PhD Pioneers:
The Living Experiences of The Open University's First PhD Graduates

Oral History interview transcript

Name of Interviewee: **Professor Neil Wynn**
Interviewed by: **Elizabeth Currie**
Date of interview: **08/04/2021**

Important
The content of oral history interviews is personal, experiential and interpretive, relying on the memories, perceptions and opinions of individuals. While all reasonable attempts are made to avoid inaccuracy, interviews should not be understood as statements of fact or opinion endorsed by The Open University.

Every effort is made to ensure the accuracy of this transcript, however no transcript is an exact translation of the spoken word, and this document is intended to be a guide to the original recording, not replace it.

In some cases, interviewees may have made changes to the transcript.

Personal/sensitive information regarding individuals who may be living has been removed from transcripts where necessary.

My name's Liz Currie. I'm a visiting researcher for The Open University researching for the project looking back to the First Open University PhD project and it's 8th April 2021. If you'd like to introduce yourself, Neil, please.

I'm Neil Wynn. I'm an emeritus professor of American history at the University of Gloucestershire. And I was in fact the first history PhD at The Open University and may have been the very first PhD. I think there was somebody else who might have graduated, but he wasn't there, so I count as the first.

I know I'm not supposed to talk but he is no longer with us, I think, so I think that definitely makes you first in that sense.

OK.

OK. So, if we kick off the interview, thank you for that. So if you can tell me a bit about the area you were born and your family's history in higher education?

OK, your question is a funny one, it's a funny one for me, because the area I was born is the Netherlands, because my father was in the Armed Forces. So we moved around quite a bit in my childhood. I was born in Holland. We moved back to England, to York, and moved to Germany and then finally ended up in Scotland, in my father's home country, and we lived in Edinburgh and I went to university. I was the first person in my family to complete a higher degree. My sister, who was older than me, started but didn't complete. So I'm the first one to complete it and certainly the first to get a PhD. So it was quite a big thing for my family. And of course I was very lucky because, in those days, you got grants to go to university. You weren't charged fees. So actually I was paid a certain amount, if you like, supported financially to go to university and of course I worked in the summer, but it was a very big deal for my family, to first of all get my degree from Edinburgh and then a PhD and subsequent publications. My mother still thinks, or still thought before she died, that I was a doctor and

asked me to cure her various ailments and could never get her head around the fact that a PhD doctor didn't mean the same as medical doctor. But they were very proud even though my mother certainly didn't always understand. My father did and was extremely proud but he died quite early so didn't follow up all of my career. So, yes, they weren't particularly familiar with higher education and, as I say, it was a very important thing for them.

What was your secondary schooling like, what type of school?

I went to secondary school in Edinburgh, in what was called the senior secondary school, which was effectively a comprehensive, so it was a mixed school. It was a secondary school, state secondary school, with quite a good reputation, quite academic in its emphasis. And again it was quite something for them to have people - I mean it was not unusual for them to have people going to university but to go on and do a PhD and then subsequently publish was rather an exception. It was a school which provided me, I mean obviously with a love for history, one particular history teacher inspired me. Sometimes he frightened me because in those days also in Scotland you could be belted if you'd committed any transgression so occasionally you would get the strap for misbehaving. So, yes, it was very different from now and looking back and thinking about it, before I went to secondary school in Edinburgh for a while I was living with my grandparents and went to a village school, primary school, where the belt was very regularly used and a very toughening experience. But things are quite different now, thank goodness.

Thank you. So we've touched on your undergraduate.

Yeah, do you want me to talk about that?

Yeah, so what you studied specifically and why you decided to take the degree.

So, not necessarily my best but certainly my favourite subject at school was history. My history teacher, although he inspired me, I didn't inspire him and he

didn't think I'd be able to get into university to do history, so I proved him wrong and that was the inspiration. He kind of needled me to demonstrate that he was wrong. So I chose to do history at Edinburgh University. I had originally planned to go into teaching, school teaching, but once I had graduated I soon gave that up as an idea. But I studied for four years for a MA at Edinburgh University in history and in the end I specialised in modern history and my main area of interest was American history. And one of my lecturers, in fact my personal tutor at Edinburgh at the time, was a man called Arthur Marwick, who in 1969 became the first professor of history at The Open University and he asked me if I'd like to join him as his first postgraduate student. So I was delighted to do so. Again proving lots of people wrong I think in their expectations. But I had no idea what it involved and went into the whole thing not having a clue what it was about and nor where it would lead. It just seemed like a nice thing to do, to continue doing history and people who had done well in my year at university who had gone on to do postgraduate seemed to be regarded as successful. So I thought wow, this has dropped in my lap, I will take it.

The Open University sounded new, exciting, something that would be good to be part of. It was something which politically I approve of. I think it was a great idea. It was of course a product of the Wilson government and particularly Jennie Lee and shared with principles the idea, coming from a working class background from a council house estate in a fairly rough area of Edinburgh, The Open University and my own experience kind of coincided in many ways the idea of bringing higher education to the master's. So I was just excited to take part in that. Even though in a way of course I was not taking part in the way that many other university students at The Open University were going to do, but it was great to be there and to be there at the beginning and to play a part in that and to study with - Arthur Marwick was in himself quite something in those days. He was making a name for himself in a whole variety of different ways in the academic world and so to be associated with them was quite something.

The Open University itself was just, you know, to be there at the beginning is an exciting thing to do. Even though it was extremely odd in many ways to find

the university in the middle of the Buckinghamshire countryside and in a way a university which existed in the ether, because at the time, The Open University was literally in its infancy, in its planning stages. It had buildings and location in Milton Keynes, in Buckinghamshire, not far from Bletchley. The new town of Milton Keynes didn't exist then. When I say Milton Keynes I'm thinking of the village, which was basically a pub and a church and a few houses, and then this university in a field down the road. I lived first of all in Newport Pagnell and if I'd wanted to get to the university by public transport, there was one bus which went there on a Monday and I'd be able to come back on a Wednesday. There wasn't a proper bus service, but fortunately I had a motor scooter. But actually I didn't have to go there very often. I spent most of my time working in the British Museum in London doing research and was only actually in The Open University buildings proper a couple of days a week probably when I would meet with Arthur Marwick, my supervisor, and meet other colleagues and meet the other handful of PhD students who were there. And it was a kind of, again, it was a very different experience from that of postgraduate students in traditional institutions.

If you went to study for a PhD in history now at a traditional university, you join a history department, and there will be several other PhD students there and a large number of, not a large number, but a number of anything from half a dozen to a hundred colleagues in history. Open University is very different. I was the first history PhD student, postgraduate student. I was the first postgraduate student I think in the faculty of arts altogether and then I was joined by a handful of other postgraduate students but they were in, there was one in philosophy, there was one in English literature, there was one I think in music who was just completing his PhD and then I met other people of my age group who worked on site, admin staff, other staff. My wife, who I married very early, got a job working in the science department at The Open University. And they did have labs there and she worked in labs there with the person she was attached to in London, in labs in London.

So I met kind of, there wasn't an academic community in the sense of traditional universities. It was an academic community which would come together as the

faculty of arts and probably once a week or once a fortnight for faculty meetings or for other meetings, but at other times it was pretty dispersed. Most people lived outside and they lived in London or near Bedford. You didn't have to be there. And so my social life involved young colleagues across the institution. Which in itself was kind of interesting because I met lots of different people from different backgrounds, but I missed perhaps being part of the community of historians, other than the several members of staff who joined Arthur Marwick, such as Clive Emsley, Bernard Waites, Christopher Harvey, and they became in a sense part of the history and humanities community there. And then gradually when the institution started to develop this teaching programme, we would meet staff, tutors and others who came down to Walton Hall for meetings too. So gradually I became part of this wider, I was a summer school tutor from 1977 to 1979 or 1980 and we would meet these historians.

So it was a kind of different experience in terms of how long I interacted with other colleagues. And that was kind of interesting, different but sometimes challenging. Being a researcher in humanities is quite isolated anyway in many respects. You're an individual ploughing your own furrow, working in libraries and archives and so on. In some ways with The Open University that was perhaps more of the case. But perhaps I had other broader experiences across the institution. And again it felt very much the beginning of an institution. Walter Perry to be socially with, who's vice chancellor; secretary of the university, a man called Christodoulou if I remember rightly. I used to play squash with him. That wouldn't happen in a traditional university I don't think. So it was interesting and I did have very fond memories of living in the Buckinghamshire countryside and visiting pubs and meeting Australians who had come to the institution to work and delighted with the pubs and then bringing American visitors, delighted in the pubs, because it was quaint and rural. And that changed while I was there. That was again one of the things about the whole experience.

Part of my research, I was very lucky I got to spend a year in the States, a year at The Open University, the first year I went to the States because I needed to get into American archives because I'm an American historian and I was researching about the experience of black Americans during the Second World

War. So through Arthur Marwick and his connections I went to Buffalo New York and was a graduate assistant there and doing some work within the history faculty, again, mainly following my own individual research. That was very exciting. Because when I'd gone to do my PhD, I had no idea I'd end up in America. Again, it just shows how naïve or lacking in experience I was but anyway it was an exciting opportunity and I had a great time in the States.

It was again a wonderful experience. It introduced me really to American society. I was there at a very exciting time. Richard Nixon was President. I still find it difficult to say his name. I hated him with a vengeance. I was against the war in Vietnam and most of my American friends [inaudible 00:16:45]. Buffalo New York was a very radical institution and had been, well, the students union building was pockmarked with the shotgun pellets that the police had fired during one of the demonstrations. We were locked into the library on one occasion when we were there by the police and not allowed out; race relations of course was very important and again something very exciting for me given the nature of my degree there. So I was able to work in Washington DC and would see consequences of race rioting and the destruction and also race prejudice and discrimination that was really part and parcel of what I was studying, but I had an experience first-hand in the UK.

So it was an introduction to The Open University through my course, through my PhD studies, I was introduced to America, American society at a very exciting time in modern American history. Some of that of course carried over when I came back. One of the pleasures about being in America was that somebody with a British accent was assumed to be very intelligent. I'm not sure that was necessarily the case but they were delighted to meet somebody with my accent. In those days I had a Scottish accent. When I got back home to England apparently I'd lost it and people said what's happened to you, what's happened to your hey Jimmy accent? I lost it in New York sadly. Some of the Americans came and visited. But by the time I got back to Milton Keynes, the area was already under change. Some of the old pubs had begun to disappear and been taken over by large breweries. The beginning of what was to become Milton Keynes, the new town, it was just beginning to be planned and developed

and it was in its first stages. So, again, I felt in the beginning of something and important historical moment.

Now, when I go back to Milton Keynes, I can't even find the university anymore. I tried an endless number of roundabouts and wonder where on earth I am. And all the pubs, I couldn't find them if I tried. I don't know what happened to them, so kind of sense of being in the place at a moment in time of considerable change. And so it wasn't just my studies and where I was doing it was exciting, it was the whole experience was exciting. Looking back, I kind of realise I've lived through something quite important in British history, The Open University, the beginnings of Milton Keynes new town and so on. So I look back and it makes me think about it and realise how exciting it was. And most importantly the relationships I developed during my studies were, first of all, with those history colleagues who were later to come and join Arthur Marwick and people I talk with at summer school, who actually I am still in touch with, other relationships with those, with people in the States. So it's stayed with me and I continued after I left, not just teaching summer school, but also eventually became a part-time history tutor when I was in Wales. So my connection with The Open University continued for some considerable time.

So being there at the beginning was great and it was exciting. Being at the graduation was also exciting. I graduated in 1973 and that in itself was a historic moment. Again, I don't think I'd realised how important it was. And I was sitting in the office in Walton Hall one day, an office I shared with two or three other postgraduate students across the faculty of arts, and I got a phone call and I heard this voice and the person said there was somebody called Richard Baker. And people may not know who Richard Baker was but Richard Baker was a very, very famous BBC news reporter, journalist, face on the six o'clock and nine o'clock news in those days. This voice claimed to be Richard Baker. I didn't believe it. I thought it was one of my mates pulling a prank. So I swore at him and told him to go away. And there was a long silence and he sort of persisted, in fact, he insisted. He said it is Richard Baker and the reason I'm phoning you is because we're going to be filming the graduation for the BBC. I almost fainted.

I had no idea that was going to happen. And I had no idea either what Alexandra Palace. It was huge. It was like a cathedral. It was just phenomenal to be there.

So, one of my friends, a guy called Richard Middleton, who was again one of the early members of staff, a musician, who is now Professor Richard Middleton, emeritus from Durham, he and his wife drove me and my wife to the graduation and took part in this huge ceremony. And I was sat next to Jennie Lee who was then I think Baroness Lee who was getting an honorary degree. So I was speechless; in fact I was so speechless I didn't even speak to her. I was totally tongue tied. So yeah it was a very exciting moment and watching it back when I saw it on television, again I couldn't believe it, and my mother couldn't believe it either. She found the whole thing, not quite sure she fully understood what was going on but she realised it was quite important. So that was a great moment too and I went from there, having graduated, instead of going into a traditional university, I decided probably fairly deliberately but also because it was the only job that came up at the time, I moved into a polytechnic, as it was then, perhaps reflecting my own background but also reflecting something of the influence of The Open University polytechnics were broadening their education and including technical subjects obviously and more vocational events. They were beginning to set up arts and humanities programmes.

So I went to the Glamorgan Polytechnic, which in itself was a new institution, being a college in technology and they were now setting up arts and humanities programmes. So again I was there from the beginning to set up the history programme at Glamorgan Polytechnic, which then became the polytechnic of Wales and then University of Glamorgan is now the University of South Wales. I taught there in a variety of capacities in history and American studies until 2003 when I came to the University of Gloucestershire where I am now and where I finally retired in about, I can't even remember when it was I retired because it seemed to take several stages before I fully retired, but by 2017 I think I fully retired from the University of Gloucestershire as an emeritus professor.

So I think that about sums up my whole career really in many ways and in The Open University my PhD was the Second World War Afro-American, which actually was, I didn't realise how much this was the case. It was kind of ground breaking. The Open University provided me opportunities in a number of other ways. It helped to take part in some of the first history programmes or history courses that were being set up. I contributed a little bit to the foundation course in history, but more especially I contributed to a third level course called War and Society and I contributed a unit in my area of research on black Americans in the Second World War, you know, and made a television programme. Because in those days Open University did a variety of TV programmes in subject areas which were broadcast on BBC2 twice a year, and I think my programme appeared for about three or four years, which is amazing because it was awful. Can you imagine a 26-year-old from Edinburgh, working class background who's plonked in front of the camera and asked to speak about his subject and be natural. That was really my first teaching experience and I was dreadful. They had to actually remake the first programme, I was so bad, because I just totally froze and didn't move or do anything and in fact it took a cameraman to say to me, you know, when you're talking normally you move around quite a lot and gesture with your hands, you can't do that on camera. They also very smartly took me out for lunch which involved some alcohol and I kind of loosened up a little bit the second time so it was better.

So actually I came out of The Open University not just with a PhD but with incredible experience in introduction to a whole new method of teaching and learning. And my first actual teaching experience, proper, was at Open University summer schools. And because of that there were 26, 27 teaching people who, it could be anything up to 70, and in fact the first summer school I taught on War and Society was knowledge, and I had in my study group two military gentlemen of considerable rank and they turned up in their casual uniform. They were very nice and they were very kind to me. I'm sure they could have taught me a lot more than I taught them but they entered into the spirit of it. It did mean that when I started teaching I taught probably in a different way than many other people because I used a lot of audio visual material and in the beginning it was very much part and parcel of what I did. Teaching at The Open

University really introduced me to the use of primary resources in a very different way and that carried over into my own teaching. So Open University had a great link in shaping my whole career and I was very lucky in terms of what happened afterwards to go on and publish my thesis, my PhD thesis and publish other parts and extracts from it and then develop other areas of interest and to publish other work.

So one of the questions you asked was did the doctorate change my life, yeah, shaped it totally. I wouldn't be where I am now without having it. Arthur Marwick sadly is dead. He died several years ago now, but his invitation to me asked me to go and do a PhD with him, just shaped the whole of my life subsequently. Everything else carried on from there. I guess if I hadn't have done it, I may have been a mediocre school teacher somewhere, something that I probably wasn't capable of being able to cope with. Teaching particularly mature students and then teaching students generally in higher education was something that I think I'd developed a reasonable skill for. But because of The Open University and because of working with people like Arthur Marwick so it changed my life enormously and I will always look here at the university, even though that has changed a great deal now, I have great affection and gratitude for the opportunity that I had. Even though I was not really, it would now be regarded as traditional Open University student, because I was an Open University student. I was there. I was at the campus insofar as they had a campus, a campus without students. Their campus is a countrywide campus really.

So it had an enormous impact and an enormous influence and when I look at how The Open University has changed now and I think wow I was there at the beginning and it's become this major institution, which actually also had a great impact on higher education generally. Arthur Marwick had an influence in how history was taught, War and Society courses certainly sprang up all over Britain and elsewhere, partly because of the influence of him and The Open University course and the publications and the other people who were working with them. And I'm very proud and grateful to have been one of them. So there you have

it I think in a nutshell or rather large nutshell. So if there are any other questions that I've left out or anything you'd like me to consider, please ask.

That was very comprehensive actually and just fantastic that it flowed from you without me having to ask questions, that was just brilliant, exactly how I would like it to be.

OK.

The only question I would have, you touched on a little bit, is how your personal life maybe was affected by studying your PhD at the OU and the work you did afterwards, if you're willing to talk about that obviously. You talked about getting married quite young.

Yeah, married at 20, divorced at 30 - a lesson there! Again, you know, I think maybe, I don't think I was particularly naïve but I think teenagers were a lot more naïve and innocent in those days. The permissive revolution of the '60s had only just about started to reach Scotland when I left. So actually we got married early because it was probably the only way we were going to have sex I think. My wife, my first wife came from quite a strict Scottish Presbyterian background. But anyway she came down to The Open University with me and in fact she had a job there working as a lab technician, and she came to the States and got a job there as a lab technician. So I mean we shared a lot of the experiences together. And for both of us it was quite something I think for two young Scots to leave Edinburgh and our different families moved to England. I think social mobility has increased so much since the '60s, although I was born abroad and my family lived abroad and we never went back abroad on holidays. I never went abroad on holidays again until much, much later even though then I went to America to study.

So I had quite a lot of experience of travel, nonetheless, to up your roots from Scotland, from Edinburgh and move down to England was in itself quite something, quite dramatic and. I suppose that separation and also the difference in terms of my career, my following an academic life, meant a

distance between myself and my family. Although they were proud, it meant they kind of watched from afar, as it were, both literally, physically and also metaphorically in the sense that they were proud of what I was doing. I don't think my father ever really thought it was a proper job; although he was actually more understanding and more academically inclined than my mum was. I think he thought it all a bit strange. I know he was very proud of my books when they appeared. And probably was proud because I had achieved the sort of thing that, my father was a very bright man, had done very well at school in Edinburgh himself but like many people had gone into the military, spent more than 22 years' service in the military. Perhaps while he was proud maybe he was envious that I was able to do, it was kind of pride and envy for the same reason that I was able to do the things that he hadn't been able to do. My grandfather was a tailor and they lived out in the countryside in Dechmont, not far from Edinburgh, and so, you know, my career was very different to them, kind of strange. Then to go off to America of course, I remember writing to my dad in great detail about the car I bought in America for 300 dollars, which was a Ford Fairlane, which was six cylinders and he wrote back and actually said six cylinders, my car is probably lucky to have four. And I remember talking to him afterwards about air conditioning and he pointed out that when he got his first car when we moved back to Edinburgh, he had a Ford Anglia and actually put in the heater himself.

So actually to hear about my car and my life in America was very different to them but there was this distance. Then of course there was a distance because you became more academic, you became, my parents' generation, we talk about institution of racism and about whether Britain is or is not racist. We are racist because it was part and parcel of our culture. My mother talked to people as coloured all her life. In fact, she didn't use coloured as an adjective. She spoke it as a noun, referred to people as coloureds and I tried to correct her but she couldn't quite understand. So, even the subject of that study was very different in many ways and the attitudes that went with that about racial equality and racial awareness and about critiquing one's history or the debates which are current now in fact. They're very alien to them and very different. So my world became very different. And if I ever went back when I was a student, went

back to where my family lived in a council house in Edinburgh in Oxgangs, that world was very different. That was even very different when I went to secondary school. The lads I grew up with had various career choices when I grew up and amongst them were going into the military, going into the police force or going into prison. So I was lucky, I escaped all three of those and became a student instead and was regarded, even in the community, amongst my mates, with sort of pride but also distain, it became some kind of defeat, idiot! My mum used to call us educated idiots. We may have had an education but we didn't know anything about life. She was right. I learnt a lot subsequently. I learnt mostly at university by becoming a bus conductor in the summer. That was my education, dealing with customers on a Friday and Saturday night on buses between Edinburgh and Glasgow.

So yeah, going to, I lived in Newport Pagnell when I first moved to The Open University. That was hugely different from Edinburgh. And then when I came back from the States I lived just outside Buckingham. Because actually living near The Open University was at the time quite difficult. It was just a little village. Richard Middleton lived in the village and that was the only person I know who lived there. So all that was very different and growing up in rural England was a bit strange, was a bit alien for me and quite alien for them. But they never visited. My wife's parents visited Buckingham and found it quaint. So yeah there were some, and eventually I suppose higher education and the academic career I led pulled my wife and I apart in different directions and she now lives back in Edinburgh. So there you go.

Sorry?

So there you go.

Thank you for that. That was great and is there anything else you want to say about the OU before we finish?

No, not really, I think it's, I don't know quite how I feel about it now. I mean, you think, you know, its connection with the BBC originally was very important.

Because I met BBC producers and people from the media world who you wouldn't now, I mean now The Open University is a huge, big mass producing education system. Instead of producing units, they're producing books. So they're producing things, films for the BBC, not just for the television but also the radio. They broadcast them on radio and television. It's just amazing. It tells you a lot about television in those days so there was that kind of space. Mind you, The Open University TV programmes were on ungodly hours. I think my film was shown at something like six o'clock in the morning. So I think I only ever saw it once. That was enough.

To think of how it's developed since and where it is now, is a totally, totally different institution. And whether, I feel sad about it in some ways because I don't think it's ever done quite what the planners, Harold Wilson and Jennie Lee, had intended. I think they had intended to bring education to the masses and make it more accessible to the masses; what it did was make it more accessible to the middle classes. And lots of people I talk with, people who already had experiences in education but for one reason or another, particularly financial, I haven't been able to do it in the traditional way or I'd come back to higher education later in life. So I think one of the phrases used to describe was university of the second chance. They gave people a second opportunity. For some people it was the first opportunity. I think now it's just become another institution, another university. Maybe it's lost its novelty, I don't know, maybe I've lost touch with it because you don't see it on television anymore, not even graduations. So maybe what we should do in a new project is produce a big film so I can see myself graduate again.

You could try and get it in the exhibition, get the clip-

OK.

-when everyone's allowed to go back.

I remember the secretary, the secretary of the faculty of arts actually came to that first graduation ceremony at Alexandra Palace. That's how significant it

was to people who worked there actually to come and see. Because of course they awarded at that ceremony, which was the very first time they'd turned up in all their finery. The chancellor, what's his name, Gardiner, was given his gowns and was also given an honorary degree. And so members of staff from the non-teaching, non-academic side came to it, and they were quite proud too. I remember she was very proud of me. She was kind of quite [unclear 0:44:52]. She told me off. She said I looked so grim. She said at least you could have smiled when you walked down the aisle! Walking down that huge crowd in a huge place is scary, smile?! I just wanted to get to the end and get it over with. I'd like to do it again. I could do it better now. I could even give a speech.

END OF INTERVIEW