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John Anthony "Tony" Connor Oral History Interview, Apr. 17, 2015

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Interview with Professor John Anthony “Tony” Connor, April 17, 2015, for the Wesleyan Oral History Project. Recorded in his home at 148 Church Street in Middletown.

Nancy Smith, Interviewer: I know that you spent your early years in England. Would you like to talk about that your life before you came to Wesleyan?

Tony Connor: Certainly because that was half my life. Well, to start it off, we were the impoverished arm of a family which actually had some rather bourgeois members to it. Two of my mother’s brothers were middle class bourgeois kind of people who were directors of companies and things like that; but, counter balancing respectability, was my mother’s favorite brother, who was incarcerated in the local mental hospital, known as the “lunatic asylum,” before I was born and died there when I was fourteen. My mother made the mistake of marrying a man who was a survivor of the First World War. I think by modern standards he would have been said to have Post Traumatic Stress syndrome. When the First World War began, my mother was 20, with everything in front of her. By the time it had ended, four years later, most of the men she might have wanted to marry were dead.

She went from 1918 to 1929 before she met this man, my father, an Irishman. Talk about oil and water---because he was an Irish Catholic, and there were only two categories of men I ever heard her express contempt for, one was Irishmen and one was Catholics. He only stayed with her long enough to give her a couple of kids, and then one day he left and never was seen again.

So we were utterly impoverished. When I look back on it, I cannot imagine what on earth my mother lived on. She couldn’t practice the secretarial skills she’d been trained in because she had these two little kids, and also she had an eighty-some-year-old aged mother whom she looked after. She was the last one at home. My father never even got her a house, he just moved into the house she lived in with her mother. As was the way with poor families at that time. The whole time I was growing up there were two cousins living in the house who had fallen out with their step-mother and had come to live with their Grannie, so it was an interesting house.

And then later on, to eke out a living, my mother began to take in lodgers. It was only a little terraced house in a row and you could never have more than one at a time, but there was this stream of people coming in, which was thrilling to me. Here I was, this little fatherless boy with all these men who came in, most of whom were very kind to me and did all kinds of things for me.

Smith: They were people with jobs in the neighborhood?

Connor: Yes, well, particularly after 1939, the government had a scheme called Directed Labor. They would send skilled men to whatever part of the country where they were most needed. So there was a ready flow of these people who came into Manchester and other big cities like that. That was a big part of my growing up---these people in the house. And early on I gained a great liking for the lives of others, and for having those lives impinge upon mine.

Also, we lived in an extraordinary area. When I look back on it, it was utterly cosmopolitan: it was largely Jewish, with lots of refugees and a mixture of nationalities. There was Yiddish and Polish and all kinds of languages being spoken. It was very vivacious, and there were all kinds of things to engage me. In America, I met only educated Jews, whereas these were people out of the Shtetel, with many occupations; there were butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers.

The whole gamut of humanity was there, but because they were all uneducated didn't mean that there weren't some at one end of the scale who were stupid and at the other end intellectual and clever.

And I was growing up amongst all that. Also, everybody lived very close to everybody else. You were running in and out of neighbor's houses, up and down the street. After 1939, when the war started, we in England were living under severe restrictions: the rationing, the blackout at night, there were all kinds of things you couldn't do. Then we were bombed heavily by the Germans. I spent I don't know how many nights in a shelter, but of course to a child it was all excitement, you know.

Smith: Manchester was bombed because it had factories?

Connor: Yes. It was a big industrial city. So, during that important part of my childhood and schooling, from age 9 to 14, life was dominated by the war. All the young people were away. I was educated by old ladies, maiden ladies, excellent teachers, many of whom were out of the intelligentsia. How they came to be teaching in such a school I will never know.

But when I was 11, even though I was the cleverest boy in the school, I failed a vital exam called the Eleven Plus. And because I didn't have a father to go down and thump the table at the Education Offices, and because my mother wasn't a woman who would have done that, and because I didn't think about it at all, I was sent to a "holding" school nearby for the rejects. I was just being held there until I reached the minimum age for leaving school, which was 14.

I didn't find myself among a crowd of dunces, however, because the exam, the Eleven Plus, was so stupid that all kinds of fascinating people fell through the net. So again I found myself among interesting young people, Jews for the most part, and I met these older women teachers, some of whom were good to me and realized that I had more than the usual talents.

Then, when I was 14, I was thrust out to earn my living full time.

Smith: That was the official leaving time?

Connor: Yeah. After the war, the Labor Government that came in under Atlee promptly put up the leaving age, but it was still 14. I've heard people on National Public Radio ranting about children in other countries working at age 14, and I've thought: Well, I was working at the age of 14 and it didn't do me any harm. I liked it!

Because I had artistic talents and so forth, and because Manchester was known until the Second World War as "Cottonopolis," the center of the world's cotton trade, it was natural that I would go into the cotton trade. But, instead of a factory, I went into a textile design studio, known by the French term "atelier," designing the most interesting type of textiles---furnishing fabrics. Because, as you know, if you buy material for a dress you might throw it away in a couple of years, but if you buy furnishing fabrics,

they're going to last for many years. Therefore, the most thoughtful area of design was in furnishing, all the Swedish designers and others like them.

In the atelier, we designed with paint on paper. These designs went to a factory, where they were engraved onto rollers and printed on various fabrics, from smooth glazed fabric to rough linen. Mostly the designs were traditional---flower bouquets, and such---but we did originate some modern, abstract designs.

So I found myself in this studio, surrounded by other young people, and we all had a great time. We played all kinds of tricks, and played darts and ping-pong in the lunch hour. We were all good friends, and we were all interested in the same kind of thing. The employers encouraged us to go to the art galleries and look at pictures--it was all grist to the mill of design.

I was in the center of the city, and I was able to save money. I got paid next to nothing, but nevertheless, if I got by without lunch for example, I was able to save enough to go to the theater every week. I remember, when I was about 14, I saw *Hamlet*, and I saw Dame Margot Fonteyn in *Swan Lake*. I saw all kinds of great things.

So, without realizing it, I was getting myself an education. Also, for some reason or other, I had developed rather fixed habits of study, although I wouldn't have used that fancy title. I used to spend time in the library, and just read and read, and drew; and those were my pleasures.

At the same time, I was held back considerably. I mean, I had a mother who, by the time I and my sister became teen-agers, couldn't understand us at all. She tried to stop me from doing everything I wanted to do, and was a very pernicious influence at that time.

Smith: This was your mother?

Connor: Yes. Still, it was during this time in this studio---which could be considered as a long period of convalescence for me---that I gradually grew up at my own pace.

Smith: But you had a scholar's inclinations. You've said that you had developed study habits and liked to use the library, and work on your own.

Connor: Yes. And in fact I remember well when I went into the Army--of course that sixteen years in the textile studio was interrupted because I had to go and do my Army Service for two years. And I wanted to go, because by that time I had a good sense that I was pretty weird in some of my tastes and so forth, and I wanted to be one of the boys, as everybody does.

So I went into the Army and really kind of enjoyed it. And I remember that I took with me a copy of *Hamlet* and a copy of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, so I was really pretty sophisticated in some ways.

All the other soldiers used to make fun of me; of all young boys like me. They used to call me "The Professor," which I thought was really ludicrous, you know. How could I know I was going to end up a Professor many years later?

Smith: And the Army was at that point for two years only? You didn't have to do any fighting?

Connor: No, no. You see, our time telescopes. When the Second World War ended, I was 15 years old. And an age later, when I was 18, I was inducted into the Army. Looking back on it, people say: "Oh, just after the war." And that's right, just after the war, but in that time frame in which one was growing up, between 15 and 18 is a hell of a long time.

I was sent with the Army of Occupation to Germany, which was the first time I'd been abroad. It was a kind of traumatic experience, because Germany was in utter ruins. Many of the German men I saw had one leg or one eye, from fighting on the Eastern Front; they were hobbling about, they were all sullen. They didn't want us there. We didn't want to be there. So we had to watch out for ourselves. I was with the tanks, a tank driver and radio operator.

But as I say, I enjoyed it. I enjoyed the camaraderie. I met all kind of people I would otherwise never have met. I mean I was the lowliest person, a "trooper" as they called them in the regiments. But I got a lot out of it.

And when I came out of the Army, I went back to textile designing. But by that time, I was beginning to get a strong feeling that I ought to get away.

Smith: You were how old?

Connor: When I came out I was 20.

I thought it was time I ought to get away from this domineering mother of mine, and lo and behold, she promptly had a stroke, which incapacitated her for about three months, and so then I just had to look after her.

Smith: Oh, dear.

Connor: Cut her toenails, and do all kinds of things like that.

Smith: So you couldn't get away.

Connor: No, I couldn't.

Smith: What about your younger sister?

Connor: She and my mother were arguing interminably. It was an ongoing row, and the house was hell because I didn't know what the squabble was about. It was actually just my sister trying to assert her independence, and trying to get away, But my mother filled my ears with poison, and presented my sister as a devil, and herself as virtuous--which she had also done where my father was concerned. In his absence she always presented him as a devilish character.

My sister had the wit to just leave, and I was left with my mother. I went on working again as a textile designer, and it wasn't until I'd reached the age of 30 that I gained the self-confidence to get out of it.

But how in hell was I going to get out of it? I had no claim to any skill except textile designing. And by that time, I was a Master Designer, having apprenticed at the

knee of an old man who'd come out of retirement during the war. He was very nice to me; there I was, this little priggish boy, and the old man would make fun of me. In the beginning he would only let me brew his tea and go and get him a bun, but then he let me sharpen his pencils and clean his brushes, and gradually let me fill in the edges of his designs. And by a process so slow that I can't even remember how it happened, I myself eventually became a fully fledged designer. But by the time I was 30, I knew that that wasn't for me. I'd probably become as good as I ever could be at it, and I was bored to death by it.

And what's more, I'd begun to write, and received a bit of encouragement from an older published poet who lived near there. So I quit and went to work at an art school, a local art school, part time, teaching textile design. It was one of those ridiculous situations. This art school was falling to bits. The principal was never there, and the place was completely anarchic. There was more copulation went on there, I think, than study.

I was almost immediately asked to do other things that I had no real claim to be teaching. I was teaching Life Classes, and God knows what else; it was mind-expanding. I did that for a couple of years, and then I saw an advertisement in a newspaper for something called "Liberal Studies." I thought Liberal Studies sounded like an interesting area of education. But in every advertisement, they insisted that whoever applied for the job should have a Ph.D. or other higher degree, and I had done nothing like that whatsoever. One day, however, to my astonishment I saw an advertisement for a position in Liberal Studies as a lecturer, and it said that "a broad interest in many human activities would count for more than a Ph.D."

I thought: "My God, this has been written by somebody after my own heart." So I applied for that job and lo and behold I got it. And the man who was head of this college, A.J. Jenkinson, was a remarkable person. He was an old Communist, a powerful person who got what he wanted---and I didn't realize that when he gave me the job instead of the PhDs who'd applied for it, he had to fight the Board of Education and the Board of Governors to do it. But what he wanted he got.

So--I found myself teaching full time in Liberal Studies. And Jenkinson wasn't wrong: I was very good at it. I did that for a few years; it was an intriguing area, because

it was extremely ill-defined. After the Second World War, the government set up all these technical colleges, and they decided that apprentices or people in low-level jobs, whether it was panel-beating or shoe-making, or--in the case of girls--hairdressing or typing or whatever, they'd be allowed to leave work one day a week to study. This was called Day Release. The government would compensate their employers, and they would come to these technical colleges and study the theory and practice of their trade. And these people came in out to these schools in waves. After a few years, the government sent a group of inspectors out to these colleges to see how this scheme was working, and found that it wasn't educating anybody, it was just training them, it was training them in the theory and practice of whatever it was they were doing to earn their living.

Smith: That's not considered educating?

Connor: No. And at that point, Her Majesty's inspectors decreed that every technical college should have attached to it a Department of Liberal Studies. And this department was supposed to augment the purely technical training.

These kids would come in for an hour, an hour-and-a-half, for Liberal Studies every day, and you would introduce them to the wider world and all the things that went into it. It was all very well-meaning, but you got through the material at a fantastic rate because all these people right down at the bottom of society, were ignorant and they had a sense of grievance: They hated Pakkies and Blacks and any other foreigners, and they couldn't see why they had to come to Liberal Studies, particularly since there were no exams or anything. Nevertheless, we assumed we could get them interested in something eventually.

I remember saying to one class, a class I couldn't get interested in anything, I said: "What on earth are you interested in?" and they answered in one voice: "Football!" meaning soccer. So, trying quickly to gather up everything I knew about football, which was next to nothing, I said, "All right, we'll talk about football." And I came to realize I knew more about it than any of them, and I wasn't even interested in it. These were people without any real purchase on reality. They never thought about the future or the

past. It seemed to me that perhaps they lived in a little hole in darkness; you really needed missionary zeal and missionary fervor to keep it up.

And after about three years of that, I was exhausted. It was fascinating work, but it was exhausting. Still, we were all breaking new ground. Because Liberal Studies had initially been ill defined, it needed time to find its place.

I remember one night I was drinking in a pub by myself, which is a melancholy occupation, and by this time I had published a book, and I wondered how I was going to make a change. I really needed a rest, I was 34 years old, I'd been working for my living full time for twenty years. How can I have a rest? I thought: I know I'll go to University. Because in those days, before Margaret Thatcher, all university education was free. If you could get in, then it was free. But I was 34 years old.

Manchester University was the only one I was willing to go to because it was just a short walk up the street from where I was living with my now wife and two children and another along the way.

[Smith: Wife and children! Well, you can tell me later when all that happened!]

Connor: It so happened that the head of the English Department at Manchester University, who was a very distinguished man, he admired this book of mine---I knew because I'd seen him and he'd told me so. So I went to see him and said, "I want to study for a B.A. at the University." And he said, "You're too old, and you know too much." I filled him in about my long design career, and he asked me if I'd like to get an M.A.? He explained to me that there was "an obscure clause in the rules that says under certain circumstances, anyone who shows excellence in their chosen field might be allowed to study for a non-graduate M.A." I said "Yes, if you can get me in," and to cut a long story short, he did get me in, and I launched on this three year M.A., because it was a very peculiar M.A.

And I had a great time. I spent a lot of time at home, and I was with the kids, and I also did some real systematic study. And at that time I must have published another book. One day, as I was approaching the end in the third year, a letter came through the door from a place I'd never heard of in my life called Amherst College in Massachusetts.

To my astonishment, it was asking if I would like to go over there and be a Writer in Residence. For a year! Somebody or other must have read my work and shown it around.

That was probably 1966. I was still at the University, but somebody had arranged for me to go over to the University of Buffalo--SUNY at Buffalo--that summer to be a Writer in Residence. So even though I was this sort of odd older student at Manchester, I came over the summer of '65 or '66 to Buffalo and worked there for a few months. Right in the middle of Viet Nam, and demonstrations. You can imagine---all drugs and free love and uproar.

Smith: Can you back up just a little bit and tell me when you got married and to whom?

Connor: Well, I must have got married probably about 1960. I met this woman who I was really unlikely to meet in Manchester. I mean, she was tremendously Upper Crust, and privately educated. She'd come up to Manchester because she'd been studying Speech Therapy in London and had fallen under the influence of some radical teacher who'd said to her: "You've got to go up where the Workers are. Go up and work in the North among the Workers." And she did go north, it was all part of the National Health Service, administered through the schools.

She attended some lecture I was giving. After a tumultuous courtship, we married. She was an extraordinarily beautiful and talented woman. And of course I was at that time making a local reputation. It also came about that I was appearing on television a lot. I was becoming famous, because one of the biggest television undertakings in Britain was in Manchester, Granada Television.

I started working for them part time, I did all sorts of things, and they'd discovered that I'd got a great gift for just talking into the camera. The nearer the camera was brought to my face, the more I could just babble away and talk and talk. People were stopping me in the street and shaking my hand, and things like that. But it soon began to bore me: it came too easily, I was coasting along on charm and charisma.

Smith: You were a rock star!. Did your wife have a name?

Connor: Frances Foad. She came of a very very posh family. Her father was head of the British Iron and Steel Board. But her mother was Irish, so Frances wasn't quite what she'd appeared to be. She'd been to a fancy school and she had a posh accent, and all the mannerisms of the upper classes who were trained to rule the world. It used to amuse me because, as a member of the lower classes, you are taught to doff your hat to the Master, and then you go away and do what you want to do anyway. But she, Frances, she liked bearding doctors and lawyers and other officials in their dens because they were nothing more than the brothers and cousins she'd grown up with, so she could make a big stink with such people.

When I met Frances, she was engaged to a "suitable" upper class man. She soon ended that engagement, but being slow on the uptake, it didn't strike me that she'd dropped him in favor of me. At the private boarding school she'd attended, she learned how to curtsy to the Queen---to whom such upper class debutantes were still being presented at that time!

Then we had three children in rapid succession, which was what both of us wanted, and had this tumultuous and fascinating marriage.

Smith: Backing up slightly again, you said you had published two books. Were these both books of poetry.

Connor: Yes, I wrote only books of poetry.

When we came over to Amherst in 1967, Frances was heavily burdened with three little children, so how much of America she actually saw, I don't quite know. And we had to bring my old mother with me as well, because what was I going to do? Either she'd go into a home, which she didn't want to do, or she'd come with us. By that time she was well over 70; she'd always said that if men were intended to fly then God would have given us wings, but once she was in the air she said: "Well, this isn't so bad. I don't see why people make such a fuss about it."

We had a big house in Amherst, with plenty of room for each of us to have a separate apartment.

I had a year at Amherst, and while I was there, I gave a few poetry readings and I was going to give one at Wesleyan. I remember, George Creeger said to me: "Don't just blow in and blow out again, why don't you spend a couple of days and get a feel for the place at your leisure, and we can take a look at you. And if you like, you can teach a class of mine."

I did come for a couple of days, and George was nice to me and showed me around and I taught a class of his, and as a result of that, they asked me if I'd come to Wesleyan for a year after I'd finished at Amherst. Well, this wasn't our intention, we'd let our house in England for a year, but the tenants agreed to stay another year, so we moved lock, stock and barrel from Amherst to Wesleyan.

We lived in a house at the bottom of Lawn Avenue, next to a plot with that very modern fraternity, and if you look at the spot now, you cannot believe that there was ever a house there. In fact, there were two houses, because we had some neighbors called Blodget---and I recently wrote a poem about that. But those houses now are just gone.

So we did that for a year, and I enjoyed teaching at Amherst. But it's a little town, and as I told you, I'd grown up in a very tumultuous area full of Jews and foreign languages and everything in England, and early on I'd thought to myself, "America must be like this, only more so." But then we came straight into the middle of this Wasp community in Amherst, where there were no blacks, no Jews, no Asians, no nothing. Nearly gave me a nervous breakdown. A year of that was absolute hell, I thought. And Amherst College I didn't like because it's so sure of its absolute superiority. As soon as I came to Wesleyan, I thought: "This is the place for me."

Wesleyan didn't claim to be superior, it didn't even know what it is. Every time somebody puts a statue up to some Value or ideology, somebody knocks it down. I liked the iconoclasm of Wesleyan. And also, at that time, it also seemed bizarre in the extreme because it was so wealthy. They'd got so much money they didn't know what to do with it. You could get piles of money to launch any crazy scheme that came into your head.

Smith: Was Etherington president when you first came here?

Connor: Yes, I think he was. In some ways, Wesleyan was ridiculous, it was liberal to the point of lunacy. And people were putting up buildings, all sorts of things going on. It was very exciting, a ferment of ideas and ideals, like the 1960s themselves. And Wesleyan had established a Center for Advanced Studies, to which the University invited many world famous intellectuals, who stayed in residence for months at a time with few or no duties. But, of course, lifting the entire University's level of intellectual discourse. Alas, all long-gone!

As I say, I was here for a year, and then at the end of that year they said, "We'll offer you a five-year contract to come back." I said, Well, I'd got to go back to England, because I was in the U.S. on a special visa which allowed me to stay for two years only. And you couldn't come back for two years, you'd got to go back to England. And I'd also observed what an undignified scramble it was to get up that greasy pole of tenure. And I thought: If I come back here, I'm going to come back with tenure.

So I said, more or less, "If you want me to come back, to dislocate my life and move from one country to another, after two years I want you to make me a full professor with tenure." Realizing that I'd already published more books than most people at Wesleyan publish in a lifetime, I was really a good catch, you know. And also I was charming and a good teacher and I had a beautiful wife---a really good catch.

To cut a long story short, they said "OK, then we'll make you a full professor." But I still told them: "Well, I'm going back to the place where I was born and if I can get an interesting, congenial job, I'll stay there." And they said, "Oh, yes, that's perfectly understandable. Let us know in about a year."

I went back to England, and the times were really hard and I couldn't get a job except a part-time one that collapsed underneath me through no fault of my own. I reached a point where I thought: What kind of a choice is this? I've got a professorship waiting for me at Wesleyan, and here I've got bugger all. So I said, OK. That was in 1971.

I was here originally from '68 to '69, then I went back to England from '69 to '71, and in those intervening two years, my writing career took a very interesting lurch in a

new direction. I started writing plays. I had a number of plays performed professionally in the British Isles, and I became very, very interested in drama.

So by the time I came back to Wesleyan, I'd got all this professional theatre experience under my belt. Also, when I came over here I had to come in rather a hurry. There was some uncertainty about getting me a visa, which held everything up for a while. Then all of a sudden, the visa came through, and I had to scramble in order to be here for the beginning of the academic year.

I said to my wife, "You clear up everything here. Rent the house, or sell it, whatever you need to do, and you follow me." So I came over here, and the next thing I knew she was having a complete nervous and spiritual and mental breakdown

Smith: She didn't want to leave?

Connor: Hmm. Maybe she just wanted to get rid of me. I don't know.

Anyway it was peculiar. I was trying to establish myself here, and what's more, she had been an actress, one of her favorite activities was acting, and I thought she was overplaying her hand. You couldn't tell whether she was making it up or she really was, and I was at the end of my tether with her anyway---not that I'd been a paragon as a husband!

Then she phoned me up in about November and said, "The children are going to be taken into care because I can't look after them." So I said, "Send them over immediately."

So she did. She sent them over immediately, and from then on I brought them up. The girl was 8, and the boys were 10 and 11.

Smith: And your mother by this time...?

Connor: She had died, yes, she died just before, during the interim two years when we'd been in England.

But there again, you see, this business of looking after my children gave me a tremendous thrill. Partly, I suppose, because I felt I was redeeming my father's

delinquency. I had no father which made me not only wish to be a good father but to become a really good father. And not just to my kids, but to any student at Wesleyan who wanted my help.

So that all preceded my time at Wesleyan.

Smith: That's quite an astonishing history! So this is essentially before 1971?

Connor: Yes, I came back in '71. And here's another funny thing. When you become a professor at Wesleyan, they give you an M.A. What's it called---it's an honorary M.A. This meant nothing to me at all. I'd got an M.A. from Manchester University, and suddenly I had this M.A. from Wesleyan. It was of no interest to me whatsoever, until suddenly I realized, after I'd been looking after kids for a few years, that I could actually put "MAMA" after my name! And that amused me.

Smith: Very nice!

Connor: So, with all those things happening to me, I think I must have been feminized. First of all, looking after my mother when she was ill, and then looking after children for many many years.

Smith: I was going to ask you: Compared to other places you've worked, how did you find the atmosphere---the politics and social life---at Wesleyan? But it seems you had so many other things to think about, you had to create a nest for your family---

Connor: Well, I did my very best for Wesleyan, but I had no taste or time for the so-called Wesleyan community. I was Chairman of the English Department for about three years when nobody else wanted to do it. I mean, I thought that one of the most interesting things about me is that in another life I would have been a psychiatrist, because one of my best talents was student advising. Which was really just listening to young people until they got round to the point of their troubles, which was usually parental or sexual or even religious.

So I spent a tremendous amount of time advising students, which is something most teachers don't wish to do. In fact I'm convinced that most University teachers don't even like students, but I really got a big kick out of that, and that's why I was happy to be the Chairman of English for a number of years when no one else wanted to do it.

And actually, whatever people may think about poets, you've got to be really, really well organized to that kind of work, and I am very well organized.

Smith: I'm sorry, I don't have the dates fixed in my head, but who was the president when you arrived?

Connor: It was Etherington first, then he was succeeded by Campbell.

Smith: Yes, with one acting president in between. Bob Rosenbaum.

Connor: Bob Rosenbaum. I didn't have much to do with any of that kind of thing. I just kept my head down, did my work, it was all about students as far as I was concerned.

Smith: So you weren't involved with any agitating or faculty meetings?

Connor: A certain amount of it. I remember there was one funny time when Willy Kerr got me in to see him and he explained to me that the University was run by the Faculty, and that I must make myself available to faculty meetings, and committee meetings. And I said: "Look, Willy, I am really eager and willing to do any of that kind of work. Any meeting that doesn't happen in the late afternoon when I have to be back with my children, I will willingly attend." But there was never any meeting except those that happened in the late afternoon. They didn't take any notice of the women faculty at that time, either. I'm sure it's all changed now, but I still think that a lot of those people, once you get them into a meeting, they'll just babble on and on forever. It's as though they have no desire to go home. You could almost believe they didn't like going home. So I was never at any of those afternoon meetings.

Smith: Yes, but you did have a rather unusual home arrangement, that many of your colleagues did not.

Connor: Well, I did. But, as I say, since women faculty began coming into the University in ever greater numbers, they have campaigned for changes in those rules.

Smith: One of the people also interviewed for this Oral History Project is Gertrude Hughes, who was one of the earlier women teaching here. And her story is rather the reverse of yours in that she had four children and a husband who more or less absconded and she was left with that exact problem: "How can I do the things I have to do at home and at the University?" In her case, the older women in the community helped her how to work out schedules and get sitters, and so on.

Connor: When I came here I suppose I was a very desirable catch. There were all kinds of women wanting to move in with me, you know. That never happened, but nevertheless I had some very good female friends who helped enormously in one way or another with the kids and so on. Just the opposite to me on Brainerd Avenue lived Greta Slobin, who had a little girl, a few years younger than Becky, and she was like Becky's other mother. And I had many people living in the house. I'd grown up in a house with lodgers and really liked that I had lots of people living in my Middletown house. One time, when she was about 18, Becky came to me with a hard luck story about her friend Eva Firshein, who was a daughter of Bill Firshein. At that point, Eva didn't get on with her dad; he had married someone new; Eva had made the mistake of moving in with some man and found she had to do all the washing and cooking, and Becky said to me, "Dad do you think you could help her, she's got to get out of there and she doesn't want to go back to her mother, could she come and live here for about two weeks?" And I said, "Sure, there's a room at the top of the house she can live in." So Eva came, and she was still there twelve years later.

Smith: I didn't know that!

Connor: Yes, and she's like one of our family. She really loves my sons and my daughter. And I've had lots of people living there; at one point I had a drunken Jesuit priest living with us. A man I really loved. He'd lost his religion and fallen straight into a bottle. He was just hopeless, but he was a lovely, lovely man. And I thought, it won't do my children any harm to see that great kindness and intelligence can co-habit with great weakness, and it wouldn't do him any harm as well, so I invited him into the house, and he lived there for about two years. And the children loved him, even though they'd often find him drunk and incapable in his bed and so on. Still, it was a great experience for them. I had all kinds of people living in the house, and it was terrific.

Smith: Your children were certainly exposed to the real world at a very early age.

Connor: Yes. and also, I made sure that even when their mother was in the midst of her kind of madness, I sent them back every year to England to be with her. They never came to any harm. They observed that their mother was half crazy, but they dealt with it. And then gradually she pulled her life together, and then she went on to do a Ph.D. at the School of Oriental Studies and Languages in London. And she did an extraordinary degree. Having been a speech therapist in her early days, but always attracted to theory, she homed in on the way the human throat produces sound. The anatomists have very clear ideas on how this happens, but she, with the help of an American who'd invented an x-ray with high speed cinematography, proved that the anatomists were all wrong. She did this extraordinary piece of work, and when she'd finished it, she set up her own company. She and her team were invited to Australia and Sweden, in fact they went all over the world doing this kind of thing. A voice scientist. A very remarkable woman. And gradually we reestablished a good relationship. She used to come over here and visit the kids, and they'd go over there.

Smith: I think this rather unruly life you're describing, which wasn't chaotic because there was always love and control and comfort from your side, probably gave them a view of the world which was far more mature than that of their friends.

Connor: Certainly they're all fine people. And as I say, the wheel turns, and I, the poor little fatherless boy, have lived long enough and done well enough to make things better in the next generation.

Smith: And you have how many grandchildren?

Connor: My eldest son's got three boys, 15, 14, 11. My daughter's got one girl of 11; and my youngest son has just adopted a little girl. And I've got good relationships with them all.

Smith: You live right on the edge of the campus. Do you still feel part of the University?

Connor: No. Not at all. Except that I walk round the campus in nice weather.

Smith: I feel that the particular charge of this Oral History is to talk to retired professors and get their sense of how this university changed during their tenure. So, when did you retire?

Connor: Nineteen ninety-eight.

Smith: So, between Seventy-one and Ninety-eight, that's twenty-seven years...

Connor: Well, it must have changed a great deal, but my own life was so demanding that I kept largely to myself. I tried to do a really really good job of being at Wesleyan, and I loved it. And Wesleyan, God love them and to their credit, they let me do exactly what I wanted to do. I changed the job description--I mean, they thought they'd got a poet but found they'd got a dramatist. And one of the best things I ever did at Wesleyan was organize and run a student theatre for 15 years: Captain Partridge's Theatre.

And all kinds of wonderful people went through my hands, many of whom are now in Hollywood. And that was probably the best thing I ever did at Wesleyan. It's left no record behind it. It was always disguised as something else---a Group Tutorial.

Smith: You were meeting on the upper floors of fraternity houses and so forth, weren't you?

Connor: Right, we got a dance practice room up above there on High Street, in what used to be the Housing Office. We met up there every two weeks, and I just let the students run it, more or less---although I didn't allow it to become chaotic. I was a kind of gray eminence. Anyone who wanted to get credit for it had to write something, direct something, act in something, and clear up afterward. I said to them, "This is as important as anything else. If you leave that place in a mess, the dance people will stop us coming."

There were a handful who got credit, but everybody else did it for the sheer love of it. And for the same period, it was not part of any official curriculum, or anything.

Smith: That's very unusual. I've learned a great deal through these Oral History interviews, and I know that for 99 percent of your colleagues, their experience here was much more cut and dried, more lockstep from the beginning to the end. But I gather Wesleyan has always been ready to absorb the unusual and to let people step off the treadmill

Connor: Right, and I have been congenitally opposed to all authoritarianism and all institutions, but as institutions go, Wesleyan is terrific---or certainly was during my time in it. As I say, I found that just by keeping my head down and doing what I thought was the best thing to do, I just went my own way and did it.

Smith: I have a feeling that the people in North College figured that out and said, "We're not going to interfere. We can't always tell what is going to emerge next, but its going to be good." They trusted you--which is, again, the same pattern

Connor: Indeed. And as I say, that gave me many happy years, and I made some really good friends. At my 85th birthday party, which was just a few weeks ago, I was by far the oldest person there; many students, and people who'd come from all over the place.

Another interesting thing is that my children, of course, had a great time growing up the edge of Wesleyan. My son said to me recently, "As far as knew, we had a huge park at the end of the street." That was the campus, and by the time they came to think about college, the two boys didn't want to go anywhere else; they just wanted to go to Wesleyan. My daughter wouldn't think of it, she went to Barnard, but she spent all her spare time on this campus, working with the Theatre program I ran, being in original plays that were written by people who are now big out in Hollywood and so forth. Eventually, she transferred in, so all three of them went to Wesleyan, and all three of them lived at home while they did it.

So then there were even more students coming into the house, all their friends. But I sent my oldest son, before he ever went to Wesleyan, in his last year of high school, I sent him to a school in the Himalayas in India. Because there had been a girl in my class who came from India, and she told me that her father was Principal of a school, called the Woodstock School. I questioned her at some length and thought this would be a damn good place for Sam to go, because of course the British had been invested in India for two hundred and fifty years. Of course he was thrilled at the idea, and he went to this place for a year. He's the one who's spent most of his life in International Development. That's what set him off, I think.

When he came back from India, all he wanted to do was to return to India with his brother, because his brother had finished high school by then, so off they went to India together for about nine months. Tramped around and did all kinds of daring things--including finding themselves insolvent in Sri Lanka.

Smith: I'm going to ask you one more question about hierarchy of presidents at Wesleyan.

You've been here since Etherington was president, so you've worked here under Colin Campbell, Bill Chase, Doug Bennet, and Michael Roth.

Connor: Chase I rather liked because he was a very literary man, as is Roth, just the kind of person we ought to have, intellectual.

Smith: Have you noticed any differences in tone or leadership under these different men or administrations?

Connor: No, I'm too far away from it all, you know. As I say, I just did my job, so long as nobody interfered with me. Which happened to me only once in my years here.

Smith: Oh, tell me who interfered?

Connor: Nat Greene had become Academic Vice President, I think it was, and he initiated a secret examination on all my teaching. Because I'd offered to teach an unlimited enrollment course of Shakespeare, being assured that there would be no more than sixty people in it at the most. It turned out that there were nearer two hundred, and I had to explain to these students that I couldn't possibly teach the course that I'd intended to teach, and I thought it was a disgrace that they'd paid all this money to come to Wesleyan and then find themselves in a huge course like this---and that they should complain to their parents. And they probably did, and their parents probably wrote to Wesleyan, but all Nat Greene could think of was to launch a secret investigation of my teaching, which I only heard about because one of my colleagues was ashamed of having been caught up in it, and he told me about it.

Of course I created as much of an uproar as I could, I thought it was disgraceful. But they couldn't find anything against me anyway, so---

Smith: Presumably they thought you were instigating students into attacking the administration?

Connor: Something like that. Though I think it was just Greene who was trying to be a new broom, you know, flexing his muscles and so forth. But it's sort of self-defeating,

that kind of thing, because then I said, "Well, I'm never ever going to teach a large course again." And I didn't.

But I did my best to be a good servant of Wesleyan. I taught all kinds of things.

Smith: Did you bring speakers to the campus?

Connor: Not really, I don't think. I never made many friends among the faculty; the only people I became good friends with were all denied tenure and disappeared in no time.

Smith: Well, that's pretty interesting.

Connor: I was very, very fond of an economist who failed to get tenure at Wesleyan, and I'd met him because his wife was a social worker at the Soup Kitchen. And that was another counterpoint to my time at Wesleyan, which was as important to me as my time as a professor. For twenty-five years, twice a week, I was working in the Soup Kitchen, helping to serve lunch, and that put me in contact with all sorts of people I never met up on the hill.

Smith: Was that down on Main Street?

Connor: Yes, Main Street. St. Vincent de Paul. That was important to me. Those were much more like the people I grew up with than the people at Wesleyan. I enjoyed that. But this economist whom I liked a lot was called Franek Roszwadowski, who didn't get tenure here. He didn't mind that because he immediately applied to the Federal Reserve and the World Bank and the IMF, and in no time he was working for the IMF. Recently he was sent to Iceland to sort out all their troubles. He came to my birthday party. He's just invited me to go and visit him in Iceland this summer, so maybe I will.

Smith: I think we've gone as far as we can go today, but is there anything you would like to add to what you've said today?

Connor: It has struck me many a time that my main usefulness to a place like Wesleyan is that I'm one of the few people in the place who's had a truly vigorous life outside the University. I think that the life of universities is vitiated and made less than it ought to be by the fact that nearly all the faculty are just overgrown students themselves, who have hardly ever had any outside experience. And as you can see, I've had all kinds of outside experience.

Smith: That's a fascinating point that you might want to expand on, and I'd love it if you want to continue on another day. For today however, thank you so much for agreeing to join in this project, and for being so open and forthcoming.

Connor: It's been a pleasure.

[End of Interview.]