

Interviewee: Bob McKean (Professor R B McKean)
UoS Dates: 1968 - 2007
Role(s): Lecturer, latterly Professor, Dept of History
Dean of the Faculty of Arts 2003 - 2007



Interview summary:

Summary of content; with time (min:secs)

Start 00:22 – Was in the third year of his PhD in Modern Russian History at the University of East Anglia and won a scholarship to the University of Leningrad for 9 months, starting January 1968. While there, applied for the role of lecturer in European history. Had a telephone interview from his student hostel with George Rude in the University's primitive telephone exchange, later found out that Malcolm Thomis and Andrew Bain were also listening.

04:16 – Returned to Scotland in August 1968 and came to Stirling for the first time. Met secretary Miss Neech on the steps of Pathfoot, and was warmly welcomed to the department.

05:25 – First impressions of the University were that it had a refreshing informality. Had studied at University of Glasgow which was very hierarchical. Was told by Professor David Waddell to address him by his first name which would not have happened at Glasgow. Was also surprised that the Principal would speak to anyone.

08:32 – George Rude was a distinguished historian of the French Revolution. Marxist views had held back his academic career; he eventually secured a Chair at the University of Adelaide. Applied for the first Chair of History at Stirling and initially asked for a short-term contract, but to RMCK's lasting regret Rude's later request to stay on was declined by Tom Cottrell. George Rude was nevertheless allowed to appoint the staff and write the curriculum.

11:00 – The Chair of History was advertised and the choice was between David Waddell and the eminent Scottish historian Chris Smout. David Waddell was chosen but RMCK doesn't know why and Malcolm Thomis could not find out. When George Rude came to visit in Spring of 1969 it was like seeing what might have been. David Waddell was a nice man but not a strong academic.

12:45 – David Waddell did not change Rude's curriculum. George Rude was a modernist and wanted History at Stirling to be different. It was to start in the late 18th century and be worldwide, not Euro-centric. David Waddell focussed on Latin-America, Jean-Pierre Lehmann on East Asia, Robin Law on Africa. Curriculum was not to concentrate solely on Political History, all courses had to have social history.

15:53 – Roy Campbell, a distinguished economic historian, was appointed in 1970/71. All courses were to include economic history as well as political and social. No Scottish history until George Peden joined in 1990. Enduring influence of George Rude, who had been at Stirling for only six months.

18:14 – Most academics came to their posts with no experience or training in teaching, were expected to learn from the job. Mature students were a great help in learning, giving good feedback. Had lessons from Malcolm Thomis on how to

write on a blackboard. Theory of teaching was not discussed. It was taken for granted that there would be lectures and seminars but it was to be more seminar based than in traditional universities. In the final year of a History degree classes were to be 3 hour seminars which was difficult in terms of room allocation.

21:44 – A move away from the traditional assessment system was to RMcK's liking. Mixture of exams and essays, exams never worth more than 50%. Gradually brought in tutorial assessment which RMcK approved of.

24:20 – Department collapsed from 22 staff members in 1981 to 10 in 1988 but grew again in the early 90s. Took on younger colleagues who had experience of teacher training. This helped RMcK become a better teacher, he would observe them and ask them questions despite having already been in the job for 20 years. Thought he was a good teacher as did not get any formal complaints like others did.

25:30 – Remembers Professor Campbell sitting in on a lecture and telling RMcK he was cramming too much in, and giving sound advice. University was progressive in many ways but the staff were left to teach without assistance.

27:07 – Pathfoot had a good community for the first few years. At lunch staff sat together, regardless of which department they belonged to. Remembers a tea trolley. Shared a room with Anand Chitnis, a blessing as they would help each other in their duties as Advisor of Studies, a role for which they had no experience or preparation.

31:05 – History moved to Cottrell and everyone was dispersed. Cottrell didn't have the same atmosphere as Pathfoot. History moved back to Pathfoot in 1992/1993, which became the Arts building, apart from Education and Aquaculture. The sense of community came back. At Pathfoot you are able to deal with problems outside an official setting which was invaluable as a Dean.

32:39 – Became a Dean in 2003 succeeding Sandra Marshall. Did three years as Dean of Arts. As a Head of Department and then Dean, RMcK felt that the Administration in Cottrell ignored Pathfoot. Never saw a Principal in Pathfoot apart from Colin Bell.

33:45 – The first group of students contained mature students Monica Clough, Peter Holt and Margery Fell. RMcK felt inadequate as he was 25 and there were students who were 35 and 45. Some of them, like Peter Holt and Monica Clough knew far more than RMcK sometimes but were very helpful. Mature students brought perspective. RMcK admired that Stirling would take unconventional mature students. The oldest was Madge Niven, who was 65.

36:30 1968-1972 the Department was growing. Professor Waddell allowed RMcK to develop European History as he thought best. No one checked the courses, they were just put on. RMcK had been appointed because George Rude had been keen on Eastern Europe; he advised that they required to appoint specialists on French History (Alan Forrest) and German History (Richard Evans). [Peter] Desmond Stachura, Derek Hackett and Michael Hopkinson also joined the Department. The appointment of John McCracken gave Stirling a second Africanist, probably more than other Scottish universities had. British historians were a minority in the Department.

40:25 – Many staff hadn't completed their PhDs but it was taken in trust that you would finish and you were given plenty of time to do so, including the long summer break. RMcK went back to Leningrad in 1973, which the sabbatical leave system allowed. Went to Moscow in 1975. During these visits RMcK had access to the archives which was exceptionally rare. Became the basis of his research. Three further sabbatical trips in the 80s. The University trusted early staff which had positives and negatives.

45:17 – The University classed History as a Social Science at first, which was part of a trend at the time. RMcK never met a historian at Stirling who believed History was a Social Science. Had to sit on the Board of Studies for the Social Sciences where the agenda had little relevance. When the School of Arts was set up, History was moved in to it.

48:35 – Student unrest and the Queen's Visit in 1972 was a sad episode. Saw it happening from his office in Cottrell, watched with Alan Forrest. Neil Tranter was meeting the Queen and said you could hear the students. The worst part was the photograph of the student on the link bridge with a bottle. Didn't think he was even drunk but that photo did the most damage. RMcK thinks the incident killed Tom Cottrell. The University had hundreds of thousands of pounds of funding withdrawn. Tom Cottrell had asked the police to disperse the students, the police then asked the Queen's forces who declined as the students were rowdy but not dangerous. The press made out that the Queen's life was in danger. People would bring it up at conferences and said they thought Stirling must be an awful university. History was still able to appoint excellent staff after 1972 but it probably stopped good people applying in some disciplines.


52:53 – Was invited to dinner at the Principal's house several times as a young lecturer. People were treated as equals. The tradition carried on with John Forty and Christine Hallett.

54:08 – 1981 saw cuts of 25% made. Alastair Wood had to decide who would lose half the lighting and the telephone in their office. University handled it very well and did not run up debts. RMcK thinks at one time they only had enough money to pay staff for three more days. Staff who left were not replaced. History Department went from 22 members of staff on 1982 to just 10 in 1988. Fortunate in keeping specialists on Africa and Latin America. Lost French special subjects until Mike Rapport joined in 1995.

58:50 – The 1990s saw a revival. John McCracken took over as Head of Department after David Waddell retired. John convinced John Forty to replace the Chair of History. George Peden, an outstanding academic, head of department and

networker, was appointed, and persuaded the University of the need for a large History department. Principal Andrew Miller, though a chemist, loved history and believed in a strong Arts faculty and History department. When RMcK retired in 2007 the Department was back up to 22 staff.

[Ends 1:01:34]

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