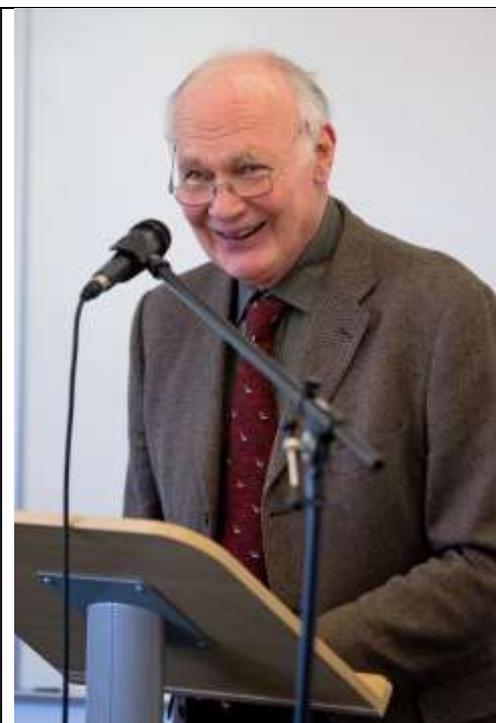


Interviewee: John McCracken. Dr
UoS Dates: 1968 - 2003
Role(s): Lecturer, latterly Senior Lecturer in the Dept of History.
Founding Director of the Centre for Commonwealth Studies.
Currently Hon Senior Research Fellow



Interview summary:

Start 0:30 – Came to Stirling in 1969. For the previous four years, he was at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. It was a lively and intellectually exciting place, but it was time for an expatriate to move on. He wanted to return to Scotland, and the Stirling job came up. They wanted an African historian, and JM was attracted by the idea of working with George Rudé, the first professor of history because his own interest was in history from below.

2:30 – He came from Dar es Salaam for an interview. It was very cold, his luggage was mislaid. On the steps of Pathfoot, he first caught sight of miniskirts. The campus was looking wonderful, paintings everywhere ... all very desirable.

3:30 – He was interviewed by David Waddell, Eric Richards. (George Rudé had already left.) They asked him to wait for an hour, and then offered him the job. Anand Chitnis drove him around to look at places to live. He was impressed that a new university was making an appointment in African history.

5:00 – George Rudé had structured the courses in the department to follow his own Marxist model. David Waddell, a Latin American historian, changed the emphasis to cover new areas: hence the desire to appoint an African historian. Then Jean Pierre Lehmann came, an Asian Historian, and Robin Law as a second African historian. This was very unusual for a UK department. Now the department is more conventional.

8:00 – Students at a new university are more adventurous and so they wanted to study African history. He remembers the first group very well, notably Monica Clough, subsequently his mother-in-law, for her independence of mind

10:50 – At the time of the Queen's visit he was in Malawi on sabbatical leave, and found out what had happened from the front page of a Malawian newspaper. He returned to find student sit-ins, terrible divisions among the academic staff, interminable meetings, and the university on the TV news. JM felt very sad, and sympathetic towards Tom Cottrell. He thinks there were two consequences: the university lost a lot of money, but on the other hand subsequent intakes of students were more radical, and more interesting: Tommy Sheridan; John Reid. At this time

Robin Law put on a very challenging course on Marxism, questioning the preconceptions of such students.
18:00 – John Reid went on to study African history. By the final year he worked hard and stayed on to do a PhD with Robin Law. It was a part-time PhD because he went to London to work for Neil Kinnock. JM was an examiner of the PhD: it was a good piece of work. JM praises JR’s contribution as President of the Student Union, SUSU.
21:20 – History was a small department. The most able person was Eric Richards, now the leading historian of the Scottish Highlands and of international migration. “We asked so much of our students in those days!” A number of very able people were appointed shortly after JM arrived. JM discusses a number of these. Interdisciplinary work: JM discusses the “small” Centre for African Studies, which involved Max Marwick from Sociology and Alastair Niven from English. JM describes a talk by George Shepperson, in which GS sang Malawian soldier songs.
27:30 – Then JM went to Malawi on leave of absence for three years. Angela & Grahame Smith also taught at the University of Malawi for two years when the McCrackens were there. On JM’s return, the Smiths suggested a formalisation of the intellectual links between various members of the university. “The name was a difficulty ... we fell back on the term ‘Commonwealth’.” The major founders of the Centre of Commonwealth Studies came from English Studies, History, and Religious Studies; JM hoped that there might be involvement from Environmental Science. JM discusses distinguished visitors to the Centre, and praises the regular seminars. It was a friendly and unintimidating group, which postgraduates found congenial. JM describes a paper he gave on African clothing which he subsequently developed in his book, <i>A History of Malawi</i> .
36:00 – Local people came to the talks. JM describes the conference held when he retired, attended by a group of ex-missionaries in Malawi. One of them closed the proceedings with a hymn.
[Ends 38.51]

Interview No:	SURSA OH / 032	<p>SURSA University of Stirling Stirling FK9 4LA</p> <p>info@sursa.org.uk www.sursa.org.uk</p>  <p>Oral History</p>
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