



SID-0002X0001_2M0

Date: 22 September 2013

Interviewer: Helen Hughes

Respondent: Isobel McCully

So this is Thursday 26 September, 2013. I'm Helen Hughes interviewing Isobel McCully. Isobel can you spell your name for me please?

My first name is I-S-O-B-E-L and my second name M-C Capital C-U-L-L-Y

Thank you. And we're in your home in Port Glasgow and interviewing for part of the 'Stepping into diversity' project. Where and when were you born Isobel?

I was born and brought up in Glasgow and I was just a pre-war baby.

Thank you. So that was at the beginning of the forties?

Yes

And Isobel you were born in Glasgow but now living in Port Glasgow, can you tell me of something where you have been living and working in between? Because you came to port Glasgow to work I believe? Could you tell me a little bit about what you did in-between?

I used to drive my friend's daft because I was always changing addresses and they said their address book grew... ran out of pages. From Glasgow I went to London to work and then through my church connection I applied to be deaconess training. Deaconess as it was then. I was accepted and came back home to Glasgow and then trained for two years in Edinburgh which was residential. And then the third year we had to do a third year in Glasgow so another colleague and I set up a flat in Glasgow to get used to having a flat of our own and then my first parish appointment was in Hamilton and then I was in Cumbernauld and then I went back to St [ph Colmes] college for a term as I was accepted to work in Pakistan. Gosh I'm out of breath already! [laughs] After Pakistan I came back and worked in Glasgow. I worked in sheltered housing for social work and I worked in Clan Hill and then I worked outside Edinburgh and then I came here to Port Glasgow. And I've retired now and stopped moving.

You certainly have moved a lot! Just to confirm you trained as a deaconess, was that with the Church of Scotland?

With the Church of Scotland yes.

So you certainly did move around a lot then, and you mentioned lots of different places. You mentioned Pakistan, you worked in Scotland then you went to Pakistan.

Yes.



SID-0002X0001_2M0

Tell me some of what you were doing in Pakistan.

Officially I was appointed as a bishop of [ph Siyalco] secretary, but I was also given the remit from the Church of Scotland here to use my deaconal skills to widen the work that I would be doing. They didn't want me just solely based in an office and in an administrative position so I did that. I got friendly with what was the equivalent of a deaconess in the church of Pakistan, they were called Bible teachers, and I worked very closely with her and then latterly I took over the training of Bible teachers for the diocese.

What was the name of the person, the bible teacher you... were there more than one?

Yes there were several bible teachers, but the one I was friendly with who lived locally, her name was [ph Sakhina Laldin] and she, the first time I met her, the first thing she said to me was "do you know Miss Reekie and of course I did know Miss Reekie. Sakhina had belonged to a Christian family and was a nanny to one of the other missionaries and Stella Reekie saw in her something special and arranged for her to be trained as a bible teacher although she didn't have the school qualifications, she helped her get the qualifications and sponsored her to train as a bible teacher.

That must have been quite something for Sakhina to find that you knew...

I did know her yes! [laughs] It was quite... it was astounding really. Pakistani folks... the Christian community's quite small and they're inclined to think everybody knows everybody in the Christian communities, but that was quite strange.

And you kept in touch. How long were you in Pakistan?

I was there three years. It wasn't very long, but I wasn't very good at the language, but I also discovered Stella Reekie was terrible at Urdu [laughs]. I think we both had the same philosophy: we really wanted out on the job and learning the language was really [grunt] too much hard work. So she was terrible at Urdu and I was equally as bad.

Did you meet any other people in Pakistan who remembered Stella?

Well see the Christian community's very small and yes they all, in the Siyalco diocese everybody seemed to remember Stella Reekie. She was quite... she had a car, we didn't have a car. She had a car and did an awful lot of outreach and just knew everybody, and despite her poor language she could communicate beautifully. So everybody knew her and remembered her fondly. They also remembered her eccentric ways. She would always get lost and apparently one time she went over the Indian border – the Pakistan Indian border – which was easy but then she couldn't get back! She had a terrible job getting back into Pakistan, but she could charm her way out of anything and she did.

Can you tell me some of the other stories people told you about her time in Pakistan? Because we're very interested in finding out more about Stella's life.

Not an awful lot, just that she was memorable. People remembered her and they remembered the stories about her getting lost. And they remembered she would never wait. She was responsible too for training the bible teachers and, in her day, they were always late and she would leave without them half the time if they weren't going anywhere. So they learned to be on time.



SID-0002X0001_2M0

Was that her whole work in Pakistan, training the bible teachers or did she do other things?

The work in Pakistan in the Christian community, the women's work was very separate from the men's work. The ministers and pastors, or the padres they were called, they're called different names in different areas, was really to do with the men and with the wider families. Women were a bit neglected as far as fellowship and teaching was concerned so that was the bible teacher's remit, to work with the women and the wider families, Sunday schools, and women's fellowships and things like that. So Stella was involved in that.

So when did you go to Pakistan?

I went in 1979.

And how long was it since Stella had been?

I can't think how long it would be - maybe five or six years prior to that.

So it wasn't that long?

No, no. Oh yes peoples' memories were very fresh about Stella. She was a kind of character they remembered.

So she had quite an influence did she? Could you see that in the way things were done and the work that continued after she had left?

The work was certainly there, I don't whether she established it, but she was certainly ongoing and people like Sakhina were great at their work and keeping in touch with all the outreach work.

Sakhina came to Scotland didn't she? I seem to remember meeting her at a council meeting of deacons. Did she come to visit you or...?

She came home with me when I came back from Pakistan, she came with me and stayed for three months and the diaconate sponsored her and gave her some finances towards her travel and things. So yes she did come to the council. We came back at Christmas time and the council in January was the one she came to. And then she visited various other deaconesses. But yes she was very much Stella's prodigy. She also, of course, got in touch with Stella but by that time Stella was very poorly so it was quite a tearful meeting up and a very tearful goodbye when Sakhina left and Stella came to see her off, there was a lot of tears. So that was quite sad for both of them.

Yeah that must have been difficult.

Yes I think it was. Well I know it was.

When you came back from Pakistan, can you remember what you did when you came back?



SID-0002X0001_2M0

Yes. After I came back I had to do the usual deputation work round the country and then, because of Stella's illness, Home Board – which was the body that employed Stella – along with the YWCA – asked me to work in the international flat with Stella, so I went there in the March, Easter time and started working in the international flat with Stella. But I had worked with her before, will I backtrack?

Please yes.

I first met Stella when I was training at St [ph Colmes] and she spoke at a fellowship meeting there and I was very intrigued by what she was saying about her work with international community in Glasgow. I also thought she was quite, not strange, but very intense. I thought "oh, I don't know how I would get on with you" but I just loved the idea of her work.

And then when I did pastoral studies at Glasgow University after St Colmes training, we had to do a month practical work and I was going to work in London but they couldn't take me in the allotted space so I had a month free and I asked if I could work with Stella at the international flat and the University agreed and at that time Stella was in Glasgow Street, which was her own flat, but it kind of... our work developed from that flat so I helped Stella. Helped her with her admin work which was a bit difficult, it was a one bedroom flat, rented flat in Glasgow. And the typewriter was in the bedroom and all these people coming to the door! [laughs] It was fun, but I also learnt a lot about the international community visiting with Stella and the early sharing of faith work that she was helping set up and meeting with all sorts of people. She had a kind of magnetic personality. She saw things in people that people themselves didn't see, and she drew them in, and then she gave them things to do. Other folks would be much more protective but she would send you out into the unknown. It was quite scary, you were appearing at people's doors and you'd never met them and you couldn't speak the language, but she had this faith in you and because you gave her name you would be welcomed and you were. So that was my getting to know Stella, working a month with her there.

And then I went into the parish work and then out of the blue I was offered the job in Pakistan, which was quite coincidental that it was Pakistan. I just offered, you know "I'd quite like to work abroad," and out of the blue I was offered this in Pakistan, and I remember in interviews they were saying "and did Miss Reekie influence you in any way?"... "No!" [laughs] it was one of these divine coincidences that happened that way. The other thing was when I was commissioned I asked Stella to be one of my sponsors at that. So I've some letters that she wrote to me at that time and letters that she wrote to me before I went to Pakistan that I keep and treasure.

Would it be possible for us to have a copy of some of these?

Yes. They're very personal in some ways but other ways they're very... they're almost prayers they're very meditative letters. That was one of the things about Stella that she was known for, she seldom went to bed on the same day as she got up in Pakistan and Glasgow. She would work half the night and write letters to everybody. That was one of her outreach and her thinking about people. She wrote everywhere and she was always buying stamps and I remember she was always looking for pillar boxes to post all these letters that she'd written because she wrote them all during the night and then when it was time to get up in the morning she was going to bed. So her body clock was very different from everybody else's.



SID-0002X0001_2M0

So she came back... Stella came back from Pakistan and then she opened up just her own home initially? You said it was just a small flat at first?

Yes. She was appointed by the Church of Scotland and the YWCA to work with the families, there was more and more families coming into Glasgow. [ph Emanuel Johnson] was a minister, had been appointed by the Church of Scotland earlier because of the influx of Pakistani families but of course, traditionally it was the men that he was concerned with and he wanted somebody to work with the families and children and that was Stella's appointment. But she wasn't appointed to work from her own flat that was how Stella's imagination grew, that the international flat vision would be a home place. A place where families could come to and feel at home, welcomed. It kind of grew just out of her dream, he vision, her prayerful thought about it. And of course a one bedroom flat became outrageous to have all these people coming and going. And I'm sure the landlord didn't appreciate it either! It was then that the Home Board – I don't know if they purchased or leased the big flat in Glasgow street that became the international flat. But it also was Stella's home and that was very much her philosophy that it would be a home.

But when you went to work with the Stella you didn't live in the flat?

No, no. Stella.... There wasn't room I don't think. Because one of the rooms was a room for guests and it was often students that would be staying there. No I didn't stay. It wasn't my kind of thing to live on the job.

And what was your experience then of working along with Stella in the international flat?

Well remembering that Stella was very ill when.... It was amazing how she kept going, but she was very poorly and very aware of what her lifespan would be, so she was very focused on having a legacy and having things in place as she dreamt they would be, which was quite hard because it wasn't everybody's vision of how things could be or should be. But she was lovely to work with in other ways, she really was. She was such a – I don't know if it's the right word – some kind of character, she could charm anybody into anything in the long run. And I think it was Maxwell Craig said she could... you would object strongly and then find you had done it, whatever she had wanted you to do. And I think she could charm the men especially. I think the women were more perceptive to see round what she was doing, but you still went along with her because she did it so nicely. But yes she welcomed everybody into her home and the sharing of her faith, of her work in the international flat. It was her vision that, the more they knew about other faiths the easier it was to communicate.

You mentioned Maxwell Craig. He was minister at Wellington Church?

Yes he was the parish.... I was going to say Stella was part of his parish but I think Maxwell was part of Stella's parish! [laughs] I don't know which way round it was, but yes, he saw the vision that Stella had and shared it and he got into bother with the Glasgow Presbytery because they thought he was kind of watering down the Christian faith by having this sharing of faiths. But he just kept going and he was very close to Stella, especially at the end, he was her minister. And Stella also – I don't know if you know – she was on Songs of Praise. Yes she was... they didn't do it as she wanted it [laughs] too much Stella not enough about her work and the international flat.

I remember being there and she chose 'God be in my head' as her hymn for songs of praise...



SID-0002X0001_2M0

And then she... it was at a funeral, yes. But the flat, yes, Stella had her vision for the flat but it was quite a difficult vision for anybody else to fulfil. She insisted that the residential aspect would be there but that faded out, because it was so difficult, they needed that special person to...

Do you think that Stella hoped that you might fit in?

Yes. That was her hope and I think her expectation but I just couldn't, I needed space. And you never had space. I think that was partly why she stayed up all night. Nobody ever saw inside her room [laughs]. And Stella never threw anything out – I know that's not about her work – but that's part of her, she never threw anything out she kept everything and if anybody brought her a present it was on show and – of course- you ran out of space and when you were working there it was quite difficult to find a space! Because she couldn't throw anything out or move anything away.

What kind of things were you involved in doing in the flat? How long was it?

It was a year I was there, I was there nine/ten months on my own with the other workers, [ph Bridge Candy] and [ph Cass] was the secretary and other folks. Yeah it was very much the pastoral work that was always my favourite I think. And I was involved, we had holiday club things. There was a sharing of faiths exhibition and just the ongoing work of the flat, people coming – always people coming and coming. The strangest mixture of people would appear and they weren't all international they would just come. But Stella had just welcomed them and for them it was a place of refuge.

Could you tell me a little bit about some of these people? Who came about?

The famous Freddie [laughs]. I don't know how Stella found... if Freddy found Stella or Stella found Freddy, but he was always there. And then there was Roy. Roy had come through the poetry group that met in the flat on a Saturday or Sunday I can't remember. But Roy had come to that and he was always there as well. And there was other folks came, strange wee girls appeared and went. When Stella died they just kept coming and when I eventually left I still had Freddy, Freddy would appear for meals at my house! But there was always other folks that Stella had got involved with. There was Mary, I don't know how originally she had been at the flat, but Stella had her slap up an English class for some of the... especially the older women who had no language at all and didn't have the confidence to go to any formal classes, Mary had these classes and then she had some helpers to do that as well. So yeah I was involved in that group that was a good group. But it was the early days of people coming to the flat. Often the men folks would come first to check out the environment and to see that there was no other strange men around before they would allow their wives and their family to come to the flat. So Stella was quite visionary in her work and made it a safe place for these women to come.

So it must have been a difficult time then working in the flat after Stella had died?

Yes. You try to keep things going as Stella had wanted and people were mourning Stella very much, very much. For some Stella had been there first local Scottish – Stella wasn't even Scottish – but your first British person. Had been their friend, truly their friend and was there for them, so people were sad. And that was quite difficult to keep going working wise because maybe you weren't doing things the way Stella would do them and you weren't on



SID-0002X0001_2M0

demand the way Stella was. Yeah it was quite hard. Things moved on and the flat moved on and it was still there for quite a long time so, yeah, she left a legacy.

Yes. She certainly did. And there's still, I believe, sharing of faith work going on in Glasgow originally...

...from the flat, from Stella's vision yes. And how hard she worked at it. Stella, she was very good at rounding people up. I'd say they were often protesting at these meetings, but it worked because Stella had this winsomeness and this appeal, people wanted to please her so people wanted to come and they were protesting but... [laughs] Yeah so Stella she worked hard at that and yeah I used to be amazed. The sharing of faith nights in the flat they had once a month meetings and they were jammed with people, and each faith took a turn of presenting some aspect of their faith. I think you were involved, you used to come to these sometimes? But yes, there was such a disparate group of people, there was the intellectual types and there was the funky types and the very devoted folks who were keen to share their faith. There was a lot of criticism too, people thought it was the wrong way to go, but I think for the time it was proved to have been the right way to go to help people understand, not to be ghettoed so much.

Is there anything else about Stella and the flat that you'd like to share Isobel?

As I say Stella never threw anything out and when she died her family asked us to help tidy up and clear up. They just left us to it and we found tea chests full of papers that Stella had in Pakistan and I think when she left Pakistan she hadn't packed I think she'd be too busy doing other things.

Part 1 ends

Part 2 begins

Isobel there's one other person I'd like you to talk a wee bit about. When I was having email contact you sent a little note that Catherine Nicoll [sp?] who had gone out to work through the Church of Scotland in Pakistan many years ago and who still lives there had sent this little note about some of her memories of Stella. I wonder if you could say a little bit because obviously you're still in touch with Catherine.

Yes. When I went to Pakistan I stayed in the same house as Catherine and found that she and Stella had shared a mission house when Catherine had gone out to Pakistan, Catherine was a teacher, and apparently Catherine had been quite a shy character but was very influenced by Stella and had admired her tremendously, and admired the way she worked and my knowledge of Catherine was very much, she was very similar to Stella. She never went to bed at night either and she was working half the night and so on, whether she'd consciously modelled herself on Stella or whether it was just the development of her life, but yes, she admired Stella tremendously and was influenced by her and Catherine has a lifelong commitment to Pakistan and it's people. She officially retired and lasted back in Scotland four weeks and went back and plans to be there forever. She stays in the hostel that she managed, now she's just there and lives there and works there, but is not paid to be there. Whereas Stella was terrible at Urdu, Catherine is the prime example of Urdu in perfection, but they could both still communicate, it didn't matter. And Catherine, when I wrote to say about the project, she sent a nice tribute and she'd asked around because people still do remember her, the older people were Stella's Sunday school children so they all have



SID-0002X0001_2M0

recollections of her. So that's nice that Stella has a legacy in Pakistan, even in these troubled times, people do remember her. Stella wasn't always approved of by the other missionaries, I think they felt she was a bit off the wall sometimes because she just did things her own way and, yeah, they were terribly radgey and British some of the old school, Stella wasn't, she just got involved and identified with the people and I think that was Catherine, she identifies with the people she works with.

Well thank you very much Isobel you've shared so much about Stella and also your work at the flat as well and shared some of the legacy she has left in Glasgow and in Pakistan all these years later people still remember her.

It's amazing yes, I'm so sorry Sakhina wasn't able to share her memories.

Yes because Sakhina actually came to live in Scotland.

Yes, she and her husband both got asylum and were granted refugee status. Sakhina's heart was still in Pakistan but yes, her life was very influenced by Stella as well.

Yes we had hoped to interview her but sadly learned that she had died.

She passed away yes, but there we are.

Thank you very much Isobel for your time and your stories.

Transcript ends 0:31:53.0