
**FULL TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH DAMIEN MCCLOSKEY
DOCUMENTARY: A LIFETIME OF STORIES, 2019
IRISH SCREEN PROJECTS**

INTERVIEWER: DR ENDA MURRAY

DAMIEN MCCLOSKEY

Can you tell me your name and where you come from?

My name is Damien McCloskey, and I was born and raised in the Bogside in Derry near St Columba's Chapel. And the Bogside of course was to become very, very famous in Irish history later on.

And can you tell me a little bit about growing up in Derry?

I remember growing up in Derry and we had a fun time, we were always playing football, and anybody that had a ball, they were the cock of the walk for that week until we burst it.

But then of course times changed as the political scene changed, and as I grew from a child to a young man. Things changed dramatically with the civil rights, and people like John Hume, who happened to be a teacher of mine at St. Columbs College, and with these marches and with the English army becoming involved and the police, it gradually became more serious, until fatalities became actually quite the norm.

Tell us about finishing school, and what did you do after finishing school?

Well I finished school at St. Columbs College and I went to University, and I came back to Derry and was teaching in Derry. When one day, my friend Hugh Breslin, said to me, he said, "I've heard they are looking for teachers in Sydney, I'm thinking of going," and I said, "Well I'll go with you."

We were changing the oil in my car, an old Morris Minor, I remember at the time and you've never seen blacker oil in your life. And between starting to change the oil and finishing it, we had made a decision that would forever change our lives. We decided to leave Derry and go to live in Sydney. We didn't think it was going to be permanent, but at that time and at that age you didn't think anything was going to be permanent.

Tell us about the civil rights campaign that was going on at the time.

Well there was a civil rights campaign of course and probably the best-known memory from that is Bloody Sunday. And I remember giving up my day to go and watch Derry city at the Brandywell [Stadium], and there was a huge crowd at the march. I'm sure there would have been about 30,000 people. And Bernadette Devlin spoke, and it was the first time I realised what a wonderful speaker she was, and what a wonderful future she would have in parliament as it turned out later on.

Tragically, 14 people were killed, 13 on the day, one was to die later. 13 people were shot on the day, many of whom I knew well, Derry wasn't that big of a city, and it was just so by surprise. Standing listening to Bernadette Devlin, the army coming in on personnel carriers, and just the gunfire and looking at it and thinking "What is happening?" and just watching the bodies fall, and somehow trying to get my place behind a telegraph pole to give me some safety at that time.

You mentioned Burntollet.

Oh yes, and there were so many dangerous times that you never knew when you were going to come back home. Burntollet was certainly one of them. And I remember my brother-in-law, Franky Ramsey, a very, very well-known Derry personality who boxed for Ireland, amateur boxing, and so on and owned a couple of hotels in the town. But he was hit in the thigh by a rubber bullet, and I thought it would kill him. I've never seen a person's leg swell to such an extent.

Now, of course the army was meant to bounce a rubber bullet in front of you, but they always aimed it directly at you, and I just could not believe the damage that could do. And the damage done by the gas, and of course the CS gas which was meant as a deterrent, the number of people that it actually killed, like Sammy Devlin and so on, that it killed... People who had weak chests, the CS gas of course, they couldn't recover from that. And I remember the week after Bloody Sunday, going to Newry town where there was even a bigger march and there was a bus from Derry, and I thought I would never see my family again, and I thought that I would never return to Derry, but it was just something that I had to do.

You tell me that you made a decision quickly, but what do you think was the reason that you came to Australia?

Well, there was obviously the reason that I couldn't watch people I knew be shot dead and not do something. So, I knew if I stayed in Derry that I would have to take an active role in the military-type activities that were taking place.

I was not afraid, at all, of taking part in these military activities, I was afraid of shooting, or killing someone who was innocent. I always remember that was my major fear. Not of being hurt myself, but of doing a terrible thing by someone else. I would have no trouble shooting those who were guilty, but I had a fear of shooting an innocent person, even if that person was a British soldier.

But one of the things that I remember about the Troubles, and they were terrible times, but there were also so many, like all Irish things, so many fun activities that happens amongst tragedy.

I remember it was a very common thing on a daily basis for the army to stop us in our car. "Wind down your window sir, show me your license," you know, "What's your name? Where are you going? where are you coming from?" But I remember one day in particular that this happened, where that it turned out to be a very humorous incident.

My friend, my best friend, Micky McBride asked me to play football for his team, they were short. And I said, "Micky I'm going back to Australia I can't, you know I could break a leg!" Anyway, he convinced me. So I got in the car along with his brother. . . along with his son Michael, and his cousin. So we are going along to Altnagelvin bridge and were going to play in the football match at the Brandywell Stadium, the army stops us. "Wind down your window, what's your name?" and my friend was driving. "Michael McBride," "And where are you going Michael McBride?" "Oh I'm going to play a football match," and he looks across at the passenger, and he says "and what's your name?" and he says "My name's Michael McBride," and the soldier looks at him a bit stunned and said, "and where are you going?" and he says "Oh I'm going to play a football match." And of course, this was my friend's son, who was also Michael.

And then he looked in the back, and he looked at the third passenger, (and I was the fourth) and he says, "What's your name?" and he said, "Michael McBride." And the soldier, I felt his head was going to explode, he did not know what to do. It turned out that this person's name was Michael McBride, he was a cousin of my friend who was driving, Michael McBride, and you could see he was just waiting to explode. And then he said to me, and I was the fourth person, Damien McCloskey, and he said, "What's your name?" and I looked at him, and I could feel Micky's eyes piercing me, and I said "Michael McBride", and he said, "All you fucking Michael McBrides get out of that car and stand here on the bridge!" And we did. And

he got my friend and he looked at his driver's licence. He said, "Show me your identification!" and Michael McBride of course, showed his driver's licence. He turned to his son, "Show me your identification!" [He showed] His driver's licence, Michael McBride. And he did the same with the third person - his cousin, who was Michael McBride. And with seeing the third Michael McBride in a row, somehow that seemed to clarify any doubts about the Michael McBride, and he never came to me.

He just finished with that, and he called all his friends over, all the soldiers, and he said, "You'll never believe this," He said. "All these people in the car are called Michael McBride!". And we were treated like royalty. He said, "I can't believe this," he said "I can't wait to tell all my soldier friends," he said "Well good luck in your match, and I'm sure we'll meet again." And the strange thing was, every time we were stopped after that, they recognised who we were without asking our names. Of course the licence of the car had got around among the soldiers, and immediately they would say "Oh good day Mr. McBride, how are you today?" and I always thought, and I remember my friend Michael McBride saying to me afterwards, he says "Why the fuck did you say that?" he said, "I knew you would, but they could of shot us just as easy if things had gone wrong." And then we just burst out laughing. . . all four Michael McBrides.

You had another story about in the car?

Well yes. Thinking more about the humorous rather than the tragic. There was another humorous incident in a car that involved obviously the army, where Michael McBride and his son and myself, went to Finn Harps, to see Finn Harps play in a football match. We went across the border on a Sunday, it was a terrible day. Now that would never stop us. Anything involving soccer, the weather didn't matter. Even though we were only watching the match. So, we got out at Finn Park, and we watched the match and we were soaked, absolutely saturated, the whole game it poured. And at that time there was no place really that you could have proper cover.

So, we went back to the car, saturated. And Michael said, "look we can't sit in the car, and we don't want to be sat in the car absolutely saturated." He said, "We may as well take off our clothes, throw them in the boot, get to my house, we can have a shower and a change." So we all agreed to this. So, we stripped down just basically until we had, all of us had a long white vest, and a long white pair of drawers. Anyway, were driving back up to Derry, and low and behold, there are our friends. As soon as we get over the border, there are our friends, the army, along the

side of the road, stopping cars, asking questions. So, they stop us, and of course, even though the army weren't too bright as a whole, they could see that there was something odd about three blokes with only their underpants, or their vests on. So of course, as they would, the soldiers immediately thought, "Great," and their first move was not about who you were or where you were going or anything else.

"Right could you three men get out of the car please and line up here, along the side of the road," So they lined us up, and let's face it they could do anything they wanted, because I ended up in Fort George a few times, and had one or two extremely unpleasant encounters in Fort George, you went along with what they did. And they had us standing along the side of the road, white vest, white drawers hanging down, And I mean they were really dripping, the water was really dripping off them, and they were stretched out so far, and we were in a very embarrassing position, but what was most embarrassing was, people were coming back to Derry from Donegal as they did every Sunday, and of course they would see us, as the army. . . as the soldiers planned, along the side of the road, and among some of those who went past, were I am sure girls who I had tried to... I had danced with, and maybe I had tried to leave home or chat up. And believe you me, I was thinking to myself "this has destroyed my chances with ever going out with just so many girls because if they see me in this position, I have no chance of ever making it with them," And that was my story, another story in the car. And they kept us there for a few hours, and then they said, "Right lads, off youse go home," and that was it.

Do you want to explain what Fort George was?

Fort George was the Headquarters of the British army it was in Bligh's Lane in Derry, and if the army stopped you and they had any suspicion, and even if they didn't have any suspicion about you, if they just felt bad or didn't like you, they would take you to Fort George.

And I remember one day in particular, I was taken there a few times and interviewed. I felt in a very dangerous position obviously, but one time it was really exceptional.

It's almost like something you would see in a movie. They interviewed me with a light, they asked me the sort of questions.. "Who lives beside you in your street that belongs to the IRA?" they asked this type of question that you might have no idea at all about, I did, but most people wouldn't have. And this particular time they said, "If you don't tell us what we want to know, we are going to throw

you out of a helicopter.” And they took me out to a helicopter, and they blindfolded me, and they put me in this helicopter, and they took off. And they asked me the same sort of questions, and it turned out, I won’t say his name, there was a very well-known IRA person who lived directly opposite me. And they asked me these questions blindfolded, the helicopter went up, I didn’t know how high we were, and he said, he asked me these questions, and he said, “I’m going to throw you out if you don’t answer these questions,” and I just said, “It’s not that I’m not answering them, I don’t know the answers,”. I did actually know the answers, but I wasn’t telling anything.

And eventually, I felt this hand on my back and he pushed me out. What I didn’t know was, the helicopter had taken off, and had only taken off maybe I don’t know, 15 feet, I’m not sure. But I was blindfolded and expected to go crunching to the ground and meet my doom, instead I broke a couple of bones, got a, obviously a very bad noggin. But, they then took me out, they put me in a Land Rover, and they took me to the end of my street and set me out, because I was badly injured. But nowhere near what would have happened. And that was Fort George. It didn’t have a good reputation amongst the Catholics in Derry.

Tell us about how you started playing snooker.

Well I started playing snooker, basically because of my dislike of school. I had to do something else, I didn’t want to go to school. I can honestly say, I never, in 7 years at college, I never did one homework. And I know that because my mother when I was home said, “Son can you take those books out, you know if you don’t want them just throw them out,” and they were my exercise books. And they had very neatly printed - Damien McCloskey English, History, Science, and that was followed by a succession of blank pages without a word in it. Except for one book which had the names of all my girlfriends and girls I fancied. And there was one other book that had various snooker games that I had played and how much I had played for, and that type of thing.

So, instead of going to school I went to St. Columb’s Hall, which was in Abercorn Street, and I went there, I’d get my bag, I’d leave my bag in a very famous shop in Bishop Street for school boys, because they looked after your bags during the day. ‘Wee Johnnies’ it was called. I’d leave it in Wee Johnnies, and I’d make my way to the snooker hall, and I’d play for money for anybody who, as I got better.

And then, because I spent so much time doing it, I became fairly reasonable at it and won some competitions and so

on. And yes... there were two players that I played with that actually became world champions. It was Hurricane Higgins and Dennis Taylor. But I think they might have been a cut above me.

One time when I was 17 and we went outside to take a break as we sometimes did...There were some folks there who were unemployed, and they used to have a spitting competition. And they would line up a fly from maybe 10 metres, and they could hit that fly 9 times out of 10, and it might sound interesting, but it absolutely disgusted me. But I realised if I didn't make it as a professional snooker player, and there were a lot of good players about, I was going to be... this was going to be my future.

So, I went inside, I had a special cue, I took down my special cue, took it home, and for the next eight weeks I spent 18 hours a day studying all the work I hadn't done for the last number of years. And as it turned out my results were satisfactory to get me to university and pass my degrees and I became a teacher.

What do you remember most about playing with Hurricane Higgins?

I remember what his name said... Hurricane. He was just so quick. Well he was world champion twice. There were many things memorable about him. He was definitely a different sort of person. But a wonderful, wonderful player. But as some people might know he also has his moments when he's had a disagreement on television on the BBC, with the referee and he head butted the referee which finished his career for a couple of years. But the thing about Hurricane was, he was a fantastic player and it was, even for good players it was great fun watching him.

ENDS
