

An Interview with Meredith Cary
June 25, 1996

Interviewer: Kathryn Anderson

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Centennial Oral History Project

Center for Pacific Northwest Studies
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[Side One]

K: This is Kathryn Anderson. I'm interviewing Meredith Cary, Professor of English, in my office at Fairhaven College on June 25, 1996. This interview is part of Western Washington University's Centennial Oral History Project, relating to Western's Centennial celebration.

[break in tape]

K: Okay, could you describe for me, in whatever terms you choose, the personal and professional paths that have brought you to Western?

M: I've been thinking about this, obviously, and when you look back, you see patterns that aren't there when you're going through the experience. But I think I got into the profession because I was working as an academic librarian, and I got to help faculty members with their research. I was fascinated by it and so, inevitably, the next step was, "Why am I not doing my own research?" So that's the way I think that it occurred to me that I'd like to teach. And a second thing was that I had a little girl, and as she became more of a person, I realized I was spending seventy, seventy-five hours a week on the job. I am a workaholic, you see. So instead of imagining that I would change my nature, it dawned on me that I needed work where I could do a lot of it at home, and be there for her. So those two things came together very easily, and I went back to graduate school. I resigned my job. I left my marriage to a very controlling man, and went back to graduate school. I came to the University of Washington because there was a man there who was the only scholar who had published a book length study in English about the Irish novelists that I was interested in. I thought it just seemed like a miracle that he was actually somewhere where I would have access to him. It turned out to be one of the most fortunate things that could possibly happen to a person who was launching an academic career, because he was a mentor in every way. He taught me everything that was appropriate to my personality in regard to teaching. He also taught me a great deal about the way you go at research, the way you add things up and wait, and different elements and so on. As well, the University of Washington when I came there was one of the most amazingly gender neutral universities. I couldn't believe it. I'd never experienced gender neutral group activity and it just seemed like paradise. It was a miracle. So when I was ready to graduate and was looking for a teaching job, they were hiring here at Western. And so I came up. Western unfortunately wasn't like the UW, but the chair who hired me was, I owe him an endless debt because

K: Who was it?

M: Edwin Clapp. He was generous. He encouraged everyone, male or female. The year that I was hired, half of the incoming crop was female. I don't know that he did it mathematically, but he saw to it that there was no difference made in scheduling and respect. Whatever kinds of fostering he could do, he did. And so if my trip out here, it was a blind trip in a way, I'd never been to the Northwest before, but y'know, I happened, fortunately, to get two mentors right off the bat who were just wonderful to me.

K: And the professor at the UW was?

M: Malcolm Brown. He's a major scholar. He unfortunately is dead now but he was a major scholar in George Moore studies.

K: When you came to Western did you consider other options?

M: I applied all over the northwest because I wanted to stay in this part of the country, and it

K: Did it become home?

M: Yes, and it'll stay home I think. The only university that, or the only school, because I applied at community colleges, I mean, I applied everywhere. The only school that was hiring was Western, except for one of the community colleges in Seattle. But when they found out that I intended to finish my Ph.D., they said they had problems with Ph.D.'s in community colleges, and maybe it's true. I felt like it wouldn't have applied to me, but y'know.

K: So that was a major transition from library to

M: Yeah, and I like library work, but I could see that if I was going to really enjoy being a mother, there had to be a change. And I've never regretted it, I like teaching too, I seem to like work.

K: When you came to Western, how would you describe what you found?

M: Well, the first year I was here, we were expected to throw women out of class if they wore jeans. [laughs] That gives you an idea of how things have changed. I didn't, of course. But, I felt like I was taking a risk in refusing to enforce that rule.

K: Now that was in '64?

M: Yeah, it was still a rule in the spring of '65. No one mentioned it after the spring of '65, so I don't know when it was officially backed off from. But you know, the sixties were beginning to crank up, and it would've been hard

to maintain, I think, for any length of time after that. But we all took seating charts. I quit doing that when my seating charts started coming back with Mickey Mouse, and The Pope and so on. There were a lot of students who wouldn't officially say, "I won't cooperate with this," but they would find other ways. Y'know, the sixties was a fairly lively time, and so they would be there, they would participate, but they would participate in ways that made it clear that they weren't going to do just a rule because it was a rule. And so that loosened the university up a great deal as far as I'm concerned, for the good. I found the orientation toward rules quite disturbing, partly because I'd been on the wrong side of rules so many times as a student myself. And so as it loosened up, I got more comfortable here. But it was a very male dominated environment when I first came here.

K: What does that mean?

M: Well, the department was primarily male, the reading lists were almost exclusively male. The students didn't seem to react one way or the other. I mean, they didn't, so far as I could tell, they didn't treat me any differently from how they treated their male instructors. But the university itself, as opposed to the student body, seemed very oriented toward male values, male intentions, male careers and so on. The turning point was slow to materialize, and in fact, y'know, I mean, there are still changes going on. Marge Ryan was a tenured member of the department when I came here, and she approached me and another untenured member of the faculty, suggesting that we team-teach a women's lit course, and so far as I know, that was the first women's, distinctly women's course taught on campus. It was wonderful fun, we had a lovely time.

K: When was that?

M: It was maybe '72, early seventies. I'm not exactly sure when we taught it as an experimental course.

K: How did you think about what a women's lit class would be?

M: Well, [laughs] we had an odd experience in fact, because I mean, we all thought yeah, this is a good idea, y'know, it's long overdue, and so on, the kinds of things you say to yourself. But at the same time, none of us had studied women writers. I went through y'know, what is it, twenty-two years of education, or something like that, without ever reading the work of a woman.

K: Wow.

M: Yeah, I mean, we're talking, y'know, cave days. And so we talked a while about what we would do for a reading list, and then finally we said

okay, we will gather up women who obviously deserve a major reputation, and get major attention from contemporary readers, and then, we'll set aside the issue of whether in fact they've been given a major build up. So we went down the list, and they were all just in total despair, y'know. And at the end of the course, all of us were just kind of dragging along the floor, because we had taught this steady stream of stories about victims, about torment, about insanity, suicide, y'know, on down the list, and all of it just utterly despairing work. And so we agreed after that, I mean, we kind of got together and said, we can't do this again, it's hard on us and bad for the students, no doubt. And, although I don't think it was bad for the students, I mean. One of the books that we read was Doris Lessing's *Golden Notebook*, and some of our students had just practically memorized it. So, it didn't worry them, about the negative implications of all that stuff we were working at, so it was a major turning point really, in my attitude.

K: How did the students respond, how would you--?

M: They felt like, as far as I know, there's always that tact and courtesy between faculty and students, but as far as I could sense, they felt like they were involved in something new. They were excited about it from that point of view. They also reacted to the team teaching model, which they seemed to enjoy. And I did too. I think it is a good way to go into a field that is fairly new, because you get more than one voice. They came in with suggested readings, which doesn't happen in a standard course. They asked for reading lists. It was a much more interactive experience, in terms at least of how they treated us. We also found out that some of them were meeting in conversation groups. They would, if they knew each other, they'd meet in someone's home, but others of them who didn't particularly know anybody before the class began started meeting at the union, y'know, for coffee or whatever, or having dinner together so they could kind of brown bag. So the whole experience took on an almost club-like tone in a lot of ways outside of class, and then inside of class, they would bring up what amounted to major research questions, y'know, just things that had never been dealt with, so we couldn't refer them to the library, because there wasn't anything in the library either. 50--

K: Sounds like a ready audience.

M: Very.

K: this class that you were developing.

M: Yes. We felt like it was overdue on the basis of the student reaction.

K: When did that class, did you, or did you ever begin to teach that class where the students weren't quite so maybe tuned into the theme of the class or would you--?

M: Y'know, that class eventually developed into the women in literature class that we teach now as a GUR, and also as one of the core courses in the women's studies program. And I still feel like it serves a purpose that a lot of our classes don't.

K: In what way?

M: Well, we teach texts that they might even encounter in another class, but we do it from the point of view of, all right, what questions do you encounter in reading this work that cause you to turn back and look at the experience going on around you? And y'know, that business of putting literature together with your actual daily life, not what you say about your life, but in fact the experience you have. That's a process that we don't really emphasize in a standard lit course. I think maybe we should, y'know, and maybe eventually one of the impacts of the feminist movement in literary studies will be that. I hope so. But at the moment, the tendency is the other way. I think the feminist movement has been somewhat threatening to people who don't want to deal with content and don't want to interface content with life, and so they're retreating into theory, which of course is a really easy way to avoid the whole feminist question. Ultimately it'll turn back, I feel confident it will.

K: Were you referring to feminist theory, when you were talking just now, or literary theory in general?

M: Literary theorists in general. They tend to retreat into theory which then discusses y'know, concepts that are almost abstracted from the individual texts. Instead of returning the texts to the life implied by the text. And a second thing is that if you step back into theory, you deal less with the implications of the text, so if the text has limited or offensive concepts, it doesn't matter, because you can still talk about structure and y'know, thought and so on. The structure of thought, rather than the content.

K: So do you want to say any more about how that, how you see that course having evolved over the last, gee, almost 25 years, with teaching, or some version of the women's literature classes on campus.

M: Yeah, yeah continuously. It's gotten far more, well, maybe what I should say is it's gotten less, at first it was so clearly an experiment, and we didn't know what we were doing. We had clear views of what we hoped would happen, and in fact it did happen to a large extent. We wanted students to take a fresh look at the literature instead of just reading what they

were told and responding in the context that they knew they were supposed to respond. The, now, well, when we taught Lessing the first time, y'know, there were maybe two short essays and there was no other criticism. Y'know, now she's an industry, y'know, so one thing that's changed enormously is that you can find scholarship on almost any woman writer, and sometimes there'll be surprises about that. At one point, you could get paperback editions of women writers, where you couldn't get paperback editions of men's writing, of men's writing where the reputation was fifteen or twenty times as big. So it, the impact of the women's movement has been, y'know, I guess you'd say uneven, but it's certainly been clear. The advantage of

having research out there is that the students don't feel like they're so on their own. They're not so dependent on the interpretation that the teacher has. And they're not so vulnerable also, to whatever the classroom group might say was true. If they disagree with the class, they can run to the library now, which is true in most literature classes, but wasn't true in women's lit in the beginning. The population, the students who take the class, that's been fairly consistent, ten or fifteen percent men, right along. One time one of my male students said that he wanted me to sign a blue slip for him, a note to let him in, even though the class was full, because he said, he really, and I asked him why, y'know, because, as I always do, and he said, that he really loved women's writing because they were just so into their pain. [laughs] That caused me to do a little thinking, y'know, I'm not doing songs to pain in here. And so, y'know, you never know where an insight is going to come from, when, if you really get out there and allow your students to tell you what they're thinking, it can help you adjust your own thinking. So, that's a change for me, I started consciously stepping aside from the whole victim concept of women's lit.

K: Into what?

M: Into, well there are a lot of buzz-words for it now. But to phrase it without some of the buzz, into literature which depicts women who are able to formulate what they want out of their life and also are able to organize themselves to reach for what they want. One early stage of that was that the, a lot of the characters who are in that process would be extremely confrontational and cranky and in your face and so on and so on, but now, another recent change that I think is a very encouraging one is that there are getting to be some novels where you just have a woman who's going about her life, and doesn't feel she has to set the whole world straight, all she has to do really is y'know, be appropriate in her own roles and see that she does have roles, and that she's not trapped by them, she can move among them. And that's just an aspect of experience. So the attitude toward victimization, the attitude toward difficulty, the attitude toward social roles, all those things have changed quite a bit, fairly recently I think, within the last five to ten years. It's a major difference.

K: Would you say that the class is exclusively about that now, or more of a balance, or--?

M: Probably scattered all over the place, but where in the beginning the class was almost focused on being a victim, and then a transition phase was to say, we're valuable because we're victims, and we're, we pride ourselves on being victims, and then, beyond that to say what's good about it, [laughs] y'know, and then kind of turning a corner, and introducing the concept of--, if you want a life, then it had better be your life. But we do still have a large group in any of the women's classes that I teach at least, where they're very interested in being a victim and they feel almost defrauded when they read material that doesn't present women in that light. So it's, I don't, I guess I wouldn't call it a balance. But, but there is a considerable scatter, in terms of reactions.

K: Maybe this would be a good time to go back a bit and just talk about how the women's studies program developed and how this one class with you and Marjorie Ryan, to what it has become. What are your memories of that?

M: Well, yeah, and I, I just talk about my memories. Because I haven't gone back to my files to see, but there was a group, and I have to tell about this in terms of what I was told, because I wasn't part of the original group. There was a group of students, concerned students, I think were the beginning, and they approached a couple of faculty members where they thought they would get a hearing, and sure enough they did, as far as I understand it. They operated as a group, they designed a program, and this would have been in I think '71. And they wanted, the university had what they called innovative funds back then. If you had something, a program preferably, not just a class, but a program that you wanted to experiment with, the university would fund it for two years, after which whatever body would be the appropriate body, would have to pick up the funding. So basically they give you a two year window to do your experiment in, if it turned out to be a valid experiment, then off it would go. This group offered a proposal to the innovative funding, and they were turned down. And, they couldn't tell why they were turned down, they didn't know whether it was just frankly sexist, or whether they hadn't presented it right, or something wrong with the program, or, y'know, all the kinds of questions that you go through in a situation like that. I'd been pretty active in university wide politics by that time, and so they thought I might, I'd been on a lot of committees, and they thought I might be able to figure out what really had happened. And so they came to me, and I said, well, I'd like to see the proposal that they had offered, and y'know, without getting into a ton of nitty-gritty, what it boiled down to in my mind was that two things had probably been against them. One was that they had gone to committee meetings as a group and that looked too much like a sit-in, y'know, and so, it got backed up, y'know, for reasons that

had nothing to do really with gender. And then the second thing is that as they described their proposal, they had tried to make the need for it clear, and as they had tried to explain the need for it, they made it, by accident, sound like a social movement rather than like an academic topic, and so I said, that I would be willing to try again. I hated it in a sense, because I knew I'd have to go back to the same committees that had already turned it down. But I thought well, y'know, let's try it one more time. And so I rewrote the proposal, and I said, I'll go alone, at least in the first stages of this. And that did work. I had, it was perfectly true, I had been in enough committee situations that I knew the tone that would irritate everyone to sort of [laughs] automatically and so I was able to avoid that, and also able to put an extremely academic context on the material. And the combination was enough, so we got innovative funds that supported us for two years. And since I was up to my elbows in it by then anyway, I did serve as the manager for the program for the first five years. Our funds ran out at the end of two years, and mercifully we had set it up, we had done it so that it would look academic, but what we had, which it was, in fact, but what we had done is get the departments to stand behind the three core courses, and so when we ran out of funds, the departments did continue to teach those courses, so the program didn't disappear. But I spent three more years then after that struggling to get funds, and I couldn't, and so I knew it wasn't, I had tried for three years in fact, because I knew the Dean, that was James Davis, I knew he very much fostered academic roles for academic type women. So I kept thinking, it'll work, it'll work, but it didn't, and so finally my last straw was I had heard that Fairhaven might be willing to pick it up, at least in a small way, if arts and sciences wasn't able to come up with support and so at that point I felt free to resign and say I was resigning because of the lack of support, whereupon I handed it over to you, as you know. [laughs]

K: So the actual structure of the minor, who designed that? Did you revise that in that process?

M: Yeah, that was part of my effort to make it look clearly academic. I felt that any program which looked like what they were calling a social agenda, the committees that had voted against it were calling it a social agenda, and my guess was that that was sincere, because I knew some of the men that were on those committees, I knew them personally. And so I thought let's be high-minded here. Let's assume that this is a genuine reservation rather than a vendetta, and I have never been sorry that I took that approach because it worked and I think a lot of, it's one of the reasons I feel so strongly about avoiding a sense of being a victim. If you think you're a victim, of course you are. You see, whereas I went back to them describing an academic, a clearly academic program. We have three basic courses, and then our second step was going to be that we wanted to design an overview course, which would come after the introductory courses. We didn't ask for an intro course, because we were afraid that they would dismiss that as more social

movement type stuff. We didn't get our capstone course, but we did get our academic courses in the departments. And the fact that they were in the departments, you see, gave them visibility as academic courses, because if I was able to persuade individual chairs, three of them, after all, that these courses were legitimate additions to their curriculum. Then that helped the committees see that well, y'know, the chairs involved think so, and all those chairs were men, and so there was no sense that we were just gathering up the women on campus and asking them to teach. And in fact some of the women on campus that I approached to contribute to the program gave me a lecture instead. Y'know what I mean, it wasn't a men against the women situation, because some of the women were far more outspoken than the men were.

K: What were their objections?

M: Social movement, basically. They felt that it was, that they were in a standard academic program and they were female and they never mentioned it and why should we mention it, and y'know, that kind of thing. They insisted that they saw nothing except a social movement involved. And I can't assess it, y'know, that may be a perfectly genuine reaction. I had come through a strictly male program too, but on the other hand, but you see, having a daughter really improves your life, or at least widens your view, because when my little girl really disliked school. But when she was ten, she was reading a book about frontier America, and she discovered that girls weren't required to go to school, but boys were, and she came home just absolutely foaming. It was one of those topics that I found it very hard to talk about. Why weren't girls required to go to school back then? And from there it's an easy step to y'know, why aren't men and women both learning about the contributions of women, and so on. And so, I've always been ready to think that the reaction against this kind of curricular innovation may be perfectly genuine, and genuine on the part of a person who just hasn't confronted it on a personal level. I know that it's quite often not a popular attitude, because people would like it to be simple and straightforward, but I don't believe it is.

K: Did you observe conversions?

M: Oh, yes. yeah. Yes. One of the odd little experiences of my academic life here has been, I was visible in affirmative action contexts in various ways, and people who have, women who have fought me in one way or another have sometimes over the years called me and long after the fact, so that I have y'know, forgotten all about it, and apologized for having fought me and then asked me for help. [laughs] And y'know, it's one of those disconcerting things, you would rather they would just simply ask for help, and not say why they're embarrassed to do so. But conversions do happen, yeah. And I think they usually happen on a personal basis. Some of my male colleagues

have gotten interested because they have little daughters in grade school now. Y'know, that kind of thing. My students, it seems to me, have always been pretty liberal. So my problems of confronting pressure have generally been through difficulties with colleagues rather than the student body, [who] have seemed very very open to the topic always to me. I don't know if that's, y'know, they select the course, so they must be wanting to consider it. That could be, y'know, self-selection.

K: But that course has always been very popular.

M: Yes. Right. It has, and it's popular with me as well. I thoroughly enjoy teaching it, and I do think, y'know that a teacher who is having fun helps a class to have fun, so.

K: If you could have gotten enough funding, what would your vision have been?

M: My vision then would have been the same as it is now. I do see women's studies as an academic discipline. I would have liked to see the almost every department have a core course, the sciences clearly need a course which would add the achievements of women to the history of science. The emphasis is not strictly a humanities emphasis, in my mind. The problems that women face in the academy, of never seeing themselves in an academic context, I think those shouldn't have to be discussed, they should simply be demonstrated in reverse. That is, the curriculum for everybody includes the achievements of women. And so y'know, I'd like to see a kind of history course added, that would parallel whatever history course every department obviously does have, and sort of feed information about women into that, until it's no longer necessary. Until there is a balance in the basic course. But I don't see any evidence that the balance is being achieved, so in my opinion, it's still needed, to have a parallel course feeding in. And then I'd like to see in the departments where it's relevant, that is, in any department where part of the topic is human development and personality, and action, I'd like to see a progression within the curriculum that would recognize the equal contribution of women, and in my mind it is equal, but it's never presented as such. So for example, if you're studying history, you would need to revise all the history courses so they don't focus primarily on war, and on politics, and instead talk about lifestyle changes in the advent of technology into daily life, which has a heavier impact on the lives of women usually than it does on the lives of men. I do that kind of background lecturing in my, when I'm teaching Victorian lit. I hand out a timeline which one of my colleagues asked for a copy of, but he also called it trivia. But y'know, I mean, I was delighted that he was interested in it, the first enclosed cooking stove, and so on. Well, it is trivia, but at the same time it's crucial change for women's lives. And in literature I would like to see the profile of personality adjusted to take into account the fact that female

personalities very often are different, maybe that's an innate or biological difference, but also, clearly it is influenced by the kinds of pressures that society offers. And I'd like to see personality described in terms of that. It seems to me that both of those possibilities should be represented. Because I don't think that there's one model of personality. I don't think that there's one model of female any more than there's one model of male, y'know, so, what I would see as the ultimate outcome of this is that as less exclusive presentation entered in, and at first you need almost a parallel curriculum, but as less exclusive interpretations became possible, then what you would have is a range of human behavior and human attitude and human potential, rather than the kind of either or that we get now. Men, and women. I don't, that seems so reductive to me, as to be almost useless. But, unless Western wants to set up a second university, in which women get equal presentation, it's a long road.

K: It is indeed. Just a couple more questions about this. When did these classes become part of the General University Requirements? Shortly after they were created as part of the curriculum, right?

M: Aren't you the source of that?

K: No, they were GURs before.

M: Already?

K: Yeah. [pause] I can find that out, I just.

M: Yeah.

K: The reason I ask is that, well, go ahead.

M: No, I was going to say, I know that they've been part of GUR for a long time. I don't remember. I remember going to a lot of committees to get things approved. And I remember battling with the curriculum, the university curriculum committee. But I had forgotten, I guess I did go there as the program manager.

K: I think you must have, and then shortly afterwards, I think it was in '78, they threatened to eliminate--

M: Yes, they, that's happened a couple of times.

K: And you wrote a letter to the student newspaper or Fast or whatever.

M: Yes.

K: objecting to their characterizing women in literature as narrow focus.

M: Yeah, yeah. That's the reason that I remember going to that committee meeting because the chair was trying to illustrate the problem, and he said that some things are too narrow. And then he said, for example you can't teach medicine by focusing, I'm paraphrasing obviously, focusing exclusively on the bile duct. [laughs] Whereupon I thought, oh, good, this is just the opportunity we need. And so I was able to be cranky in an amusing way.

And the result of that letter was very very rewarding, let me hurry on to say, because a number of men around on campus and other departments called me to laugh in my ear and tell me that that was a good, y'know, the letter had done the job. And I do think that an amused response sometimes is the best approach, particularly in an area like this where a lot of people are simply responding on the basis of the way they grew up, and aren't necessarily out to do anybody any harm, or to ignore anybody or anything of the sort. You, anybody tends to react automatically until they look at what they're doing, so I think sometimes humor is the best approach.

K: I'm interested in your accommodating style, or the style that you're describing as a strategic one, as a sort of pragmatic one, and so forth, and I know that you spent some of the early part of your life in what some people might call the South, or at least--

M: Yeah.

K: And I'm just wondering, this is kind of an aside, but I'm wondering how you would attribute the source of this approach to human relationships.

M: I think it's partly just my nature. I think confrontation achieves nothing, and I've seen that demonstrated enough that I believe it on the basis of my experience as well as just my nature. But yes, I do, I come from a southern community and mercifully for me my dad was, he was a real equal, and I'm almost a stereotype in that respect. You know the studies that say that fathers who have aspirations for their daughters have more of an impact. He never, he had one son and two daughters and he never made any distinction among the three of us. I mean, he would give us all the same old speech about, y'know, basically vocational guidance. My mother on the other hand, was very very much into southern, how would you characterize it?

She felt that women's roles were clear-cut and that we should stay within them and all the kinds of jittery things that made me uncomfortable as a child. She thought they were right, and so I learned very early on to deal with power that I couldn't escape and couldn't win against, and to go on liking her. I liked my mom, but she was really hard to handle. And that's excellent experience, y'know, if you can deal with your mother who thinks you're doing everything wrong and still go on liking her, which I did manage to do, then you've been trained. And so I did come out of it partly because the

whole community was very much into girls should be seen, and they should be polite and they should, y'know all the kinds of things. But I also saw that you can find a way to have your own life in that context. I left, as you notice, and I wouldn't even consider going back. And one of the things that I find in the Northwest, that just seems really miraculous to me is a sense of emphasis on the individual which was missing from the environment I grew up in. Northwesterners aren't any more miraculous probably, in terms of gender, than you might find elsewhere, but they very definitely emphasize individuality, and so if you make it clear that you are an individual as that being primary ahead of your gender, then you get a hearing in the Northwest in a way that I haven't discovered elsewhere. I've lived in various parts of the country, and this is the only place I know where the individual really is granted primary respect, so yeah, I think my negotiating skills very clearly came out of my childhood to circle back to your question.

K: So it's the culture or the climate that keeps you in the Northwest. Or both?

M: Yes. That's true. Both. I love the climate. The climate is absolutely right for me. It's beautiful, there's space. We aren't overrun by population yet. But yeah, it's the culture here that I can't turn away from, it's exciting to watch.

K: I'd like to go back actually we're at the end of the tape so I'll pause here, but.

[Side Two]

K: When you consider significant changes or things that have happened over that period of time, you talked a little bit about what the campus was like in terms of the students and teaching when you first came. Can you talk about it more in terms of the campus community of faculty as a whole, and what you see as being the sort of high points since then?

M: The tone of the student body has always been extremely warm and outgoing and I think we have an extraordinary student body. The faculty has changed enormously though, and partly I think in response to the women's movement, and then, also in terms of an emphasis on getting other ethnic groups represented. When I first came here, the faculty at least, in the parts of the university that I came into contact with was almost exclusively white male. And they weren't all difficult about that necessarily, but you just walked around campus and you were aware of the fact of being very very much out of step in gender terms, and I'm sure that anybody who was of a different ethnic background felt the same. That's changed enormously, and it's had a ripple effect. It's more than just that you look around and you see people who represent a huge variety. The intellectual constructs that you

encounter have changed, and so where, when I came here, I couldn't quite believe how traditional the campus seemed.

K: Traditional in what way?

M: Academically. Y'know, I mean, you had your list of historical classes in literature, and then you had your two or three special topics classes which were again, very very traditional and you could have found them on, say seventy percent of the campuses nationwide. But the other side, to balance that is the fact that I've always had a feeling that if you organized your thoughts and made a case for a class or an approach that wasn't conventional, that you would be heard and you would be given your chance. And the curriculum, the structure of the curriculum suggests that, because, we have always had experimental numbers. So if you're teaching something that's really off the wall or where you generally want to try and see if it would work, you can teach a course as a one time thing as an experiment. If you like it, think it worked well for the students, and can show good student

evaluations, then you can take those to the curriculum body and your department and ask that it be made permanent and so that structure of curricular change invites a more liberal attitude toward curriculum it seems to me. And I don't know, how many campuses have a structure like that? I don't know of other schools where, y'know, that extreme generosity toward experiment is right out there. It's been helpful because when we've clearly needed to change, the mechanism is already in place, so we don't have to invent the possibility before we go for the change. The department, our English department now is going almost to the other extreme, y'know, because, as I said, when I first came here, every, all the classes taught seemed very traditional to me. But now, we're going into multicultural trends so strongly that the primary question that we're dealing with now, is to what extent do we have an obligation to the students to present the traditional materials so that when they leave us, they'll know what the society at large considers to be traditional material. It is a major issue, because the national tests that help you get into graduate school are still extremely traditional, and so y'know, if you go through a quite liberal undergraduate education and then take the Graduate Record Exam, you're in trouble, and so, y'know, that's our primary question at the moment, is to try to balance the needs of our students who might want to go on to graduate school with the needs of our students who want to see life as it actually is. Another element of that I think is the development of a concept of Pacific Rim, and that's a big change, because when I first came here, only black students were considered as part of the curriculum, but now that has shifted and we have an emphasis on Asian material and Asian influence, which seems highly appropriate given where we are. A second element is the implication of the fact that what are we? eighteen miles from the Canadian border? [laughs] Y'know, when I first came here, if you mentioned Canadian lit, people would just sort of stop talking and look at you for a while. So that's been the primary change that

I've seen in my own department, is a kind of departure from the kind of mind set that also had rules officially throwing women out if they wore jeans. I mean, y'know, there's been just a complete reversal, in mindset, and then y'know, various demonstrations of that, it seems to me.

K: You would have been here at a time of pretty significant transition in the nature of the college.

M: Yes. We were a college when I came here, and so I was here during the days when we debated whether or not we should ask for university status, what it meant, was it going to become a killer option, were we all going to have to publish a book every two years, y'know, all the kinds of anxieties that a basic change of that sort generates. I don't think it was an actual choice on our part because the legislature had decided to redesign the structure of higher education state-wide. But the debate that went on locally treated it as a choice that we could make.

K: You also witnessed the expansion of the faculty numbers.

M: Yeah.

K: When you came that must have been quite a number.

M: Yes, I was hired in the, in an expansionist period. '63, I think beginning in '63, there was a lot of hiring for several years. I've also been through a hideous contraction at one point, our department was cut exactly in half. And it was gruesome, but I have to say this for my colleagues. They behaved in a way which I will always remember with the highest of respect. When it became apparent that we were going to have to cut every , we would cut some programs altogether, and then lose faculty within each of the programs that we maintained, some faculty members took reduced assignments if they could afford to, to leave more courses available for people who had huge commitments, young children or something of the sort. Other people would, I'll never forget one man who looked around and realized that there was a choice that was going to be made between himself and a woman, they were both untenured in a, in one program that was going to lose faculty, and so he went to her and said, let's both apply for jobs, and whichever one of us gets it, goes. And I thought, I've always thought how admirable. Y'know, it's just the faculty, I just, they were wonderful. Y'know, they faced this dreadful situation with real gallantry. And so it made me feel good about my colleagues. The loss was supposed to be temporary, but it lasted forever and ever and ever, it seemed like. And so all of us who stayed had plenty of chance to decide whether we were glad because we were teaching enormous overloads y'know, We were teaching basically double what we had been teaching the year before. One of the accrediting groups that came through said, called us "heroic," [laughs]. Which I've always taken pride in, and said

that it was, we shouldn't be asked to do this forever, y'know. But the return of our faculty ratio has been very slow, so we've had to be heroic for a long time.

K: In those early days, were you at all aware of how the expansion was changing the campus for people who had been here for a while? Were there tensions there that you remember, or was that sort of not part of--?

M: No, that, I think you're always somewhat aware of that, the department had been, I was, I was a brand new faculty member, but I had been a faculty wife, and so I was aware of the kinds of things that go on between colleagues. The old guard, y'know, there's always an old guard. The old guard had a recollection of a campus and a program and a department that was highly controlled, and the, where they had faced really no challenges so far as I know. They might, I suppose, surely would describe it differently. But to me coming in as a new member and as an outsider, it seemed to me that there had been very few challenges. And with our student body, they are amiable and they give their teachers the benefit of the doubt, and so my guess is that there probably weren't challenges in the classroom either. And they felt that we were rolling over them, and I suppose we were, y'know. I mean, there was this huge influx of new people, and all of us charged up and sure that we were going to change the world and we did. So I think they felt at a loss. That may be going on again. The new crop of very young faculty that we're hiring sort of look around and obviously think, well, let's set all this aside. Y'know, so it's interesting to me to see it again, but I'm on the other side of the division now.

K: What's that like for you?

M: It's okay. Because the students still treat me as they always did. And so I, and my dedication has always been to the students, and so that is a continuous part of my life. The second thing is, though, and this is probably unique to me as a faculty member, I've always been yelling and belle ring for change, and so, when the new people come in and call for change, it sounds like an old song to me. And so I don't feel that they're going to take away anything that would have seemed like an oasis. And mostly the changes they call for, I heartily agree with, and have called for them myself, many's the time. So, you know, it depends partly on your attitude toward change. But the other side is, that it is extremely interesting to me in a sociological way to watch happening again what was happening when I was first here, so I do see my experience in terms of cycles and I don't know, is thirty years an academic cycle? Anyway, y'know, that's what it's been. We seem to be back about where we were thirty years ago in terms of the kinds of questions, the reactions to situations and so on. It does seem like a cycle to me rather than a flat-out change. But for me personally it's not a bad thing.

K: What else, if you were reading a centennial history of Western, what in your experience would you want to make sure, would you like to see noted in terms of things that might have happened while you were here?

M: I guess, I'm not at all sure that this is the kind of thing you have in mind in asking the question, but I guess to me the most important thing about Western is the student body, and I, it seems extraordinary to me, year after year, so it isn't that I'm responding to one group of students, it's these people, year after year, they're remarkable. And the university goes through a wide variety of stances you might say, but they have maintained, whatever battles have gone on in the faculty, they have managed always to remember their primary commitment is to the student body, and that's helped orient the faculty as well, I think. So y'know, where some universities become so riven and turned into factions and hardened into their positions through confrontation and so on, that hasn't happened here. There have been battles, I don't pretend that isn't true, but, because the faculty, they fight their battles, but when they go to their classroom, they still have a primary focus on their students. I think that makes a total difference. And that's the thing about Western that has kept me here. Does that seem true?

K: Yeah. I'm not sure how I would explain it. Do you have any thoughts?

M: No, I don't.

K: Okay.

M: I don't know where it comes from, but it's the reality that I experience every time I walk on campus. And it seems crucial to me. It's what Western offers.

K: Let me switch gears just a little bit in terms of your professional life as a scholar and writer. I know that you've chosen to organize your life so that you have time off to do that, one way or another, with sabbaticals and leaves, that you publish under more than one name in different genres.

M: That's true. Yes.

K: I know Caroline Heilbrun said she had to hide that for many years, because that was not acceptable at Columbia. How have you found that activity here at Western?

M: Well, when I was first, when I first started writing fiction, I wrote women's fiction, and I am still very much interested in that. [laughs] Well, anything that it deals primarily with women's lives and it doesn't depict them in a context of defeat is, in the publishing industry, called women's.

Okay. [laughs] That's a rough and ready definition. At first I was very very pleased to y'know, it was hard to crack the fiction publishing market, and so I was delighted and ran around sort of announcing, look! look! look! Lucky me. And I very quickly learned that my colleagues weren't at all enamored of my second career. So I did face a certain amount of pressure, but then when I published last year, I published a detective novel, and that turns out to be socially acceptable in an academic context. [laughs] So, I don't understand the difference, and I don't suppose I ever will, and probably don't even want to, but I get positive treatment, positive feedback from my colleagues about publishing detective fiction, so that's nice. I appreciate, I always appreciate kindness. [laughs] It's easier to deal with than the alternative. But I haven't lost my interest in women's fiction, nevertheless. But I don't talk about that particularly on campus because it's not wanted, I guess you could say.

Y'know. I do help students, on the other hand, who want to' break into fiction writing, and I don't care what they're writing if it's something that I read. I don't attempt to help students who are writing something that I don't read, but if it's something that I read, then I do help. And my students don't seem to mind what I'm working on. But I was very disconcerted. I went public with my mystery writing very very hesitantly because I had kind of gotten my ears pinned back over the other, and, and then I had the odd experience of the newspaper identified me when my mystery came out, and so, I was sitting in class, cheerfully nattering on about 19th century Victorian writers, y'know, and after an hour and a half of this, class was dismissed and one of my students came up and leaned both hands on the table in front of me and leaned over so that he could make sure that he had established eye contact and said, SO. Do you write mysteries? And I was certainly taken aback by that. Because I was still thinking about Elizabeth Gaskell, y'know, I wasn't at all thinking about my own, y'know, alternative. [laughs] So it is disconcerting, since it's so different from my on campus obligations. But I'm working it out in the sense that I'm dealing with it, by saying okay, I'm available to any student who wants to write for the commercial market, and wants to talk about writing on that level, and that's bridged the gap for me, so now I know how to behave when I'm confronted with this. At first I was just totally, y'know, flapped, but I have figured out how to behave about it now.

K: Since you want to dwell on the sort of positive aspects, what would you characterize in the time that you've been here, as the sources of support, as the most important sources of support for you as a faculty member, for you as a colleague, for you as a teacher?

M: My students have always been a, just an absolute resource, and when RD. died, I don't, I couldn't, I don't know what I would have done if, but I took ~ week off, and then I came back, and I apologized for missing. And they were just there, y'know, so. The support I've had from faculty also is remarkable though, and when I went into dealing with the women's question, I knew that I would make a lot of enemies and I did. But at the

same time I made a lot of friends, so it was as if my saying this is my agenda, and I'm going to have to y'know, state my piece here, it's as if they, whether they agreed with me or not, they understood what I was doing, and that was okay. And so a lot of colleagues who clearly didn't care one way or the other about women's literature did nevertheless support me in faculty meetings, that, yes, this is something that our students should have access to. And so they took that approach rather than taking a stand on the issue itself. They took a stand on this should be available for students who want it. As long as the courses enrolled, they would support my offering them. And the amount of help I've had varies enormously, because from time to time other members of the faculty haven't wanted to teach in the program or sometimes a woman would teach a course once and decide no, it was too stressful, because y'know, your students do look on you, they want to use your life, you know that as well as I do. Y'know, it can be a heavy trip. And so some of the people who would look like they would be naturally a good person to add to the list of participating faculty, they'd try and they'd just withdraw, and they'd say, no, no, no, no, no. So you can't predict, or at least I wasn't, I've never been able to predict who, who will be a help directly by participating in the program, who will be a help in terms of supporting necessary change or standing behind courses even when there's y'know, some kind of question about cutting, and so on. I've never been able to tell. But what I can, what I have gradually over the years come to count on is that there will be support in our department, excellent support for material, if the students think they need it, then it belongs in the curriculum, basically that's been something I could count on, and so individuals might squabble with me about any particular course or any particular figure that I wanted to teach, but that would be in the lounge, y'know, it wouldn't be in the curriculum committee. There've been individuals who have fought, y'know, quite enthusiastically against liberalizing the curriculum, but, y'know, I think that would be true no matter what topic you were undertaking. I don't see it as targeted.

K: You've done a lot of things in your days for a librarian too.

M: Yes.

K: Seller of Irish novels, and mystery writer and women's fiction and all the rest. Have there been any costs?

M: Yeah. Um, [sigh] I am a workaholic, y'know. I mean, I don't, I never do anything that doesn't contribute I guess is what you'd say. Y'know, whatever project I'm lost in. And so I mean, where other people are perfectly capable of sitting on their back porch and looking at the birds. Y'know, I mean, that's something that never crosses my mind. Yeah, being, being focused always costs, don't you think?

K: What do you think you've missed?

M: Well, y'know, I would never admit that I've missed anything. [laughs] I adore my daughter and I have a strong relationship with her and she's a powerhouse all her own, and so neither of us dominates the other, but at the same time, y'know, we both know who we are. I have a grandson now, I am important in his life. He fantasizes about me, so you know that [laugh] you know I haven't shirked my grand motherhood. I have good friends, and I maintain those friendships, so evidently I do enough there. I keep up my reading in both my fiction realms and my academic realms and also my research realms. So evidently I'm doing okay there. Y'know, I mean, I just, I feel I, the cost has been in giving up idle time, but I don't feel like I've given up anything I've wanted. I have y'know, I do the bonding thing with colleagues who retired, I keep in touch with retired colleagues. That's going on, y'know. That's going out beyond what a lot of people spend time on, and I feel okay about, yeah, I do. The advent of e-mail has been an enormous help, because now I can keep track of my students. I used to dread June, because I would see these people, I had been involved in their lives for, y'know, years sometimes. And they would come in and tell me goodbye and that would be it. And I used to, I would, I'd be depressed, y'know, for months every year. But now, as soon as they have a job, they're back on-line and suddenly they pop up on my e-mail and it's wonderful, because I can keep in track, keep in touch with people that I would normally lose touch with. So I feel like I'm maintaining a balance there, y'know, everything that I want as part of my life pretty much, y'know. It's been available.

K: This is a potentially whole new topic, and the whole question of e-mail and internet and education, any thought on that?

M: Yes. [laughs] I'm a fanatic on the subject, as you can, that's the reason you thought to ask the question I'm sure. I think e-mail is going to really save us. And I have a little story, which, it isn't e-mail exactly, but it shows you why I believe so firmly in the internet. I teach a correspondence course, I can't remember if I've mentioned this to you, Kathryn, but I, one, I, I normally, if a student takes the trouble to be entertaining in writing their correspondence lesson, I always thank them, you see. Well, so I had thanked this one young man who had written an enthusiastic essay that had obviously taken some effort to be entertaining. And, so and then he, the next paper was even better, and so I, y'know, pointed that out to him and explained why. He phoned and asked me if I knew who he was. And I said, no, well, I'm sorry, y'know, if I should. Excuse me, but no, I guess I don't. And so he asked if he could come over and meet me, and I said yeah, come on. And so he walked in, and, then I understood the whole agenda. He was black. And he wanted to know if I had been, as he put it, friendly to him in my grading responses simply because I knew that he was black, and was encouraging him as a member of a minority group. And I was terribly upset and so was he, and so I said, sit down here and let's talk about this, y'know,

it's a touchy topic, but we can manage. And where we ended up, or at least where I ended up was realizing that he didn't have, there was no way except through correspondence, except through education that is not face to face, there was no way for him to escape his sense of always being identified in an ethnic context, and then if you're friendly that means that you're getting strokes that you didn't earn, and if you're unfriendly, that means that you're getting negatives that you didn't deserve, and I could see that he had an extremely, wholesome kind of y'know, stable outgoing balanced personality.

I responded to his personality very positively but I could also see why he wanted to check and see whether I had been genuine to him. And it changed my way of thinking about what we do. Y'know, I've always just sort of, y'know, I mean, sure education takes place in a classroom, what else?

Y'know, because that's the way it's always been. But he changed my way of looking at what we do. And so I'm extremely interested in getting an on-line capacity so that any student who wants to go in, of unknown ethnicity, unknown gender, and participate in discussions and y'know, get feedback from the teacher, and all the kinds of things that happen in a classroom. But where your gender and ethnicity are there before you open your mouth, all that can be set aside on the internet. I'm extremely excited about the potential for the internet, though there's a lot of resistance to using it that way. A lot of my colleagues think that you need the college experience, but to me the college experience involves a lot of prejudice and a lot of negative stuff, and so y'know, for student who wants the, the classroom experience, fine, let's maintain it. But for students, whatever their reason is, who might prefer to avoid face to face, then I would, I'm just, I'm just eager to see that happen. That alternative, that's the big change that I'm yelling for now. But y'know, I've always wanted change, so that's just a y'know, part of it for me.

K: [something]

M: Yeah.

K: Those are the, pretty much the topics that I had in mind. Are there things that you haven't covered that you wanted to talk about?

M: It seems to me that you've covered everything.

K: Well, if you have second thought when you see the transcript, we can go back.

M: Okay, all right.

K: Okay, thank you very much for talking.

M: It's been fun.