

Oral History Interview with Dr. Michael Larsen
Conducted by Angela Baker, June 22, 1993
Transcription by Jeff Lipton, February 11, 2000

Position: Lecturer, English (1972-74), Assistant Professor, English (1974-78, 1980-81), Associate Professor, English (1982-87, 1988-89), Professor, English (1989-05); Assistant Dean of Arts (1989-91), Dean of Arts (1991-01), Ex-Officio Senate Member (1991-01), Ex-Officio Board of Governors Member (1991-93), Acting Dean of Education (1995-01)
Dates associated with Saint Mary's: 1961-2005

Scope and Content: Major topics include: life at Saint Mary's between 1961 and 1966 when Dr. Larsen was a student, changes in the University over the years, changes in Halifax.

AB: O.K., lets just start off with a little background information. Could you state your full name?

ML: Michael Joseph Larsen

AB: Your date and place of birth

ML: I was born in New York City, January 31st, 1944

AB: Let's go on to the time when you were a student here. Why did you choose to attend Saint Mary's University?

ML: I knew a girl who went to Mount Saint Vincent, who was of the Sisters of Charity, and I was at a Catholic high school, and I found out about Saint Mary's through her and the sisters who taught at the high school, and the priest that taught at the high school I was attending. I wrote away for some information about the school. It sounded interesting. I was interested in going to a Jesuit University and the Jesuits were here, so it sounded unusual. Go to Nova Scotia, so it would be fun to travel.

AB: What dates did you attend Saint Mary's?

ML: I started in 61, and I graduated in 66.

AB: What was your academic program?

ML: It was varied. I began in an arts program, and then after a couple of years switched to a pre-med then I switched back and took English, some philosophy, so I had an academic career that was all over the board.

AB: So how did you go on from Saint Mary's educationally?

ML: After I graduated I went to Dalhousie where I did a Master's in English, where I was accepted and completed a PhD at the University of Toronto. After that I went to teach in New York for a while and while I was here on holiday with my wife who is from Halifax one summer I was talking to a friend. Actually it was my wife was talking to a friend of mine who was the Dean of Arts at the time George Burpee Hallett, who you interviewed and he asked or mentioned to her that there was a sabbatical coming up in the English department and wondered if I would be interested for filling in for a year. So I filled in for a year. For twenty something years now. But that was how I got the job, a complete accident, just happened to be here on holiday when the sabbatical was approved in the department. I thought it would be fun and it was, it's been great.

AB: At the time you were a student, did you reside on campus?

MB: Most of the time. Saint Mary's in those days was probably no more than six hundred students, about half of the students enrolled here were resident students, the rest were what we called dayhops, and residence was a real beehive. This was all the residences by the way. This wing of the McNally building, I lived here for the first three years, and it was all pretty well young men, but each floor had a proctor on it who was a Jesuit or a Jesuit in training. There was some attempt to control, a real vigorous attempt to control. You probably heard of Father Hennessy, he came in 1961 and actually came at the end of his career as a social worker in Vancouver. He was about 6'5, 6'6 at the time, and he came real [unclear]. He had tremendous energy and enthusiasm, he loved the students. So he really became a legend. His name was shortened to "The Hennerly"; he was actually like a mother hen to everybody. He bailed people out of jail, you name it, if you can imagine two hundred and fifty guys between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two and he was sort of the Dean of Students. So it was his ultimate responsibility, and he loved the job. He loved taking care of the students, supporting athletic events. He taught in Theology, Philosophy; he was just everywhere. I don't think he slept for fifteen years, because he was so active, and really left a tremendous imprint on the institution. What you can still see, still recognize [inaudible] have you seen the portrait of Father Hennessy, or in the O'Donnell Hennessy Center portraits. Anyways he had a real impact on certainly a lot of students in my generation right through until his death in 1980 or 81.

AB: So what were the academic programs like in the years you were a student.

ML: The basic academic programs were arts, science, commerce; we had engineering. Very similar to the mix we have today. Education, there was a graduate program for education, but predominantly it was undergraduate. We also had a degree in journalism in those years; I got out of journalism around 1965, but what was really different then as compared to now, was that it was very much a Jesuit institution that was just beginning to introduce a fair number of lady teachers, and it was virtually all young men, until, there was some women, younger women admitted in the mid sixties. Jocelyn Grasp in 1964 and Aileen Carroll around

1964-56. They were both transfer students from the Mount, but they wanted the programs they were particularly interested in. Aileen O'Leary was her maiden name. They were both interested in programs here, not at the Mount. So they got special permission to attend Saint Mary's. Now Father Hennessy and other Jesuits were really supporters in making the university co-educational. It could have or might have helped civilize the guys, and they were probably right. You might be surprised; they were really supporters of it. There was some resistance I think at Mount Saint Vincent because they were probably worried they would lose a portion of their normal student market to Saint Mary's, but it didn't take long before the small number of female students, well now it is more than half the population.

AB: So what effect did the introduction of women have on the institution?

ML: Well it's hard to isolate that one change because it happened at a time when the university was changing in so many other areas as well. The Jesuits formally turned over control to a lay board of governors in 1970. The beginning of tremendous growth of student population occurred around the early seventies. Those two things combined with the fact that Saint Mary's was a co-educational institution increasingly emphasizing higher and higher academic standards. All those things had a tremendous change in the evolution of the institution. Overall I would say the impact has been, that it has allowed us to pursue a number of things. We have been much more concerned with getting female faculty members for example, members of staff, administration as the proportion of the number of female students has increased, which has been good. There had been programs that we have pursued that we wouldn't have normally pursued, like Women's Studies, which has been a benefit to the general student population. As I said it's hard to isolate specifically. It's been part of the maturing developing process of the university.

AB: Lets talk a little more about the classes you took when you were here. What type of format were the classes offered?

ML: When I was a student here, believe it or not attendance was required. We had full year courses. There were no half credits. No point five courses. Everything was a full year credit and attendance almost everywhere was taken by the faculty member. You were allowed to miss no more. If your class met three times a week you were allowed to miss no more than six classes a term or you were out automatically. In the early years, the professor, many of them, particularly the few [inaudible] professors wore the academic gowns that were, that you see people wearing, students wearing and faculty members at graduation. Those were a normal part of academic garb. Not for the students but for the teachers. Not all the Jesuits wore them, but they had their own academic garb. Classes, were, since our classroom size hasn't changed all that much, the classes were very much as they are today in terms of numbers. There was a dress code for the students to go to class or to go to the cafeteria. You had to have a sport jacket and a tie on at all

times. So there was a look of the students was a little bit different. There was a big American influence; many of the students in residence were Americans. The traditional dress of the American student was white sneakers, white socks, khaki pants, jacket, and a thin, ultra-thin tie that was tied once at the beginning of your academic career and was never untied the entire time you were here. That was the traditional look, but the, I don't want to emphasize the fact that there were a few Jesuits, but there were also a number of [inaudible] teachers even in the early sixties. Alan Subbian taught chemistry for example, Burpee Hallett was here teaching English, Ed Flynn was, although in 1961 he was on sabbatical, he was also in the English department. Arthur Monahan came in 1962, Rolly Smith came in 1962 or 63, you know, Rolly Marshall, rather. Numbers increased dramatically in the latter part of the sixties, early seventies. But classes were generally were filled because you know, there was the attendance requirement. That doesn't mean everyone was able to stay awake for the classes, but they were generally there.

AB: What was the workload like?

MB: I would love to tell you in the grand old days we worked day and night, but the workload, it seems to me, it was probably very comparable to what it is today. Not that the demands were perhaps higher, but the Jesuits were an awful tolerant group by and large so it was possible to get away with a fair amount of the usual student excuses for not giving papers on time, but it was very comparable to today.

AB: So describe your fellow students for me? What were their family backgrounds and ethnic origins?

ML: First person I was introduced to when I came into Saint Mary's, I came up to the front doors of the McNally building because there was a big entrance sign and the presidents of the student council was there to greet the incoming students, because there was a load of us coming up from Boston actually. I got on, I flew from New York to Boston where a whack of students got on and came to Halifax. So they knew when a group was arriving and so we were there, actually we came in by bus from the airport. When I flew over the, I had never been to a city airport that was out in the country; I was used to city airports in Chicago and New York. I had no idea, I saw all these trees and I thought is this the city? I was really shocked, but I was only seventeen. So we took the bus in then a cab from the Hilton up, when you come up Inglis street the side of the McNally building had not been completed. The stone facing had not been put on, so there was just the raw concrete with the steel rods projecting for the sides of the building, which looked like porcupine quills and rust coming down the sides. It was a little while before they got the money to finish that side of the building, but it did not make a great impression when you first looked back and saw that side, but of course when you came around the front, it really is a lovely building.

The first, the student council president was from Quebec. Very strong French accent I remember, but his name escapes me at the moment but he was the first fellow I met. Second fellow I met had a very strong Newfoundland accent from St John's. The third fellow I met was from Trinidad and I was from New York and I had my own sort of accent. We were like in [unclear] United Nations trying to understand and speak a little slower to try and understand. The residence had quite a diverse mix of students. There was a lot from the U.S., typically from Boston, Manchester area, Maine, and a few from New York and Pennsylvania, but there was a fair contingent from that group. Lot of students from Trinidad, Central and South America, a few Eastern Europeans but not very many. We even had a student from Montana. Aside from the Canadian students there was quite a large portion of international students and quite a few from Hong Kong. So the Asian, Central and South American were quite a high proportion and they were concentrated by a large [inaudible] residence. The proportion of, how should we say, visa students, was much higher than it is today.

AB: Were you involved in any school societies or organizations when you were a student there?

MB: I'm just trying to remember, it was so many years ago. There was, some of the societies were, the Journal for example, those who wrote for the journal, which I did a little of. There was an Arts society, which I was a member of. You caught me by surprise. Let me think about that. I can't remember the university having aside from its intramural, junior varsity, and varsity programs; there weren't as many students' societies available on campus as there are now.

AB: What was the role of sports at the university when you were here?

MB: In what way do you mean role? What sort of profile did it have?

AB: Yes.

MB: Saint Mary's University had a very strong rivalry with Dalhousie at the time. Dalhousie still had a football team and the dominant power in football in those years was Saint FX. Eventually we finally knocked off Saint FX, but the team we had the most intense immediate rivalry with was Dalhousie and then in the early sixties the quality of the Dalhousie team was declining quite rapidly. There was an intense amount of student interest in every sport. It began with football because it was the first season and I can remember, you know where the computer center is, McNally east. That at one time had been a chapel and beyond that there was a field and then the playing field, the football field. Before the first Dalhousie game which was here, they set up a bonfire out there and sentries were posted around the bonfire so that the Dal students would not come and raid it or knock it over before it was able to be torched and the fire set. This was an operation right out of World War Two, I mean these were serious sentries looking for collaborators and infiltrators and ready to smash heads. It was, the residence was an incredibly close

knit, intense, enthusiastic group and its outlet through sports or whatever was really quite traumatic and you could always count on Father Hennery to try and restrain the fellows on the other side. I mean sometimes he would whip up more enthusiasm than he restrained. He had kind of a way of sparking up all kinds of school spirit. There was a tremendous amount of school spirit, which expressed itself largely through sports. Basketball and football were big ones, but we had great hockey teams too. Yeah, great hockey teams. I was going to say soccer, because we had a lot of good soccer players.

AB: Being a student in the sixties, was there any type of student rebellion or political action going on at the university at that time?

ML: Nothing comparable to Berkeley or the free speech movement, the students of the democratic society. The SDC. Nothing like that. Nothing of that degree. For the American kids, we were in the early sixties tuned to what was happening with the Cuban missile crisis. When that started to heat up, a lot of us left and headed back, a lot of us started hitch hiking or whatever and started returning because we thought we would be called up, and then nothing happened and we came back and continued on with school. In the early sixties we got some of this in the Journal. Those students like Pat Hickey who was a young firebrand from Long Island, saw journalism as a way of shaking up the establishment and so on, but it was still a very conservative, Halifax was very conservative and the student body for all the useful rebellion or whatever was still a fairly conservative group. I mean it was just wild; it wasn't focused in the same way as the political action groups on campus were in the west coast of the U.S.

AB: So how has your role as a member of the faculty and administration of the University changed over time? You were hired as a member of the English department?

MB: That's right, 1971. I was hired on a one year contract, which was renewed for another year, subsequent to that for a third year, at which time the university size had grown sufficiently, it was branching to add positions in a variety of departments and English was one area, so the temporary position I had become permanent and beginning in that time as I had mentioned before, the university had gone from being a Jesuit institution to a public institution. It began a period of rapid growth, Owen Carrigan was the president and the first [inaudible] president and as we went through the initial stages of growth in adding new faculty, we began looking at unionization. I think we had our first union contract in 1974. Saint Mary's was in the forefront. We were growing quickly; we were bringing in people to a variety of new areas faculty, women, men. Anyways, as a product of our rapid growth and a certain amount of tension in the early years between the boards of governors, the university administration saw the university growing and the faculty developing. That led up to the growth, a fair amount of union activity and I think we are the first English Canadian university to have a collective agreement. At any rate it was a vital and vibrant place where people were sorting

out and thinking through the issues that have importance. What is the role of the faculty in scholarships, the relationships between administration and faculty members, the role of department chair person and so on. A lot of that stuff was being debated sometimes quite hotly. So it was pretty exciting and very interesting at times and that was in the mid seventies right through to the eighties. And at a certain point in the latter seventies early eighties our faculty members stopped growing but our student numbers have continued to grow quite dramatically, so we entered a whole new phase of activity where more and more we have had a variety of part-time people working in the university or continuing education programs have expanded enormously. We've developed the China project; we were teaching at the world trade and convention center at Burnside Industrial park; extension centers more and more remote from the campus began to develop. So there seemed to be an explosion of activity, new centers of gravity beginning to establish themselves, for some people in quite a bewildering way. I mean this happened in a very relative short period of time, within a decade Saint Mary's had changed for say 61-71 there was tremendous changes, 71-81 there was again tremendous changes. One way I think that 61-71 was the secularization of the university and the introduction, the development of a co-educational campus, and then in the second decade really was the tremendous outward expansion, the outreach, I think characterized the university. Institutes were set up, collaborate research projects among faculty members here and elsewhere and I think also during the third decade from 81 on, I think one has noticed particularly at Saint Mary's is the enormous increase in prestige, provincially, regionally and even nationally. It has gone from when I was a student here from a small graduate Jesuit run institution, which was very good you know, but a very good [unclear].

AB: O.K. so you were saying in the time you were here it was just a small Jesuit institution.

MB: Right, as I said the total student body was about 600, now we've got, what is it now 8 700 in the fall in the winter session and about 3 200 in the summer sessions. That's another dimension in this last decade, it seems that we've established a tremendous, we've made tremendous gains it seems to me in terms of the national reputation of the university. This is through the faculty, the quality of the faculty, their teaching and research accomplishments have increasingly been recognized so we play in a very different arena. I hope that hasn't, I mean I don't think that's been to the detriment in any way, in fact I think it's been a benefit to the students, but it's meant that we have in some ways, although the sentiments of the university remain the same in attempting to provide a kind of specialized experience to the student. The atmosphere is really tremendously different than when I was a student. That would be inevitable anyway given that I think the population is so different in terms of the age, the distribution. There is not the same international mix, but the age range is quite different now. We have far more mature students, or students pursuing part-time programs, than when I was a student. By and large, most of the students when I was here were between 18 and 22. They were virtually all male and there was little part-time work for example in

Halifax in those times. It just didn't exist and so it was an experience that was not altogether unlike what you might find even today at Saint F.X., or Acadia, which was basically a residential and in the summer there is rural but this wasn't all that different because there wasn't the same opportunities for particularly work and other activities outside of pursuing your degree on very traditional time lines. By the way, when I saw those years, Halifax was a conservative town. The taverns closed at 11:00 pm. They had their last call, I mean there was nothing open on Sundays; virtually it was a very conservative place. So it was very different. How many students do you know who have jobs downtown working in bars or in restaurants? A lot?

AB: Yes.

MB: Well those didn't exist and what clubs were really frequented by students were all illegal after hours. All kinds of things that wouldn't be necessary now.

AB: So what do you think students wish to gain from their educational experience at Saint Mary's? Do you think that has changed over the thirty years?

MB: I think it's changed even over the last ten years so that the students today, the ones that I deal with, have a much higher degree of anxiety about the practicality of all aspects of their education. Where it will lead them in terms of the work world than was the case even ten years ago. It certainly was the case when I was a student, I mean you just didn't worry that much, or think that far into the future what this course will contribute to your employability, or will this program be in terms of employability. Part of that may have been naivety but the fact was certainly when I was a student, college education was much, you were much more confident in, within an unthinking way about where it would take you, than students are now. So there is a heck of a lot more anxiety seems to me among students today about their programs and as I said the practicality of it than just a decade ago.

AB: So what specific academic changes have you seen, since the time you were a student, as well, in the programs offered courses offered, things like that?

MB: Well, it's almost too vast. The program, when I was a student here the bachelor of arts degree was consisted of in terms of number of full courses, 22 full courses. It was a four-year program. You took six in your first, six in your second, five in your third, five in your fourth. Of those 22, 15 of them were required courses. To give you an idea, you had to have four theology courses, three philosophy courses, or vice versa, I can't remember, two English courses, two full courses in English, one math, one history, one either had to have Latin or what was it now, two Latin courses and one French or three French courses, three levels. By the time you fulfilled your requirements the opportunity to major was fairly limited. There was almost no social science. It just, we didn't have the range of courses, there were a few. The depth as far as they were was depth was in the traditional humanities, literature, and philosophy and also with theology because it was a

Jesuit school. Now even within the Arts faculty, we had tremendous growth of the social sciences has changed that, and if you looked at the courses that were available in the literature or whatever, these things have changed dramatically too as well in their scope and nature. Science courses, we had a very modest science program, science and engineering program, so I guess in every way whether it was the content, the range, the diversity of courses and the freedom to choose has changed dramatically. Now that has probably in its own way contributed to the anxiety of students because there is so much opportunity to choose, if you look at the commerce program now. The commerce program when I was a student was not much different from an Arts program, you still had to take two Englishes, you had to have so many theology and so on. So there were accounting and economic courses, but not the full range of finance, marketing, management, all of those. These are all new areas that didn't exist, I mean here. So I think a student who had slept the thirty years and woke up and looked at the university today just wouldn't think he or she were in the same world at all. Intellectually.

AB: How have research facilities at Saint Mary's changed over time?

MB: Well, If were going to talk about the Arts I would say in all universities one of the things that has had a tremendous impact in terms of research has been the computer and this has transformed the nature and the types of research that is done. Even, not only in the social sciences but in what you would consider the traditional humanities as well. So one thing that's happened that seems to me within the faculty is the greater and ever increasing need for enhanced computer resources at the individual faculty level, but also within departments in terms of small dedicated computer labs, which are not only used for teaching but for research. For example the geography department has a dedicated lab for computer assisted graphics and all kinds of courses in individual research. The English department have a lab, which is a general student use lab but it's also an area where they can do certain types of research. The sociology department has a tremendous reliance on computers. They don't have their own computer lab but they have clusters of resources. So that seems to me one area, which has changed. When you mentioned resources did you mean, I'm not exactly sure what you meant besides?

AB: That type of thing, library facilities as well.

MB: Library facilities never keep pace with the demand. I mean, the library is tremendously better now than when I was a student. We had a very small library. There has been quite literally, not literally, but figuratively an explosion in knowledge. Part of the problem with keeping up with that is the cost of journals has skyrocketed. Now to some extent this can be offset as more and more becomes available on line through computer resources, but it is still a concern that the library facilities even with the resources of Novanet will not be adequate for certain types of research that's carried on that is necessary for university professors. It is a real concern, but nevertheless, there has been an attempt to

make the most of the resources that we have either through Novanet, which you know about, and electronic, electronic publications, through things like the ERIC file and these sorts of things. But money is short and so there is a limitation there. One thing that has been well supported at Saint Mary's is, within limits of our resources has been travel for scholarly purposes. For example conferences and scholarly research, so computer resources support through travel, enhancements in the library. These things I think are areas in where Saint Mary's has done a pretty good job, but then it's demanded a lot from the faculty in terms of scholarly productivity, so you have to support those activities if you're demanding them.

AB: So, what do you feel that Saint Mary's has in particular to offer students?

MB: When I was a student or now?

AB: Both.

MB: If I were going to focus on something that seems to me that has survived over the years, that I think that is really valuable for students at Saint Mary's, that even was part of the culture when I was a student, and still exerts an important influence is that as a culture, as a institution there is a very strong commitment to providing students with an opportunity to develop themselves completely as a human being. That we don't ever, I wouldn't say that we don't ever, but there is a recognition that there is more to education than simply providing X number of courses for a person and demanding a certain level of achievement of those courses. Academic life is important, but it is not the whole of the person's experience, or the whole of the person's needs and more here than any other places that I've been, given our size now and our growth and our diversity. I think we've still held on to our recognition that we have to address the needs and the concerns of the student as a whole person. Now that is becoming increasingly challenging as we brought into Saint Mary's an increasingly diverse mix of people. For example when I was a student here we had very few physically challenged students and none that I would know of that would have learning disabilities. At least there would be no way of determining that say a person had a learning disability and needed a certain amount of support. There were no women students here, but we had not made any formal commitment to increasing the numbers of native students or black students or whatever. Now, although we had a part time program, the part-time program was certainly not integrated into the regular student stream as it is now. Now we have just a tremendously wide array of variation of students in terms of population. So it makes the challenge that much more difficult to address them as completely [inaudible], but it's still something it seems to me that we try to do at the faculty level, support staff, administration. There is kind of a esprit de corps and it honestly, when you get to be our size, I mean we are almost at a critical. (Tape stopped)

(Tape starts again) Some point in an institution's growth, there is a strong temptation to bureaucratize everything, to make almost every relationship a matter of formal

procedure and simplified, rationalized whatever as much as possible so you don't have to deal with the messy human interactions, well you can deal, we have this procedure whether it's in student advising or conflict resolution or whatever and we have really tried to avoid that and to provide as I say, as much as possible for a student's complete experience. For example even though we don't have a Fine Arts program here we do run through Layton Davis in the art gallery a very, I think a very good program in the fine arts and the performing arts, the musicians, the dancers, the art exhibits, sculptures and so on. I mean there's something there who can benefit by it. Anyway.

AB: Well that's about all I wanted to cover, unless you can think of anything you would like to add.

Tape ends here