-sixties.

AB: Okay. Unionization took place in the mid-seventies as well. What were the effects of that?

RM: Frankly, the President at the time was a tyrant, and unionization resulted because of his attitude and conduct. It was necessary at the time, I think. How did it change things?

AB: Yeah.

RM: Well, when the Jesuits were running this, the university in the sixties, in my experience with them, there were no formal structures. There was no promotion procedure, for example. Everything was arbitrary. Promotion, tenure, one would get a letter out of the blue - "you've been promoted", "you've received tenure". There were no hearings, so there was

no formal relationship between faculty and administration. Things were done randomly, so it was inevitable that this had to come about, and it came about through the unionization process.

AB: I see. Okay. So, over the years, have you noticed any changes in the academic programs, other than what you've noted?

RM: In terms of English?

AB: Yeah.

RM: No doubt. We had very small offerings in the late sixties, early seventies. I suppose one positive result of larger enrollment was a larger faculty and a wider variety of course offerings, certainly, now offered in every conceivable area of English literature, whereas, before we could only offer a few. Excuse me (said to Ms. Baker as Dr. MacDonald answers a knock on his door). Have you found anything... have you heard anything useful so far?

AB: Oh, yes. Very much. Yeah. Okay, in regards to the student population what have you noticed in the same areas, like age, gender and ethnic origin, have you noticed in your students?

RM: We are getting a more cosmopolitan student body now. Maybe that's because it's so much larger, there's representation from everywhere. But, it was somewhat cosmopolitan, even in the beginning. As far as age is concerned, we've always had a fair number of so-called mature students because of our active continuing education program. That's certainly the case now. There are more older students attending class full-time now, far more than there were percentage-wise in the past. And age..?

AB: Gender, ethnic origin.

RM: In terms of gender, of course. In 1967-68 I had one woman in one of my classes and all men in the others, so that's a radical change.

AB: And how about ethnic origin? Cosmopolitan?

RM: Yeah. A greater variety now. Students from different parts of the world, mainly because I think we have so many more students. There was always a percentage of international students, largely Asian students from Hong Kong and Singapore. That was the case in the sixties.

AB: Okay. Have you noticed any difference in the nature of the students family backgrounds?

RM: That's something I wouldn't really notice, so I haven't. No.

AB: Okay. What do you think students wish to gain from their educational experience at Saint Mary's? Do you think that's changed over time?

RM: I don't think so. I think most of them wish to gain a job, frankly, which is understandable. Of course in the late sixties there was jobs available. Anybody who wanted to teach, then, simply moved into the B.Ed., program the next year without question and started teaching the next year without question. It was that easy. The students weren't really under pressure then to find a job. It was a much more relaxed atmosphere.

AB: I see. Okay, I see. So, have the research facilities at Saint Mary's changed since you've been here?

RM: I don't see any dramatic changes, speaking from my own experience. Maybe that's because the kind of research I do involves interlibrary loans; it isn't necessary for me to travel. I don't really need any assistance. My research is done independently, so it really hasn't changed.

AB: I see. How do you feel Saint Mary's compares academically to other institutions?

RM: I think our undergraduate programs is as good, or better, than the undergraduate programs of just about every university across the country. Certainly every university in the Maritimes. My..., I have experience with several universities and Saint Mary's does not need to hang its head to anyone. I think that's our str..., academic strength is increasing. In our department, for example, we've been able to hire three, bright, young people in the last three years. We'll be hiring another one next year. And we have the pick of the crop, literally, because we get scores, even hundreds of applications where we're able to take the best, and we'll have a tremendous faculty in a few years. We have a very strong one now. Stronger than any I'm familiar with in English.

AB: So, is there anything else you'd like to add?

RM: In terms of?

AB: Anything at all.

RM: Anything. I think the reputation of the university in recent years has grown remarkably. We were really looked down upon in the late sixties and seventies, by Dal mainly; I hate Dal to this day as a result. I never have anything good to say about them because of their arrogance and pomposity. But they realize now, they have competition. They understand they're no longer as they used to say... What was the phrase they always used? They had the..., it even burns me to think about them, so I can't remember the phrase. But I've noticed even in our first year classes in the last few years, we're getting better students. They write better. This is because our admission standards have increased in the last few years. And there's every reason to believe that our reputation will continue to improve, and the quality of education here will continue to improve because we're getting a stronger, more committed, younger, more energetic faculty. We really need that.

AB: Great.