**201. INTERVIEW WITH Jeffrey Dudgeon (ORIGINAL – 3,827 Words)**

**201. Jeffrey Dudgeon**

**6th December 2019**

**ORAL**

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**Do you sit most of the time with your arms folded?**  
  
**JEFF:** No, no.I’ll sit up

**Declan:** That’s a hint to not sit with your arms folded.

**I was pleasant about it.**

**JEFF:** Go ahead. Do you think I should do this top button?

**Cameraman:** No, it hangs better. I’m only seeing you from here up so it hands better open. Okay so if you’re looking at Edmund and all yours Ed.

**What’s your name?**

**JEFF:** Jeff Dudgeon is my name.

**When were you born?**

**JEFF:** I was born in 1946 in Belfast.

**I’m going to ask you that again because I need the date, month and that. When were you born?**

**JEFF:** I was born on the 8th of January 1946 in Belfast so I was just not a ‘war baby’.

**How many siblings in your family?**

**JEFF:** One sister, older sister. I had … who…. and a couple of younger children who didn’t survive.

**What school did you go to?**

**JEFF:** Well, a number of schools. I went to the local primary school in East Belfast - Belmont and then followed up by Strandtown and in secondary school I went to Campbell College which is in East Belfast. School, so-called public school. But it’s… as I got the…what was then called the qualifying exam, you got paid … most of your fees were paid. I was a day pupil at a boarding school so there was a sort of, slightly, snobby atmosphere.

**Did you enjoy school?**

**JEFF:** Not particularly. I enjoyed later in my mid teens when I got to know… I don’t think I was very a friendly youth or child. It was only after 13 or 14 I began to make friends and then I enjoyed school.

**When did you first notice that you were different than your other siblings?**

**JEFF:** I never noticed that I was different because being gay just became the only fact when I was.. Between the ages of maybe 14 and 16 I was maybe resisting it and knew enough to know that it wasn’t attractive or a well thought of option. In fact, the opposite. It was a serious disaster zone if you ever wanted to … you could never tell anyone you were gay or not, the words weren’t there. Nobody mentioned it maybe in the first 15 years of my life. I never heard the word. So it was all vague but prohibited.

**When did you get in touch with the gay organisations or groups or gay people?**

**JEFF:** Well there was obviously no organisations in my youth or teenage years. I got to know of the only gay bar in Belfast when I was about 20 which was called the **Royal Avenue**. It was a fairly sparsely populated venue. But it was home and it was … I found my community in a sense.

**Were you in college at that stage?**

**JEFF:** Well I did two mixed university career partly in Magee College in Londonderry and the other second half in **Trinity College** in Dublin. So it was split over the two and Derry was fairly ‘ungay’ you could say. I wasn’t … I think I told my first … the first person I ever told I was gay was at that moment. A woman called Eilish [?] who I still… she lives in the next street to me now. Dublin was entirely different. Dublin was, in the mid ‘60s, to my mind was very gay. It was very upfront and open. You had two or three gay bars. **Rice’s** which was a bit of a, sort of, dull bar for the older gent maybe and **Bartley Dunne’s** which was bohemian and French and full of … and lit by candles, ‘camp’ and full of … it was mixed. The back of the bar was for ‘straights’, the front was all snugs and little alcoves and it was… you couldn’t have asked for a better gay bar.

**You said there was three? Three gay places?**

**JEFF: Davy Byrne’s** was a pub which was thought to be gay. People met in Davy Byrne’s, they didn’t sort of go there to meet. They met their friends there and worked their way up the streets from there to Rice’s and then to Bartley’s and Bartley’s was run by two brothers. One of whom either was gay or was pretending to be very camp and only spoke in French which was all very exotic. There was a group of students, half of dozen of us at Trinity who were … came ‘out’ who I knew and met at Trinity and then we had our oppos. [?] in UCD and the Art College. Maybe 10 or 12 of us were good friends and kept together.  
 **Was there any gay societies in Trinity?**

**JEFF:** No, this was 1965-6-7. That was unheard of. But nor was there an anti-gay society or any sense of… In some ways we were rather fearless. There was a very rich Englishman called **John Debenham** who was a mathematician, exceptionally ‘camp’ and .. but very gifted mathematician. Anyway he every so often had a trip to the **opera** where he hired a carriage with horses. And uniforms of all.. four or five of us dressed up as ambassadors or … with epaulettes and everything We went to the **Gaiety Theatre** for the opera so you listened to ‘La bohème’ or whatever. It was ‘campry’ gone mad. Everyone loved it and nobody noticed.

**Did you stay in college?**

**JEFF:** One year in college which was an all-male environment. Not that it made it particularly gay or anything. But you could have people staying overnight in your room if you had a room on you own which I did.

**Was your college paid for by the Northern Ireland government?**

**JEFF:** Yes. Well the fees were all paid and they gave you a grant…

*\*restarts answer\**

**JEFF:** Yes, my fees for the university were paid by government and they gave you a means tested grant for living expenses.

**What was your degree in?**

**JEFF:** General arts degree - English, history and economics. The history was interesting. There were some lecturers, there was … Eavan Boland and Eileen O’Callaghan [?] I think were some of the English literature lecturers. The English… One of the lecturers in English, I think he was an Englishman but he had the course was composed almost entirely of gay novels. Modern American - James Purdy, Djuna Barnes, that sort of thing. We all eagerly discussed all these gay novels, I don’t think … nobody said they were gay or anything. I think maybe nobody noticed. It was just modern.

**When you finished college at Trinity, where did you go to then?**

*\*coughs\* \*interuption\* \*drinks\**

**When you finished college, what did you do then?**

**JEFF:** Well I got a job in London in the post office. I was basically … my whole purpose in life was to escape from Belfast and go to London. So any job did. But after a year in London I found I didn’t really warm to the place that much. I think it was all chance or luck. I didn’t fall in with a crowd or get a significant boyfriend or anything. London was pleasant but it was not lively I felt it was … nothing like Dublin.

**Did you return to Belfast or Dublin?**  
  
**JEFF:** I returned to Belfast. I returned to Belfast then I did a couple of years teaching in the city just as **The Troubles** broke out and it was rough. Discipline almost broke down in the schools. The school I taught in had a Catholic school almost across the street and they had to ferry kids around to avoid them fighting. It was really bad and I gave up the teaching.  
  
**What did you do then?**

**JEFF:** For about six years I worked for a shipping company in the city, in the docks area which was… basically just I wanted an income and by that time I was beginning to get involved in Gay Liberation through the **Queen’s University Gay Lib. Society** which was just beginning … well it had started before I really joined up and it was run by a couple of very.. well **Andy Hinds** who was a… became a fairly significant theatre director and writer. **Brian Gilmore**. They’d already started the association and it was quite vibrant and lively at that point.

**How did you rise to prominence within it?**  
  
**JEFF:** Well in a small group it’s not difficult to rise to some degree of prominence. Basically you do what you want to do. I was good at… I mean I’d been a youth, a political youth, I’d been in the Northern Ireland Labour Party when I was a teenager so I knew my way around some of that bureaucratic organisation and political background. I wasn’t a radical really, I was more of a reformist. I mean in the small group - Gay Lib. Society - there would have been 30% radicals, 30% reformers and 30% no politics at all and the basic question was how did to get decriminalisation out of the then Stormont government which had briefly reappeared in the power-sharing experiment of 1974. But it wasn’t, it certainly wasn’t, one bit interested in decriminalising male homosexual behaviour.

**How did you get the same as the British system on gay issues?**

*\*interuption\**

**How did you get involved in Strasbourg?**

**JEFF:** Well … whenever Stormont government collapsed in 1974 - direct rule was imposed and London was in charge of Northern Ireland. We had failed to get law reform out of Stormont. We had tried to get it out of the Conservative government - sorry I mean the Labour government - of the time. There was some yielding there. There was commission studies and reports done and, at the same time, we were running the Strasbourg case cause a law lecturer called **Kevin Boyle** at Queen’s told me, and he had some experience of the **European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg**. He told me that we had a very good case because it was life imprisonment for sodomy in Belfast and not any imprisonment in Birmingham. So it was just ridiculously imbalanced. He said you can run a case for the price of a postage stamp. Just put your ideas down on a piece of paper and post it into Strasbourg and you can start the process. So we started the process in early ’76. It took seven years, six or seven years. And Kevin Boyle did the hard legal work. I mean I did the sort of political add-ons, and argument, the gay argumentation while he did the more human rights stuff. But coincidently around that time the police suddenly started a… basically a purge on the two gay organisations - **Cara-Friend** and **NIGRA** (the Northern Irish Gay Rights Association) which I was a member. That lasted about six months. They arrested about 25 people. Everyone who was on the committees. It was quite nasty. We were able to resist, many of us cause we were ‘out’ and proud and angry and we believed we were winners. So we weren’t going to take it lying down. You know ten years earlier we would have been in jail. We wouldn’t have thought, we wouldn’t have done anything but plead guilty. That being the case but this time around they had a problem on their side. I mean we were politically organised, we got no support from local political parties but we did get significant support from journalists particularly female journalists - **Mary Holland, Fionnuala O’Connor, Sandra Chapman** and also in the radical end of London. So ultimately they decided not to prosecute even though they’d drawn up prosecution papers against a fair number of us. But London intervened, reluctantly intervened, but said “no prosecutions. we’ll await the outcome of the law reform campaign” which took another three or four years before Strasbourg ruled that the United Kingdom government was in breach of our human rights.

**How long did it take for them to put it in action?**

**JEFF:** Well unlike what happened here in the Republic they moved within a year of the judgement and they changed the law in 1982 with an Order in Council which all the local MPs voted against who were at Westminster at the time including at least one, if not two, who were gay but totally closed and hypocritical including **James Kilfedder**, the MP for North Down. Now deceased.

**Who was the other one?**  
  
**JEFF:** Well I understand **James Molyneaux** who was the leader of the Ulster Unionists. I didn’t believe it even at the time. But I’ve since met people who told me that, well one in particular who told me that he was his boyfriend. I know that’s resisted by his relatives and all the rest and he’s dead now but it does stand to reason.

*\*interuption\**

**What effect of winning the case in Strasbourg did it have on you personally?**

**JEFF:** The effect of the case on me personally was in one sense not very significant - I survived. I had been nervous about going on TV during the case and I’d refused to debate with the **Rev. Ian Paisley** on the grounds that I wasn’t interested in the religious matters pertaining to homosexuality. My beef was with the UK government which was criminalising me. After the… when it went to Westminster and the House of Commons I did one TV debate with Paisley and I suffered a fair degree of harassment at my house for several months afterwards including windows being put in three or four times and a breeze block being put through - on one occasion somebody was injured. So that was a downside. Up till then I hadn’t had any even at work I hadn’t any significant problems.

**What was the reaction like of your family?**

**JEFF:** You begin to learn after a while that there was more reaction than I was originally aware of.

*\*interuption\* \*starts answer again\**

**JEFF:** My family’s reactions were governed by the fact that my parents knew I was gay and my … as did my sister before the whole court case started and I probably put them in a bit of jeopardy being young you don’t think of. I certainly didn’t consult them or ask them permission or anything. I discovered many years later that an aunt and an uncle were very angered, if not horrified, by me being gay. A slightly religious aunt and a slightly conventional uncle. But that was kept from me at the time.

**You would be well known for your book. Talk to me a little bit about it.**

**JEFF:** I’ve written obviously extensively on **Roger Casement -** who was executed in 1916 for treason - who was the most prominent homosexual in early 20th century probably apart from **Oscar Wilde** another Irishman. It’s a bit of a coincidence that the two most significant gay figures before the Second World War roughly were both Irish. Both had a rather similar background. Casement is exceptionally interesting for many reasons but obviously he wrote these very frank diaries over a number of years when he travelled and did humanitarian work as a British consul in Peru and in the Congo and then he became, or well he didn’t become an Irish nationalist, he had been an Irish nationalist since he’d been a teenager but he became a dedicated separatist in the last ten years of his life from roughly ’05 to 1916. As we know went to Germany to try enlist German assistance in the Easter Rising as was going to happen.

But ever since then there’s been a huge dispute over the diaries and their authenticity and I’ve written.. well first of all I published the diaries, they hadn’t been … one diary had never been published cause it was threatened with the prosecution for obscenity in the 1960s cause it was so upfront and descriptive of his sexual encounters. Basically he told… every thought he had and every image he saw he noted it in his diary very briefly - terse sort of remarks actually quite erotic in some cases. You know you can write sex badly but he didn’t manage to because he kept it brief I think but that remains a huge… It’s a huge issue for Irish nationalism in many ways. Could a - well initially it was - could a patriot be gay? And the answer was no for most people and therefore they resisted the fact of the diaries being authentic and then Ireland moved in the last 10-15 years into a very, very upfront, radical, modern, liberal outlook so that died a way in that sense so the issue isn’t so much was he gay or not. Did the British forge the diaries? A lot of people, separatists particularly, think well they must have forged the diaries because the Brits do that sort of thing. So there is still a huge discussion in certain circles as to the authenticity and there’s very detailed arguments over documents that have gone missing from the National Library and you know were bits forged, sections, sections of it forged, or “he couldn’t have written about the weather in Bolivia on the 2nd of April because he was in Ecuador on the 3rd of April” and they’ve proof of that. The problem is when you write a diary you’re not governed by absolute rules that … you can write up a story a week ago in your diary on this day and this sort of thing.

**Are you still involved in that work?**

**JEFF:** The whole Casement controversy is not going to die away cause it’s an article of faith in many… for many people. I think I spent a lot of my life working against conspiracy theories. Casement is everything you want, it’s got so many facets and as a gay man it’s got that extra aspect. Other issues like… we’ve had this huge **Kincora scandal** for 30 years now in Belfast, the boys home where three men were convicted of abusing their charges in the 1980s - early. And ever since there’s been a whole raft of conspiracy theories built around that. But the worst thing that happened to us in gay Belfast was that in 1983, or thereabouts, the **Eastern Healthboard** made a policy of not employing gay people in caring roles because of these individuals and because the whole issue was constantly being ramped up. And that a took a while to undo and I think many of us still are very chary about the conspiracy theories around Kincora. They’ve even re-energised this year on Lord Mountbatten. Somebody decided.. they came across two, very late in the day, they’ve came across two new boys who claimed they were shipped from Kincora to County Sligo for his pleasure. I just don’t believe it but it get pages and pages of press coverage.

**What’s life like for you now?**

**JEFF:** Well it’s very difficult to retire as a gay person. Especially as the gay activist type person. I slowed down.. well but then I’m also involved in other matters. I became an **Ulster Unionist councillor** in Belfast City Council five years ago - pretty late in life to start a new career but I managed it. Just. So that takes up a lot of my time but the whole gay issue is for a relatively small minority it’s become almost predominant in news and television coverage and campaigning issues and politics and it’s even every day there’s more ‘out’ gay people. I just noticed that the Fianna Fáiler who won the Cork by-election this week is gay and it was hardly mentioned. I hadn’t noticed it until the result come out. I gather that your Taoiseach is gay as well but I don’t know if this is correct. *\*laughs\** I wouldn’t like to attribute sexuality to anyone.

**Is there any question I should have asked you?**

**JEFF:** Right. Questions. Questions that need answered. It’s difficult to say. It’s a bit like that question that comes up at the end of the interview - “is there anything you’d like to ask me or you’d like to ask us?” I think you got… the question might be - how did you enjoy it? or it was always a struggle and a fight obviously. I’ve been doing that all along but there’s no question that it was satisfying in many ways, happy and cheerful. I had a good life despite the difficulties. I had considerable love affairs, still have. Relationships have been developed and maintained and sustained with many people. I think a lot of young people maybe - it’s a strange thing to say - but if it was a struggle coming ‘out’ and coming to terms with yourself, I think in someways it’s been easier to cope because you learn how … the problems. I think an awful lot of young people nowadays - I’m no expert - they come ‘out’ very early - mid-early teens even and they haven’t got any….they’ve still got the same issues, being gay is not easy and good for a 12 year old or 13 year old - you still know it’s wrong or difficult but you suddenly jump from there into ‘out and about’. I think it can be too rapid for some people in that sense. They don’t, in a sense, have the same stresses. Sounds a bit unfair maybe.

**Declan and Ronan, is there any question I haven’t asked?**

**Ronan:** I can’t think of anything.  
  
**Declan:** I have one small thing, we talked about how you’re an expert on Casement’s diaries and you presented the argument but you haven’t told us what your own opinion is. I think for people who are watching this who aren’t familiar with your work, it might be interesting to hear what your own personal opinion on them is.

**JEFF:** Well on the matter of Casement’s diaries, I mean, I’ve always assumed they were authentic because I wasn’t convinced by the conspiracy theories but you have to be sceptical enough when you look into it. And there is very little evidence, apart from the diaries, of Casement’s sexuality or his sexual life. He didn’t marry and that’s true but he was also travelling most of his life. But it’s the whole feel of everything he wrote tells you that this is a genuine article here. This is someone who experienced gay life as a man, in the 20th century, would. A lot of cruising, a lot of outdoor sex. These are things that maybe aren’t fashionable anymore but it happened until cyber sex came along. Everything about it. If they weren’t genuine they would… the British secret service would have had to employ half a dozen ‘out’ gay men in 1915 to write them because they wouldn’t… they themselves wouldn’t have known how to write them. You know you couldn’t convince me they’re other than genuine.

**Thank you very much. Are you happy with that Declan?**