

[0:00:00]

Kieran Connell: So I was going to ask, then, just for the kind of background, really, about what brought you to the Centre in, was it '79?

Maureen McNeil: Yes, yeah, well, well '80, '80, yes. I went there in 1980, and I had been working in Manchester, and I got involved with the Conference of Socialist Economists, which was an, I, I don't know whether you know about it, but it was kind of broad left kind of intellectual reading and discussion group, and I had met Michael through that. And when the job came up he mentioned it to me, and I was interested in what was going on in Cultural Studies and, partly because when I did my thesis it, my PhD thesis in Cambridge had been examined by Williams and Thompson, so that had got me, you know, their work had really got me into Cultural Studies more generally anyway. So I applied for the job, and interestingly at that point my, what had been a temporary job at Manchester had already been extend, confirmed as a permanent job. But nevertheless I went ahead with the application, and, and that, that was it, I was really, you know, I was very much interested in it as a place which seemed to be doing interesting things in a different way, that had, was obviously orientated towards the kind of issues of politics in education that I was interested in and all of that. And also the job was advertised as very specifically in, on, it was Women's Studies within Cultural Studies, and more and more of my work had been moving in that direction in Manchester. So I decided to, to apply, you know.

Kieran Connell: So did this, you know, the Centre have a, an influence on your own intellectual formations prior to that?

Maureen McNeil: Yeah, it, it, it had, I, I have to say that it was more particularly the work of Thompson and Williams that had the impact, and I was gradually getting to see bits and pieces of what was going on at the Centre at that time. So it was primarily their work that had attracted me to Cultural Studies in the first place. And also I had been a little bit involved with the History Workshop, and the History Workshop during all, and then, and had some connection with, oh god, what's the name? I can see him and I can't... the guy, the guy who, who died and did the books about... oh it'll come back to me anyway. Anyway, anyway, so that was another kind of connection as well, through History Workshop.

Kieran Connell: So you had the interview, that would have been with, that would have been presumably Richard on the panel?

Maureen McNeil: Mmmm. Richard was on the panel, Richard and Michael were both on the panel, I think David Large was on the panel, I think, I don't think I've imagined that. And we, we had a process of meeting other people, I think I remember meeting Christine actually when I came, we met some of the students as well. And I have to say that when I found out what the shortlist was I was incredibly daunted (laughing), but, because, because it was, the, the shortlist was a range of really interesting feminists from different, who had done different, kind of different kinds of work that related in some way or another to Cultural Studies. So that, that was amazing for me, but I didn't really have great expectations about getting the job or anything like that. And I just remember that I, I also remember the location of the interview, because it was downstairs in that Arts bit, just down below it, where your office is really, in one of the rooms down there. So yes, and, and the, and then I found out that I got it, so I was amazed (laughing).

Kieran Connell: So you started in Birmingham in 1980?

Maureen McNeil: 1980, yeah, yeah.

Kieran Connell: What was the atmosphere like? I mean, in the, within the Centre then at that time?

Maureen McNeil: Mmmm, well, I, I think it felt to me, it was obviously a period of transition, because Stuart had left. And that was the other thing that was quite daunting, you know, I always make this joke that I was Stuart Hall's replacement. And there was a sense of, you know, that there was a gulf there. But

also feminist work was becoming more and more important, and so obviously that, my appointment was linked to that. And there was already work going on and, and the Women Take Issues group, and all of that had long been in train(?), and, and so it was, there was a sense of, well where are we going to go from here, and what's going to happen and what, you know, what, what might it mean to have an explicit appointment in Women's Studies, and, and how would that, you know, how will that change the configuration? So there was a lot, a lot going on, and I remember also that Michael had arranged for me to meet with Dan Finn in, he was in Manchester then, and I had a, a, that was before I came, actually came to the post. And I had a meeting with him, and he was filling me in on bits and pieces about how the subgroups were working and what had been going on in his version of things. So that was, that was interesting as well, and he was, I mean there were a number of other connections that I had with people in addition to Michael, so –

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Kieran Connell: I mean, so, obviously by, by like, by 1980 the Centre had built up a considerable reputation?

Maureen McNeil: Yeah, yeah.

Kieran Connell: Was that a help for you or a hindrance to you or how, how did you kind of have to fit in?

Maureen McNeil: Yeah. I, I, I think it was, it was definitely, definitely a help. It was undoubtedly in a way daunting, and also I was, you know, I was always thinking very specifically about how feminist work, how I could develop and extend feminist work and what that meant. And that sometimes was particularly challenging, because the range of work that was being done, I mean I ended up supervising everything that had anything to do with gender or women's issues. And obviously, I mean now the idea of doing that, you know, I like, supervised Jackie Stacey's thesis, that was later on, in Film Studies, and there was everything from kind of Film Studies to more, kind of, on, on the ground projects around issues of class and gender, and it was a whole, whole range of things. So that was very daunting, but also it, what I really, what was really appealing to me was the combination of the idea that doing research and teaching were so closely tied together, and also that there was a sense of a collective political project about that, which, which was so nice. And I can remember preparing my first talks for the, the taught MA as it were, and, and it was, you know, it was incredibly ambitious, and I was using, it was about the relationship between Sociology and Cultural Studies, and so, I mean I read, just so extensively and everything, and when I think about that, the amount of work I did for that one, the first session I did was incredible and, and not something that, you know, I would be allowed to do any more I think. But that was very nice, and also, and, and also more and more getting a sense of how the subgroups were working, and getting a sense of, well, well also working closely with Richard and, and Michael and getting to know them more. I mean, I didn't really know Richard at all before that, although I, I think I'd encountered him a bit through History Workshop things and, and a little bit through his, you know, obviously through his work and that and, and the other people who were around. So it was, it was challenging, but it was also really exciting, really exciting.

Kieran Connell: I mean the, the Centre had developed by that point a, a, you know, a set of working practices that were, you know, quite well developed by that point I guess.

Maureen McNeil: Yeah, yeah.

Kieran Connell: You know, this, you mentioned the subgroups, the collaborative approach, the student say in the running of the things.

Maureen McNeil: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, absolutely.

Kieran Connell: How, were they, they, were they very much there when you got there now, did they develop?

Maureen McNeil: Yeah. I mean those, those practices were very much there, but the nature of those practices were that they were always being negotiated and renegotiated. So it wasn't like, you know, there were fixed rules, and also they would, they would change and evolve with, with new people coming in, and new issues would come up, you know. I remember when, at, at a certain point, and I can't

remember when this was, but there was an issue around our publishers and our relationship with the publishers and, and about their links to South Africa.

[0:09:30]

Kieran Connell: That would have been Hutchinson?

Maureen McNeil: And, yeah, Hutchinson, yeah, yeah. And, and those, you know, those debates were very fraught, so there was always, there were always things coming up that, you know, made those new issues. And also every single subgroup had its own kind of issues and questions about how, how it practised, and, and learning what, what it meant to be, to work collectively. And, so all of those were issues, there were also issues around, you know, obviously some of the groups that, a, particularly the group that I worked with, the groups that I worked with were women only group. And so, and there were tensions about that too, and then you were aware of what, vaguely aware of what, of what was going on in other groups, and then trying to get writing done and, and how, how you write collectively, which, I mean, is an incredible challenge, incredible challenge in so much –

Kieran Connell: I mean I was going to ask you a bit more about that, I mean what were the, the benefits and what were the negative sides to this collaborative approach to?

Maureen McNeil: Yeah. Well, well I think the benefits of it were that, I can remember saying to people that... I always felt that, I mean the good thing about it was that we would produce things, but we would do it together, so it kind of took the pressure off individual performance. I mean, now it's, it's kind of, it's hard to believe that there was ever that kind of space, but that, that was there, and that. And also that things happened in the process of writing that were just amazing, like you, in my experience when I wrote, which I did, with some of the postgrad students as they were then, we'd come out of it and we, you know, I could, I can go back to those things now and I don't know who wrote what, or, you know. And that's really nice, that's really nice, there's something about that creativity that was fantastic. I, I guess the negative things about it were that sometimes, I mean sometimes personal dynamics and, you know, we don't get on perfectly with everyone. Also there were different levels of, not just competences, but confidence about writing and about intellectual work, and people were working out their own relationship to it, and they were working out their own relationship to the politics and how the politics related to the intellectual work, you know. Because some were more activist than others, and all of that was going on. So it was always, I mean, to say that the practices were established, I think they were in a general sense, but what that meant on a day to day basis changed, was constantly up for grabs, you know, constantly up for grabs.

Kieran Connell: Was there a competitive element to any of this?

Maureen McNeil: Well I, I didn't experience it particularly as competitive, but I suspect that, I, I mean I have a sense that, that maybe some others did, and, and also there were things about... I mean, I can remember in the MA sessions particularly, that questions about pedagogy and learning, there was kind of a, an assumption that because we, we did have the subgroups, because we were all committed to this alternative collective projects, these alternative collective projects in the whole sense of the Centre as an alternative intellectual and political project animated it, that that meant that somehow we could do almost anything in the teaching context and it, it would be okay. And I know that some of the students got fed up with incredibly long presentations, and I, and some of my colleagues did more of that than others (laughing), and I think they'd probably own up to it, and, and sometimes the students rebelled about that. I mean, and, and it meant that, you know, in, in discussions too some people dominated and others didn't, and I, I don't think, I think in a way our sense of our political project meant that we weren't always as self-conscious about the, the micro processes of those as we might have been. And I think I, I personally was a little bit a, more aware, because of feminism and, and also because I don't think I was quite as confident as maybe, certainly Richard was and, and, or Michael sometimes. And, and so, you know, I, I had different, and from women's groups I had different practices about that, but, but I think it was an issue for all of us.

Kieran Connell: I was going to ask about, you mentioned Richard and Michael, and obviously you knew Michael a bit beforehand but didn't really know Richard.

Maureen McNeil: Yeah.

[0:14:45]

Kieran Connell: I mean, I don't know, the, what, more broadly, did the Centre still have this commitment to breaking down that conventional staff student relationship?

Maureen McNeil: Mmmm.

Kieran Connell: And how did that fit in, how did that work, how did that work in practice?

Maureen McNeil: Yeah, I, I think it very much did have that, and it generally worked within the subgroup and the subgroup practices differently, I think. I mean, I suppose, everyone would say something different about how it worked in, in their specific groups. I quickly got, I, I mean, when I got involved in some of the subgroups, I was with people, I had a couple of, there was a couple of postgraduate students who were pretty confident and, and that. And, because I was not, you know, I was relatively younger, then the, I think sometimes the differences, and because of feminism, the differences were not as short(?) as they might have been. They might have been in some other groups, I, I don't know about that. And also, that's partly what, you know, we used to call the MA, the, the fraught course, not the taught course but the fraught course. And that was, and that was partly, I think about that because we would be operating, as it were, as equals, in the context of the subgroups, and then you go into the teaching context and, you know, we would be making these long presentations, etc., or we weren't, you know. So I think moments like, there were tensions around some of that. But also there were, there were other things going on, I mean, I joined the Race and Politics group because, and I joined it because I felt, because of what was going on there, that I really needed to learn much more about race politics than I did before, and I felt that I needed to learn from the postgrads, you know, they had more to teach me than I had to teach them. And so, those kinds of shifts, I think, also were really, really important in creating a sense of, you know, more of a sense of openness and equality in, in the operation. But then, you know, I mean, things, you then came to situations where people were finishing theses then you, they had to be examined, and so, you know, the, those traditional modes of academia stepped in at those points.

Kieran Connell: Did you still have, were students still allowed to, or encouraged to, or did, sit on admissions panels, in (overspeaking)?

Maureen McNeil: Oh god, yes, yes. And admissions, admissions was one of the most fraught processes. I mean, it was, when I think about it now, it, it was fairly amazing, because, it was amazing because we devoted so much time to that too, so much time to that. And there was, I mean, that was, I think there were usually about five people on the committees or something and, and at least three of them would be postgrads or, I can't remember exactly the numbers. And there would be long debates and, and also, I mean, it was like, it was a kind of scrutiny that you would get if you were applying for a job in a way, you know. So, I mean, it, it was, sometimes it was fun and funny, but it was also a lot of time and energy and work, really, and pretty extraordinary because nothing like that would probably ever happen now, and yet that was a crucial part of the process.

Kieran Connell: I mean, you touched on it a little bit in a sense that the sheer workload that you, that, just, and there was just three members of staff were taking on?

Maureen McNeil: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Kieran Connell: I mean, how did –

Maureen McNeil: How did we manage that?

Kieran Connell: How did you manage that, yeah?

[0:18:32]

Maureen McNeil: Well, I have to say a, a few things about that. First of all, when I first went there, it was just postgraduate work, no undergraduate work. The second thing was that we were much less focussed on people finishing their theses than anyone would have to be now, and what we were focussed on was what we were doing. And so that, that made it easier, and, and there were just the two teaching slots, which were the two sessions in the MA course, which were, usually were Monday night and Tuesday morning, or something like that. And so, so those things made it, made it manageable. But there was this sense of, and, I mean, as activities proliferated, and certainly by the time we got into doing undergraduate teaching as well, that became harder and harder. And I always used to think that, Richard and Michael and I, there was a kind of relay around, around exhaustion (laughing), you know, one of us would be really wiped out and the other one, you know, two, would have more energy or something and it always felt a bit like that. And, and, although there were some tensions and we didn't agree about everything, we got on, you know, we just, we did get on, and that worked very well. And, and we, we worked in different combinations, so, so I think that, that made it possible. And the sense that this, you know, there was a sense of us doing something that was different and not possible anywhere else, and that, that really did sustain us. But sometimes it was exhausting, really, really, really exhausting. And I can remember, I remember one moment where there was, there had been a really, really difficult, fraught meeting which was this, around this issue, about the publishers and South Africa and everything. And, and there'd been these fraught exchanges in this meeting, and I just went off to the swimming pool to try and get away from it all. And I, one of the characters who'd been a mean(?) was in the swimming pool too and I thought, oh my god, I can't (laughing) –

Kieran Connell: Can't escape?

Maureen McNeil: Yeah, can't escape, but yeah.

Kieran Connell: I mean, did that, I guess that energy was kind of in part sustained by the, you mentioned you took some of the political projects as well as an intellectual project.

Maureen McNeil: Yeah, yeah.

Kieran Connell: I mean, what was the, I mean, the political project at that point?

Maureen McNeil: What was it?

Kieran Connell: I mean was it, I mean in the '70s it was obviously broad let, a broad spectrum across the Left, from the Trotskyists to, you know, International Socialists, you know, even to the Labour Party I guess.

Maureen McNeil: Broadly, yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah, it was.

Kieran Connell: Was that still the same, was that sort of still there?

Maureen McNeil: I, yeah I, I think it varied. The things that felt to me as being strongest in that early period when I went there, oh, one was the, I mean certainly there was a strong sense of an emerging politics about the political perspective of what was happening around race in Britain, that was really strong. And that was part of the reason why I decided to join the Race and Politics group, because I felt I had to learn about that.

Kieran Connell: That was Paul Gilroy or Laurence, Hazel Carby?

Maureen McNeil: Yeah, all of those, yeah, Hazel Carby, Val Amis, John Solomos, and, and that, you know, I was very, very aware of that. And I learned, I must say I learned a hell of a lot from that, and some of the stuff I learned from that I then integrated into my, the, the undergraduate teaching later. The other, the other thing was around feminism and how feminism could and would transform the sense of what Cultural Studies was. And, and that was, you know, that was happening at, at the same time, and of course that was crucial for me. They were, the group that was working on the education book was pretty active at that time as well, and that, I think, was important for me because there was a sense of trying to work out what was going on in education generally, both in the context we were in and, and elsewhere, so, so that was there. I had a very particular interest in Science and

Technology and I, you know, I kind of pulled that thread through with some of the, and in relation to feminism as it turned out, with some of the students as well, so that was important to me. But, but I would say that, especially the issues of, of race and racism, and the issues around feminism and gender politics, and also I think education were the crucial ones then.

[0:23:30]

Kieran Connell: I wanted to ask a bit, in a, in a bit more detail about feminism, I mean, I guess you were associated with the, the second wave in a sense, the, the Off Centre, Jackie Stacey and all that kind of thing.

Maureen McNeil: Mmmm. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Kieran Connell: Which were very much obviously inspired by Women Take Issue, so work of that generation.

Maureen McNeil: Yeah, yeah, exactly, yeah, yeah.

Kieran Connell: You know, how did that, how, what was that evolution process, and how did that relate to the broader feminist movement in the time?

Maureen McNeil: Movement, yeah. I, I mean I think there was always a sense of that the, the feminism that was emerging, especially I think in Women Take Issue, was, was negotiating with Marxism and with the Left, and, and that that was pretty, that had been pretty tough for them. And when, when I came I, I met some of the, you know, I met Janice and, and, I, Janice Winship in particular I was very close to, and I met some of the others as well, some of them were gone by the time I got there, and Dorothy was around and. But I did get, I did get this sense of how, that it had been quite hard for them, because they were, they all regarded themselves as lefties, but it was kind of hard for them to create space for feminism, and, and women's issues within that, as the title itself of that, that book indicates. I then, of course, started to work with a, a different generation, I mean they were various ages, but I mean generation in terms, and what was interesting about them was that they were much more confident I think about their feminist politics. Partly, partly because a number of them had come out of, sometimes they had done Women's Studies or something like Women's Studies in an academic context elsewhere, they, or they had been involved in issues. They, they were, many of them were much more involved in sexual politics, and out lesbians, explicitly out lesbians, and so that introduced a whole set of, of other issues. And I think they were more confident, a, they were more confident intellectually than, and also they were more confident in negotiating and making a stand in relation to other forms of politics. And, and I think... that also was shown in the way that they took the lead with, with off centre really, and even though I wrote, I mean probably in terms of length I wrote more in that book than anyone else, but it was them who, you know, they were the editors of it, etc. So I, I think that was, that was really different.

Kieran Connell: And what was the impact of that, that generation's, that feminist generation's impact within the Centre more generally? I mean, how did the men?

Maureen McNeil: Well, yeah, yeah. I, I, I think when I first went there, there was an uncertainty about how that, and, and a kind of nervousness about it. But I think, and although it kept, you know, there kept being confrontations and, and issues around, which are, I, I mean the other thing that was happening was that there was much more awareness that there were issues of sexual politics for men as well, and, and also then AIDS came up and all of, all of the issues about gay rights and Section 28, and all of that. So, so, in a sense, sexual politics became much more pervasive across the board, and something for more people, for, you know, almost everyone had to address rather than it just being women's issues. And that was interesting, because I'd been hired, you know, to do Women's Studies, but the, the set of issues really, really got much broader than that, I would say.

Kieran Connell: And did the, I mean, I want to talk about the transition to the department, in a second.

Maureen McNeil: Yeah, sure, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Kieran Connell: But I wanted to ask at this point was there a, what was, what was the relationship between the Centre and, you know, the wider world outside of the, the university?

[0:27:47]

Maureen McNeil: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well I think, I think that, that varied a lot. When, when I first went there, there was quite a lot of involvement with the Labour Party, it, with periods of that, and the education book, particularly, had been built partly around that. And also, you know, there, we, we were aware that some people were really activist, you know, were activist in socialist workers' parties and things like that, and there was always, there was a sense of particular identifications and activities... It was, I mean I, I, also I was differently placed because, because I was a foreigner (laughing) and because I didn't have, I, I didn't have any organic connections as it were to, to British politics, or indeed to British life per se. And the Socialist Economist group had been in a way my way of getting into that, and, and also a different way, the Radical Science Journal. And, so a lot of the stuff that I'd been involved with were things around science and technology, and, and there was a big set of issues around new reproductive technologies that emerges, that were important for me then as well, and for some other people for, for some of the fem, other feminists at the Centre then. But... I think that one of the things that I found was that sometime, for me the, the Centre was so absorbing that it kind of pre-empted other kinds of, me establishing other kinds of connections that I might have done. And that was, as I say, that, Michael had connections with the Labour Party, and they were, you know, there were other connections that others had, but for me the absorption of the Centre pre-empted some, I think, some other forms of engagement, and that again is why coming in to the Race and Politics group was, was important in, in that respect. And also there was a kind of sense of, I mean some of us kept, we still kept pushing out, and, and felt, we felt that that would, that was really important, and trying to think of ways that we could push out. But that wasn't, that wasn't terribly easy, and the University made it even harder, and I think the kind of symbolism of being up there on the Eighth Tower, because there were a few, and you probably are aware of this, where there were a few individuals in other departments who explicitly identified themselves with, with the Centre and worked with the subgroups, like Tony Davis and others. But they were, they were really exceptional, and because, because there was no way, there were no other connections in terms of teaching, that also isolated us more. I mean, once we got into undergraduate teaching, then you had to, you did necessarily make contact with, at least, and you had to negotiate with the rest of the university. And also there was all, you know, the kind of, for me, the local legends about what had happened and, six, you know, in the, in the late 60s, and what the university had done, and what the uni, you know, how, how suspicious the university was of the Centre. I tried to ignore that stuff, but it was always kind of around really.

Kieran Connell: So what was the relationship then between the Centre and the University, and how were you become, were you, how were you, I mean had, you, not, not, not the myth necessarily, but the actual reality of, was it becoming increasingly difficult to operate as a centre, as the 1980s kind of turned into the mid '90s?

Maureen McNeil: Yeah. Yeah, I, I don't know that it was increasingly... difficult, I mean there did, there emerged a sense that we had to go into undergraduate teaching to survive, and that otherwise we wouldn't. But, aside from that, we would periodically do things that, you know, like I remember we got, we invited David Large to come and do a seminar, and we, you know, we would do things that would, explicitly designed to open it up and try and get other people in. But that didn't, it didn't necessarily work very well, or it was very, very hard to do that. I mean, I, I think that's got something to do with Birmingham as a university anyway, and I think it's got to do some, it had something to do, especially then, with how entrenched traditional disciplines were, at civic universities especially, like, like Birmingham. So there was a kind of suspicion about interdisciplinarity then, that now, you know, interdisciplinarity is everywhere. It's not necessarily practised, but people talk about it, it's invoked, yeah, yeah. So all of those things I think pushed against it, and then it just took a lot of energy to do the work on the subgroups, to be doing all those works about, all, all the, all that was entailed in doing the admissions procedures, all of those things took a lot of time. And, and so that made it harder as well, to kind of reach out and get, get involved in the rest of the, and bring the rest of the university in, in some way.

Kieran Connell: So the, 1986, the, became Department of Cultural Studies.

Maureen McNeil: Mmmm hm.

Maureen McNeil

[0:33:29]

Kieran Connell: I mean, do you have any reflections on how and why, and that, that came about, and the impact that had on the, the, the working practices of the Centre, or rather the Department?

Maureen McNeil: Yeah, yeah, yeah, well, I mean gradually the amount of undergraduate teaching had increased.

Kieran Connell: So what year did that actually first come in?

Maureen McNeil: I, I was trying to think of that, I'll have to check that, because when, when I got together my materials I was surprised how early it was. We taught a course, I think it was from about '82 onwards, one course, and then, then we gradually moved into the BA programme. And, and it was, it was good fun initially, it was great fun doing that, and we, we had some really good, lively students, and, and they were always, you know, they were, initially they weren't Cultural Studies students, they were doing it with other subjects, and they just did it as, as a first year course, etc. But as that, I mean, gradually I think there were a lot of, a lot of pressures that were pushing us in, in a different direction, I mean one was the feeling that we had to have an undergraduate programme to survive in the university. The other was the pressure about students completing their PhDs, which I think we hid it well, the, you know, we were pretty slack about, and we weren't the only place, I mean it was quite common for, for students to take much longer wherever they were, not just in Cultural Studies. But a number of the Cultural Studies students, as you know, made, made their careers and created identities and got jobs based on what they did in the subgroups and, you know, sometimes they went back and later did their thesis, and that happened with Charlotte Brunson, and it happened with Paul Gilroy and others. And, and that was a pattern, rather than the other way round, but increasingly we felt that we were, you know, there was a pressure to complete PhDs, and I think all of those things led, led to it becoming in, in some ways a more, more like a traditional department. And, as we began to do those things, I mean given the teaching that we had, there was only three of us teaching, it was harder and harder to sustain the, the subgroup work. And also if PhD students were more focussed on actually doing their PhD and their individual work then they had less time for that too.

Kieran Connell: And presumably undergraduate students weren't necessarily as engaged with the project as the postgraduates?

Maureen McNeil: No, no, no, no. I mean I, I can think of some instances where, you know, I think, you know, where we, we taught, we, and we used to integrate, the courses were not traditional in lots of ways, the undergraduate courses. But, you know, you, we had to have exams, all of those things were pushing us in that direction, and, and some of the undergraduates had, I, I, I mean a lot of the undergraduates didn't have a sense of what the Centre was, and the very title of the degree was ambiguous in terms of, you know, communications and what, what, the course and what, what it was called, and what they were coming to. And so it, it was very different, we were, we were kind of skip, somewhat schizophrenic, going from this world where it was like, it was like some version of traditional undergraduate work, and then going into a world, with the postgrads, that was very, very different in where the expectation, in the sense of political project was very different. I mean, we still tried to retain some of those elements in the undergraduate programme, and also I think, the undergraduate programme as far as I'm concerned was really, really, was really interesting in terms of how we put, put it together and, you know, it, compared to much teaching now, I think.

Kieran Connell: In what way?

Maureen McNeil: It was experimental. Well, for example, especially the course on the West Midlands, Birmingham and the West Midlands that Michael and I did together, because, and that was one of the ways in which I was trying to be more grounded in Birmingham. And, and it was great fun in terms of what we did, you know, I went round and took students on a tour of what's now, you know, I have these old slides from the old, what the jewellery centre was like and all of those areas that were completely under, undeveloped then, and I did work on the history of all of that, and on the car industry and, and Michael, you know, and Michael did similar kind of re. So we were doing kind of

original research on the city, and we were getting, and we were doing, we were exploring the city at the same time, and the, the region. So that, that was, that was great fun.

[0:38:48]

Kieran Connell: And, and then, and in that, and in the process of it, you know, enabling students to do the same.

Maureen McNeil: Yes, exactly.

Kieran Connell: Apart from they don't, do they, in this day and age (overspeaking)?

Maureen McNeil: Exactly, exactly. And we would, you know, we were taking them out and doing these excursions with them as well, and so that was, that was great fun. And with Richard, Richard and Michael and I each did these units also which were about, we developed this mode of, we would do these periods, and we did three, three different periods, one was the Industrial Revolution, and then, I forget what two was, and one was focussed on the 1930s I remember, and, '20s, '30s. And what we did was we, we made the course around studying what was going on, the social and political movements of the period, and then key kind of intellectual conceptual movements, and then the, looking at examples of the media from that. So it wasn't like an abstract study of the, you know, Media Studies or wasn't a History course or it, it was something that came out of that. And those course were so exciting to work on, and, and also that we worked together on them, you know, so I did the first part with Richard, and I did the other part with Michael and, and I think the interplay was, was really, really, you know, exciting and fun, and a different kind of teaching.

Kieran Connell: So in a sense then it's like the, talked about the modification of those, those Centre practices over time, but that would be another, you know, reacting to the different situations to do with undergraduate teaching, but doing it in this kind of very innovative way.

Maureen McNeil: Yes, yes, that's right. Yeah, yeah.

Kieran Connell: But at the same time, and as far as I'm, I mean the last stencil paper I think was, from the archives was 1986 I think.

Maureen McNeil: Yeah, yeah.

Kieran Connell: And did the subgroups continue into the late '80s and '90s and?

Maureen McNeil: Some, yeah, yeah, yeah, some of them didn't, yeah, like the one I was in, I, I mean the, the one that did off centre certainly did, but the stencil papers I think, I think again it was this tension between the books, you know, all these different things we were doing, and it became harder and harder to maintain all of those things. But, but, but all of those, I mean those groups were still going on, or some of them were still going on, the popular memory group was still going on, and there was a sense of there just being, you know, juggling all these different activities really, yeah.

Kieran Connell: Yeah, which I can, you, from the sounds of it it sounds incredibly energising, but also I can imagine –

Maureen McNeil: Exhausting (laughing).

Kieran Connell: Incredibly exhausting.

Maureen McNeil: Yeah, yeah.

Kieran Connell: So I mean, because you left the Centre, well you left the department '90 –

Maureen McNeil: I left in, no I, well I, I went in 1989 and '90, I went to the States for a year.

Kieran Connell: And the Ann, that was when Ann was appointed was it? Yeah.

Maureen McNeil: That was when Ann was appointed, and, and, and I came back, and then I worked with Ann as well. And then in '93 to '95 I had a visiting professorship in Canada, and then I came back in September '95 and a couple of, shortly after that I got, in October I guess it was, I got the job in Lancaster. But I didn't leave until '96, I left in March '96.

[0:42:10]

Kieran Connell: I mean, were you kind of, you know, having done periods away and then coming back, what, how much had, had it changed from being appointed in 1980?

Maureen McNeil: Yeah, yeah, well, well –

Kieran Connell: I think, I mean, the undergraduate's obviously crucial but in terms of the feel of it and the energy behind it.

Maureen McNeil: Yeah, yeah. I mean, well when I came back in 1990 it was great to work with Ann, and, and also there were, and, and that was great because there was a sense that I was no longer the sole, you know, the sole one responsible for women's issues and gen, and all the topics in gender etc., etc., so that was great. So it was really, that, that was very positive. When I came back the second time I felt that the whole thing had expanded so much, and there were so, there were so many different people, it was like a very different world. I mean there still was a, a strong sense of the political project, you know, that, that it was an alternative centre, that it was different, that we, but, but it was much more diffused and diverse I think than, than –

Kieran Connell: So what, I mean what, in a sense the political project had become something else that it, or just?

Maureen McNeil: Well it was just that, that it, the weight of undergraduate teaching and the numbers, etc., was kind of overwhelming I think. That was, that was my sense then, and, and it was difficult to create space for anything else. And, and also, you know, the number of PhD students and, all of that, so it was kind of a, partly just a numbers thing. And new members of staff had come in with diverse issues, and concerns and issues, and, and it was hard to kind of hold the whole thing together as far as I was concerned by then, harder to.

Kieran Connell: And were the students changing as well?

Maureen McNeil: And also there was more pressure, well, I mean just the physical things, like the Muirhead Tower, I remember when I came back that time, I, I just had nightmares about, about there being fires in the Muirhead Tower, because people had, were going, you know, up and down the stairs and teaching, and you couldn't get, so all of those things felt, really felt overwhelming, really overwhelming.

Kieran Connell: So was it, were you ready to leave then, and the Lancaster job came up, was it, did you feel it was time to?

Maureen McNeil: I, I felt, for me it was time, it was time to go, and, and interestingly I went somewhere where there were, well, at, two, two of the, two of the people I'd worked with on off-Centre were, where, you know. So that was part of, part of the decision. And, and there were other reasons, there were more personal reasons too, that I needed, I felt I needed a change and, yeah. And Lancaster was appealing because this, because it combined the things I was interested in in terms of gender and women's issues, science studies, and it was, it's stronger in science studies than anything I'd had. And, Science and Technology Studies, and also some Cultural Studies as well.

Kieran Connell: I mean, just finally then, I wanted to ask what might be a really ridiculously broad question to end on, but, this is about the structures that made the, the Centre and then the Department possible, and how they change. I mean what, what do you think were the crucial kind of, and the structures within the university or more broadly speaking in society in general, that allowed the, the kind of work to be produced and the kind of practices that were developing at the Centre to, to take place? I mean how did those change?

Maureen McNeil: Mmmm hm, yeah. I think, I think there was much, much less surveillance of education than, than there is now, much, much less emphasis on a limited notion of what counts as productivity, you know, and, and, and also more willingness to experiment, more, more willingness to, and, and a kind of possibility to experiment about the relationship between teaching and research. That, I mean, that was really, really important, and that, in, in a way, one of the things that appealed to me about Lancaster, in relation to other universities, was that there still seemed to be some connection with that, compared to other places I, I looked at.

[00:46:30.6]

Maureen McNeil: But, but, I always felt that my teaching and research were completely intertwined in the context of Birmingham and that, that was great. And, also that, I mean, a sense of, of education as a collective project that, and, and that, you know, Michael, Richard and I were, as well as the students. But we weren't, we weren't competing with each other about publications, or we, we weren't really interested in our own publications, which is not to say that we didn't publish anything. But we, we were really interested in the ideas and in what we were trying to do and what was going, the relationship between what we were doing and what was going on in the rest of the world. And that, that, you know, really, really animated us, that was crucial, absolutely crucial. And also that, we saw, I mean, we saw, things happened that were just so unusual now. I mean, just a couple of things, and I think one of these I've mentioned before. One was that, you know, there gathered together there, that, a, a group of postgraduate students who, almost an exclusively black group of black postgraduate students doing work on race and racism, and, and nobody noticed that, you know. I mean, that just seemed to me amazing that that could happen, especially in the context of somewhere like Birmingham then, Birmingham University then, which was pretty staid, etc. And that, that was facilitated. Or that a group of women could have got together at that point to produce a book like Women Take Issue and then Off Centre, which, when there wasn't a lot of opportunities for feminist projects, and certainly not collective feminist projects in higher education, so those things were phenomenal. And the other thing is, the other thing which was really quite important to me was that, there was always a, a kind of material, material base, I, I don't know whether anyone has mentioned this but all of the members of, everyone in the, in, in the unit, gave a small percentage of –

Kieran Connell: It's in the archives.

Maureen McNeil: Yeah, of their income, and that included students who had grounds, we, that was part of the commitment when I, I took the job, that I would give a percentage of my income.

Kieran Connell: Was that officially, official? Or was that something, I remember saying –

Maureen McNeil: Oh no, they couldn't do it officially, no, no, no, no, they couldn't do it, it wasn't part of the university contract, certainly. But, but that was an, you know, and agreement that was put to me and of course I did it. And that, inter, interestingly, by the time I came back, that had gone, you know, the second time. But we did that as, and created this support fund, for students, and, you know, that was, that was part of saying, there is, you know, there's a material commitment here to making this an alternative kind of place. And that, also, that was one of the things that became incredibly difficult to administer, because we used to have a committee that would, you know, the support fund. But, but, those things, which were kind of hidden, and, and not talked about very much or not noticed, really created a sense that it was different, that it, it was an alternative. And those are the things that I think would be almost impossible to reproduce now, really impossible, and became more and more difficult to maintain, as we –

Kieran Connell: As the time went, as the pressure increased and time went on(?)?

Maureen McNeil: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, you know, as more pressure about students finishing their theses, more pressure about getting money and bringing in grants, more pressure about, you know, just having to produce certain things and produce our own publications, that, all of that. So I think it was pretty unique in that regard.

Kieran Connell: Thank you very much.

Maureen McNeil: Okay.

Kieran Connell: Thanks.

[End of Transcript]