

Oral History Interview with Dr. Arthur P. Monahan
Conducted By Angela Baker June 28 1993

Transcription By: Armin Shujaatullah February 3 2000

AB We'll start with a little background information. Could you state your full name?

AM Its Monahan, Arthur P.

AB And your date and place of birth?

AM I was born in Brantford Ontario on August the 17th, 1928, which makes me 65 and I'm retiring from Saint Mary's in about two months' time.

AB So, could you talk about your educational background a little bit?

AM Well, I was entered in to the Ontario [separate] school system, Saint Mary's separate school in Brantford Ontario. Finished eight grades there, then enrolled in the Brantford Collegiate and Vocational Institute where I took four years of the five year Ontario high school program—I took my fifth final high school year at Saint Michael's college in Toronto and then in 1945, I think it was, enrolled at Saint Michael's college which is the Catholic Federated College at University of Toronto. Received an Honours degree in history and philosophy, a four year program graduated in 1949. I registered for graduate studies in the fall of 1949 at the University of Toronto and the Pontificate Institute of Medieval Studies for graduate work in philosophy. Got an MA from Toronto in 1950, Ph.D. in 1953 - both degrees in philosophy. [licenti] in medieval studies with specialization in philosophy from the Medieval Institute in 1952. If you're interested in terms of , professional career beyond that, I suppose that's all you might want...(AB interrupts)

AB In brief [mumble]

AM I took a first job - professional appointment I suppose one might say, it's a job as far as I was concerned - at Marquette University in the fall of 1953, that's the late and unlamented senator Joe McCarthy's alma matter. And I was there for one year, left in the spring of '54, took an appointment at what is now I think, called the University of Saint Jerome college in Waterloo Ontario. It was then just Saint Jerome College affiliated with the University of Ottawa and located in Kitchener Ontario. I joined the philosophy department at Saint Jerome in 1954, remained there until 1958 when I moved, family and I moved, to Halifax where I started at Mount Saint Vincent—and I was at Mount Saint Vincent in the philosophy department for three years I think and then I joined Saint Mary's in the fall of 1960. My particular area of philosophical specialization is as you would expect from my degree from medieval institute, medieval philosophy and more particularly, particularly the recent years that is the last twenty years, medieval political thought.

AB I see...so what was the size of the philosophy department when you first came in 1960

AM At saint Mary's I joined, curiously enough perhaps, the Faculty of Education in the capacity of teaching the philosophy of education. I remained in the faculty of education for only one year and then I moved to the arts faculty. And as I recall at that time, there were four members of the philosophy department. Three of them would have been I think Jesuits and I think I was the only lay member of the department although there had been, there had been lay members, whether more than one in any given year I'm not sure, but I do know there there were previously lay members in the philosophy department. But I think I was the only lay member when I joined.

The department grew quite rapidly during the 60's as was the case with virtually every other department at Saint Mary's and at other Canadian and American colleges, that was the boom time. As far as increasing enrollment and corresponding increase in faculty, I think our maximum compliment in philosophy since I've been in Saint Mary's was either eight or nine. I'm not sure about whether or not it ever got to nine. If it got only to eight we've now gotten back to a full compliment of eight only this year and the numbers have been less than that, fewer than that, during the '70s and '80s.

AB I see...so how, how are the size of the department in terms of classes and students change?

AM Well, the Philosophy Department at Saint Mary's, like the religious studies department which was then the theology department at Saint Mary's when I first came, that would have been in the 1960s, was a much more active essential component of the degree programs, than is the case now. Insofar as for all the degree programs, Arts, Science and Commerce degrees, all three group programs in the 1960s, and then till early in the 1970s had both Philosophy and Theology as required courses for all students enrolled in all these programs. That meant effectively that there was much more philosophy being taught to larger numbers of students in terms of larger numbers as a percentage of student population. Philosophy was taught to 100% of the students when I first went there, and nowadays of course the, number of students who take philosophy, real philosophy as distinguished from just taking the basic logic course which is described and designated as a philosophy course, but I don't consider it's real philosophy... But we had, we had a very large number of-of students in a very small enrollment at Saint Mary's - I think when I first went there it might have been nine hundred, eight-nine hundred - I'm guessing, but we would have had all of them in in the philosophy department so we had lots of students in philosophy. I think the student registration in philosophy now, that is the per unit registration number of students taking courses in philosophy, by individual course registration in 1992-93 is probably, well was probably fewer than 1500...might even have been as low as

1250. Well if we had a student population of nine hundred in the three programs in the early 60's, and they were taking, lets say two or three courses each in the degree program, the Arts students would have taken philosophy in each of their three years. I think Commerce and um, Science in that period of time would have taken philosophy courses for at least two of their three year programs, so we would have had more student registrations in philosophy in 1960 with a student population of about nine hundred than we do now with a student population of, what is it...3500, 4000, if you extract the, the part time students.

So the issue of department size, relative to student population and students in the department is something which has moved in-in the conflicting directions over the period of time that I've been at Saint Mary's.

AB I see. So do you feel that your relationship with your students has changed over that 30 year period?

AM Well the students have changed...students aren't.... ha! Students aren't like they used to be. I don't say that with any great nostalgia but the whole, the whole approach to philosophy now and that I think the students' perception of philosophy at Saint Mary's now is significantly different than was the case 30 years ago. And the basic explanation for that is that our students nowadays, and I think the corresponding reaction of the institution, and there's nothing peculiar about Saint Mary's in this respect, I mean Saint Mary's has reacted to students precisely the same way as virtually every institution of higher learning in this country has reacted in the last 20 years. We offer essentially a kind of supermarket approach to students, meaning by that, that students select their courses, and the portion of a degree program which is a requirement, except in some particular areas - principally certain science programs and lets say accounting or something like that, commerce - in the Arts faculty, students take pretty well whatever they wanna take, and philosophy isn't something that very many students want to take as a general component in their degree program. Whereas in the 60s, you know, an Arts degree had - I'm guessing now - but 15 to 20% component in an Arts degree would have been philosophy, that was all there was to it. So students took philosophy because they had to. I don't say that people took philosophy courses when I was first at Saint Mary's didn't enjoy them or didn't think that they were worth while. Some did, some didn't - but they didn't they didn't enroll in philosophy courses except for those who wanted to do honours work in philosophy. They didn't enroll in philosophy courses because they were enthralled with philosophy, it was just part of the program in the same way as a student nowadays who takes a Commerce degree, would wind up taking some accounting courses. There was no way around that, that's all there is to it, and to the extent that that's the case then the attitude of students towards their faculty and the attitude of faculty towards students as far as philosophy s come in, isn't much different now than was 30 years ago

AB Yeah. So how have the course offerings and academic areas of the departments changed?

AM Well, when we were providing a required program in philosophy then the departmental approach to the discipline was to expose our students. We knew we had them as a captive student audience for three years, lets say, just to talk about the Arts faculty requirements, to give specification, we knew we had them for three years and we saw our job in the philosophy department as showing them what philosophy was all about. So that the typical division of philosophy in to a number of subject areas in to which one can divide philosophy, the students got, well if you would like to break it down in to six one semester courses— because many of the courses then in effect were semester courses although they were always advertised in the in the calendar as full year courses.

But there would be an actual division in the course content so that there would be, lets say two subject areas in philosophy in a given full year course, so that the student who was going the full route with three full courses in philosophy wound up taking six parts of what the department considered to be the slices of the philosophical pie. Slice the philosophical pie in to six parts and each of the terms, students were exposed to-to that particular subject matter. Nowadays students, if they wanted to major in philosophy or honours in philosophy have a wide range of choice and really don't have to take very many courses that might be described as required courses. And students who don't want to major, or do honors work in philosophy, would want to take additional courses in philosophy beyond the first year, can pretty well pick and chose what ever is available.

So we have things that are offered now that no one would ever have thought of offering in the 1960s. I mean, we have a course in feminist philosophy for example—no one ever heard of feminist philosophy in the 1960's. Maybe we should have. Some students take that, not very many . We have a rather full range now of courses in the history of philosophy, which we didn't have 30 years ago because for one thing, the departmental resources were pretty well stretched just giving the basic courses cause since so many of them were required. We even have a course, I'm not sure whether it's been de-listed or not. If it has been de-listed this would have happened only recently. We had a course maybe we still do have a course in Canadian philosophy. Which has never been taught! I put the course in the calendar about twenty years ago—fifteen or twenty years ago and one student enrolled the first year it was offered. And dropped the course after one class. So we never taught it. But there was not, no such thing as Canadian philosophy in 1961.

AB Yeah. Okay, so at the time that you came to the university, it was an all male institution?

AM Yes

AB Then in '68 in changed over, women were admitted on a full time basis.

AM Ye-yeah. Was it '68 that there was a formal change- , so Jocelyn [Drasby] got in what

AB (interrupts) seventy

AM '67 was it

AB Yeah

AM 66 yeah. Yeah the formal change that's right. The formal change came , during the second year of Father Labelle's presidency. He came in 1967 and I'll just throw this in for data you may already have, have run across it but during the first several months of Labelle's tenure, the Labelle presidency, there was active, but brief, and in the final analysis, fruitless activity having to do with the possible affiliation or relationship between Mount Saint Vincent and Saint Mary's. The formal decision to have Saint Mary's become co-educational I think was a function of what I would call the failure of-of-of that particular enterprise. I don't say that had the enterprise not been undertaken, had Saint Mary's continued as indeed it has, as a separate institution from the Mount that there would not have been at some point, perhaps even at—about the same time, the decision made by Saint Mary's to become co-educational but I think the particular historical reality of it becoming co-educational at precisely that time, at least as far as I'm concerned, reflects the failure of some kind of formal agreement between Mount Saint Vincent and Saint Mary's.

AB Why was those negotiations—why were they a failure?

AM Why were they a failure—I have my own views but, I don't have sufficient evidence on which to rest anything more than a conjecture. I think that the –how shall I put it... I don't know I'm not trying to be devious. I'm not trying to be, I'm not—reluctant to let you know what my views are. My hesitancy relates to the fact of my uncertainty with regard to my judgement. Lets put it this way, my guess based on experience is that in order for there to have been a satisfactory, positive relationship form between Mount Saint Vincent and Saint Mary's, as post secondary institutions , one of which , was at the time under the total ownership of-of The Sisters Of Charity, a female, Catholic religious community, and the other at the time under the, what might be called the managership of a male Catholic religious order which was hired by the Archdioces of Halifax. For there to have been a full and complete understanding and-and-and agreement between those two groups, would have taken longer than the, than the time that was available. Things were moving very quickly at that particular time with respect to the formal character of, not only those two institutions but other institutions in the province and indeed in the country. The Sisters Of Charity perceived clearly that the Mount was developing in ways that need all sorts of activity and subsequently they went out of the business. Mount Saint Vincent is no longer the property of the Sisters Of Charity. By the same token , the Archdiocese of Halifax and the Jesuits who were working for them at Saint Mary's, realized that the Saint Mary's of old could not

continue to operate in the way in which it had been for the last series of decades. So changes had to be made, and indeed changes were made very quickly. Saint Mary's for example became, an institution who's board of governors owned the institution rather than the Archdiocese, within two or three years of that time. If the Sisters Of Charity, and the Jesuits, both of them having continued to operate their respective institution had had maybe you know, three to five years to work out some kind of deal between themselves, I suspect that the Mount and Saint Mary's might have come together. But the time given, I'd say the first instance, lack of real experience with respect to the nature of universities and what universities are all about, principally on the part of the Jesuits, and the need for decisions to be made quickly. In my view, that's the basic explanation for why they didn't get together.

See, the Jesuits, particularly in Halifax, had very little experience with the operation of post secondary institutions. They have, well they had at the time, they had Loyola College in Montreal which was a somewhat higher powered operation than Saint Mary's, but basically they ran a couple of high school and the Canadian martyrs shrine in Midland Ontario and they were not very strong on the ground with respect to well qualified competent university, trained and aspiring to university operated personnel. They just didn't have the people.

AB So what effect - how did the nature of the institution change after the change of the administration of the Jesuits?

AM Well Saint Mary's saw itself, and was seen in the community, as essentially a Catholic post-secondary institution, to provide education, post-secondary education in first instance for Catholics in the area, graduates of high school. The character of the institution in the first instance didn't change very much when, when the University Act came in 1970, came in to effect, except that the perception of the institution - both itself, in terms of its administration, and in terms of the public - began to change in a completely... a erroneous statement was made—began to be made at that time— about Saint Mary's. Namely that it had become a public institution. The implication being that previously it had been a private institution.

Well, as far as I'm concerned, the description of the post 1970's Saint Mary's as a public institution is a mistaken description, in this sense with respect to ownership, of the legalities of the institution, and its property, that notion of ownership. It is no more a public institution now than it was prior to 1970. The institution is owned by the Board of Governors. They're not a public body. The Board of Governors is constituted according to the 1970 Saint Mary's University Act, of a very specific group of people, whose positions are guaranteed by—the faculty elects six members of the Board of Governors, the Alumni Association elects - I think, it's four members of the Board of Governors, the student body of Saint Mary's elects four. I mean this isn't the public is it? The institution after 1970, could have continued to do whatever it damn well wanted to do, in the same way as prior to 1970, the university was owned by the Archdiocese of Halifax which meant

effectively that what went on at Saint Mary's was what the Archbishop of Halifax and his Archdiocese and advisors wanted to have go on. The present Board of Governors has complete control of the university as had the Archbishop or the Archdiocese of Halifax, prior to 1970. In what sense is it public? That is, how can anyone give any meaning to the notion that now it is a public institution whereas prior to 1970 it was not?

In this sense and this I think is what most people understand by calling Saint Mary's a public institution nowadays—is public in the sense that it's not exclusively Catholic. Could it have remained exclusively Catholic—sure it could have. Would this have resulted in it being any different now than it was in 1970? Probably it would be a lot closer now to what it was in 1970. With respect let's say to... requirements for degree programs. I think the best thing to do is to try and get some kind of fix on this sort of business is, is to take a look at the curriculum and course requirements at Saint FX in comparison and contrast with Saint Mary's, because you see, Saint FX did not undergo any legal transformation some twenty odd years ago. Would someone call Saint FX a Catholic institution rather than a public institution nowadays—would you call it a Catholic institution?

AB No.

AM You wouldn't— would it surprise you, if someone said that it was a Catholic institution twenty years ago?

AB No.

AM No. Do you think it's much different now than it was then? You may or may not know.

AB No.

AM But do you think that there are - and I ask these questions mainly rhetorically to kinda, try and kinda get a fix on things. Like, do you think there are more required courses in philosophy and theology or religious studies at Saint FX now than there are at Saint Mary's?

AB Probably not.

AM Oh, I think you'd be wrong by that.

AB Really?

AM I think you'd be wrong by that. I know this to be the case in respect to philosophy courses, certainly in the arts, in the Arts degree program

AB Really?

AM So what you're getting there, is some kind of reflected retention of the notion that, when you say it's not a public institution you mean it contains more of a religious denominational aspect. But legally speaking, as I said a couple of minutes ago, Saint Mary's is no different in terms of being public or private than it was a few years ago. The perception, of course, is much different. The faculty have a much different perception of-of Saint Mary's now than was the case in the 1970's. Many faculty members who have come on board in the late 60's, before it underwent this legal change, and certainly who came on board post 1970, see the institution as not a Catholic institution and many have no wish to see it in that fashion at all. So that whatever the reflection was of this perception of Saint Mary's as a Catholic institution prior to 1970, is something that, the institution has had serious problems coming to grips with in the last twenty to twenty five years. How successful it has been, I don't know.

Can I get you a coffee?

AB No I'm fine.

AM Sure, I'm gonna [take] myself one. I told you I would talk too much!

AB No! What changes have you noticed in the student population over the years in regards to—well, we discussed gender, but how about age and ethnic origin?

AM Well, age doesn't reflect itself in-in my perception as far as student body is concerned. Except with respect to what I think is still a peripheral operation, even though there are larger numbers of students involved, that is continuing education, part time students in those areas. Certainly the number of students of, who are registered at Saint Mary's taking courses at Saint Mary's has increased and their age as you would expect is older. Well, the student body when I first came to Saint Mary's was male to start with, and not very varied, you know. Your average students for three or four years, whatever program they happened to be in, were students, whose ages were three to four years post graduation from-from high school—so they were all, they were all youngsters. That's still true. Most of our students are youngsters, most of our students, most of the students whom I see in-in or have seen, I won't see them anymore, in let's say, first year philosophy course. Most of them, the overwhelming percentage of them are students who have just graduated from high school. We get one or two older students, but not very many. So from that perspective no, no significant change. Not change in age.

I think there's a, I think there's a very, to me a very significant difference in the attitude among the majority of students who come to Saint Mary's now and that is the students who are coming out of high school. Um, we have a much broader approach to high school and graduation nowadays than we did thirty years ago. A significantly higher percentage of students go through high school graduate, than was the case thirty years ago. A significantly high percentage of high school

graduates go to university now, than was the case thirty odd years ago. And that fact in itself, it seems to me, largely but doesn't totally explain, what I see as a considerable difference in attitude, between students these days and students thirty odd years ago. And I'm trying to be descriptive here by the way, you may wanna get my evaluation of this later. But being purely descriptive, most of our students at Saint Mary's now—this is true at Dalhousie and Acadia and FX, Toronto elsewhere—see, a university education as simply an extension of high school. And they see it largely, if not exclusively, in vocational terms. They wanna go to university, they want to get a university degree because it is their perception, rounded up some evidence, that persons who have university degrees, get better jobs in the long run, make more money than those who don't. That's an attitude which is much more wide spread now than it was thirty years ago.

AB M-hmm.

AM The consequences for faculty, and for many departments it seems to me, in the university, particularly in the Arts and Sciences faculties, is that your average student isn't really interested in learning that much—they're interested in getting credit. Interested in getting a degree. And anything that-that smacks of... a glint of being somewhat less than utilitarian, tends to turn them off. You have to show a student nowadays that that there's something in it for them in order to attract their interest and keep it, unless you happen to be a grandstand performer. And that's not difficult to do either, but you can't give them very much that they don't think is gonna be worth very much to them. And that makes it difficult to teach some subjects. I don't say that the student isn't right to have this sort of attitude except that the assessment of them within that perspective tends to be very short term. In most of your students, and this isn't cliché, but most of your students who have become reflective at all on graduation and lots of-of students don't, never reflect on their university career. Most of them who become reflective, will concede that, you know they learned something or they thought they benefited from courses A B and C that they thought were dreadful at the at the time they took them. I think most students thirty years ago were willing to you know reserve their judgement on these matters much more so than is now the case. I blame the universities, and here you see are getting a bad judgement. I blame the universities at least as much as I blame students for this sort of thing. Because we pander to this... Essentially it's an illusion that you know you're going to do better in the long run because you've got some kind of vocational approach.

Another thing about the difference in you know students nowadays from thirty years ago, not much a of a difference, but more of a difference now than was the case, and I mean this is more pronounced now than was the case 30 years ago... I find most of my students coming in to the university, introductory first year students have a desperately low opinion of their own abilities. Especially with respect to, what might be called hard subjects. Well they really don't think they can learn very much, they think for example that philosophy's just terribly difficult and-and they can't possibly do very well and they won't wait me out. I used to tell

students regularly first week that you know, they did the course, stayed the course and did the work that they would, they would succeed. But a very large majority don't believe that. So my failure rate has been about the same during my, what is it, forty years I guess, teaching, somewhere between 35 and 40% first year.

AB Hmm quite high.

AM Yeah, well it gets expressed differently. Nowadays they drop the course.

AB More dropping. Okay, something we haven't discussed yet is the unionization taking place. In the 70s, what effect did that have on the , nature of the school?

AM Improved it.

AB Improved it?

AM Yeah.

AB. M-hmm. In what ways?

AM Well, it built in to the institutional system meaningful input from the professional academics that wasn't there before. And thereby it seems to me, eliminated the need for, faculty members on average, rolling this kind of stone up the hill. We didn't need to roll it up the hill after we got terms and conditions of appointment that accepted us as professionals.

AB M-hmm

AM That's why unionization improved the place.

AB M-hmm. Why do you think it came about at that time? Because it was one of the first institutions to unionize.

AM Yeah, it certainly hasn't been the last.

AB No

AM As I remember there were probably only two or three other institutions in Canada had unionized before Saint Mary's did. One of which, I think the first unionized university or college [since] Saint Mary's was a little two-bit Catholic place in Nelson, BC who had a terrible time dealing with the administration, which was quite benighted. Small institution, had no experience with professional academics in any large numbers, and this is what happened at Saint Mary's. The institution got large, relatively large, a lot of new faculty members. And many of whom of course as new, had no particular security, they were young, they were getting started um, it was at the time when all sorts of problems existed in-in larger Canadian and

American institutions as to who was really running the place. Did the faculty run the place or did some how or other, the government or the owners or the Board run the place? I think the situation in Saint Mary's was perfectly understandable at the time. What happened was perfectly normal. The institution, because of the legal change in 1970, became the property and under the direction of a new brand new entity; a Board of Governors, most if not virtually all of whom had no notion of how to run a university. No experience sitting on a Board of Governors, of a university, weren't sure what a Board was supposed to do except they knew that they owned the place. Ah, not unnaturally as a relatively inexperienced group, saw the industrial commercial model as normal.

They knew the difference between employer and employees and they thought, rather simply, that employers gave the orders and paid the employees and the employees took the orders and took their money. Academics never really thought that was the way things should be. There was considerable movement in post-secondary institutions across the country and across the world, certainly the Western speaking world, in the direction of making sure from the faculty side, that that was not the way things should be. And with the relative inexperience, it seems to me um the employers, that is the Board of Governors at Saint Mary's and the relative inexperience of faculty members, because so many of them were new and inexperienced, just fresh out of graduate school... The prospect of there being a confrontation between the two groups was pretty plausible. That's what happened.

And insofar as the faculty as a group - very well organized as a group - came however reluctantly to the conclusion that they could not persuade the Board of Governors to reach an agreement with the faculty as a group, they simply exercised the option of going down the street, applying to the labour relations board and getting a status that required the employer to negotiate. I mean a perfect illustration of this—I was reminded of it oh, a month or so ago when I was cleaning out my office of all sorts of files... You know how these things go, you look at some of them and.. A copy of an article of what was a manuscript of the article before it was, actual copy of the manuscript that I sent to university affairs, which is the Canadian quarterly publication from the universities and colleges of Canada, I think used to be called, can't remember now exactly what the name was. Anyway, this was an article that the editor asked me to write about unionization in Canadian universities. 1971-72 something round in there. And I wrote, the article said—I thought that unionization was premature. Now the two extremes, one - the Board of Governors ran things and the faculty were employees, well that wasn't odd. The other extreme, the union model, I thought that was an extreme. I thought, you know, it ought to be possible for faculty members to negotiate with sensible boards, decent conditions, and there wouldn't be any need to go the unionization route because of course, unionization is a pretty crude model, because all of the legislation for unions is still blue collar, industrial model legislation. But within, I suppose it would have been a couple of years after writing that article we found ourselves at Saint Mary's where we didn't have any op...we didn't think we had any option but to go the crude route, so that's, that's what we did.

AB M-hmm m-hmm

TAPE STOPS HERE RECORDING RESUMES ON OTHER SIDE.

AM My views on that are almost completely anecdotal, because I've never taken the trouble to refresh myself over the period of twenty odd years. As to just what the changes were, and the consequences, the implications of the changes.

AB M-hmm

AM And I think nowadays some people are likely to view that maybe it's time we re-instituted in terms of university curriculum, something that at least moves back in the direction – moderately - of some kind of essential curriculum. I don't think that any move in this direction should be very serious, that is, I don't think that we should go anywhere near returning to an old curriculum where everybody took 25% or whatever of their courses as simply mandatory. But I think in the Arts faculty now, particularly the Arts faculty, many students go away with a degree that isn't worth very much because they haven't taken any courses that really give them very much that they should have. They wind up stupid.

AB Mmm.

AM So what else is new, if you know what I mean.

AB (laughs)

AM You, took a degree in history did you?

AB Is that about all? I think I'm gonna stop this right here.

END OF TAPE