

Robin Wilson interview for Harold Wilson OUDA exhibition

Contributors: Robin Wilson, Lucian Hudson

Lucian Hudson:

Welcome to this introduction of the online exhibition of the OU's Digital Archive. I'm very pleased to be joined today by Robin Wilson, formally Professor of Pure Mathematics here at the OU, who will be talking to us about Harold Wilson, his father, Prime Minister and the man who set up The Open University in the 1960s.

Robin, the Open University is a big achievement of Harold Wilson's and we're very pleased to be marking a 100th anniversary of his birth. What do you remember about your father?

Robin Wilson:

Well he was a very good father and we had a lot of good times together especially, for example, the holidays in the Isles of Scilly. Of course more and more he got busy with his work but he always made a point of taking me and my brother to school every morning, even if he arrived back very, very late at night so we didn't see him in the evenings, we always saw him for half an hour every morning on the way to school. We had particularly enjoyable holidays, as I said, in the Isles of Scilly and it was in the Isles of Scilly that he first wrote down his ideas for The Open University.

Lucian Hudson:

Looking back at the archive, particularly at that speech, the "White Heat of Technology" speech, there's something quite interesting about that clip isn't there?

Robin Wilson:

It was a very important speech, both for him, and I think for the country. The party and the country. I'm always rather embarrassed when I look at that clip because in the third row or so just behind my father there's a rather bored looking teenager, not really paying very much attention to what my father was saying about the future Open University, if only I knew. Even before that he gave a speech, the way it started was he was always interested in people having a second chance or usually the only chance to get a degree, people who never had before, he was very keen on setting up something in that direction. He had spent some time in Russia, in Soviet Union, in the Soviet Union, where they actually had a lot of training for engineers were distance learning. And also in the United States. He was a good friend of Senator Benton, who, the head of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, who also was looking into distance learning ideas, I mean these were around anyway but he thought that we should do something in this country. And so in September 1963 he actually gave a speech in Glasgow where he outlined the, his ideas for a University of the Air. And then the following month in his "White Heat of Technology" speech he also had a paragraph where he talked about it there. But the earliest that I knew about it was on Easter Day that year 1963, and we all went to church for the Easter service and then we came back and in the hour between the church and lunch he jotted down his ideas, based on his experiences in America and talking to people in the Soviet Union. His ideas for this University of the Air.

When Labour came into power he really set his mind on making sure that it actually happened, and for that he had two people in particular who were really helpful. The academic establishment was against it, the Treasury was against it, a lot of MPs were against it, certainly the Opposition was. But the first person I think he really talked to was Ted Short who was the, who became Minister of Education and who in fact, his own degree was by distance learning. So Ted Short was a very sympathetic figure and of course shortly after that he then brought in Jennie Lee. Jennie Lee of course the wife of Nye Bevan who founded the Health Service. And Jennie Lee eventually became Minister of the Arts and she was given the job of creating, of making The Open University work. My father always said that he was the one that in some sense created it but Jennie Lee was the midwife.

Lucian Hudson:

When you came to see your father again when he returned to Office in 1974, 75, what thoughts did he have about the OU then because by that stage of course The Open University was firmly established?

Robin Wilson:

I think he was very thrilled that I was actually working for The Open University, it was very pioneering days there and it was a very exciting place to be in the Seventies. He was always interested, we used to see each other quite a lot at weekends, and he was always very interested in how things were going with the OU. He frequently asked about that. My father received his honorary degree in Manchester in the second year and again I think he was very, very thrilled and excited to be there for that, not only the honour of receiving the honorary degree but actually to see the outcome: here are thousands of students who actually got through the system. Later on as I said he was interviewed by the student groups and also I think he did a television programme in the late Seventies or early Eighties and I remember him saying to me at the time, he said, "I never thought it would be quite so successful, I never thought it would get quite so large, and be such a success". So I think he was very thrilled with it all and I think he also regarded it as one of his greatest achievements. The Labour Government of the Sixties had many other great achievements like equal opportunities and other things of this kind, but I think The Open University always had a very soft spot for him and continued to throughout the rest of his life.

Lucian Hudson:

We're laying on an online exhibition, of course, to mark his anniversary. Are there particular things in that exhibition that you would like to highlight, that you find particularly interesting or important?

Robin Wilson:

Well I'm very thrilled to have been invited to introduce the online exhibition and I was looking at some of the clips, some of the online clips, that I was sent and I just found it very exciting. Certainly they were very, they were very nostalgic and I think it's very important actually for the OU to have such an online archive so that anyone can watch these clips because you know The Open University is a very important part of the history of this country and of education in this country, and it's very important these extracts should be available for anyone to watch them at any time. Well some of them to watch, some of them are radio clips and so on, to listen to as well. So I'm very excited about the idea of this online exhibition and I certainly wish it well.

Lucian Hudson:

Robin thank you very much.

Robin Wilson:

Thank you.