

**Oral History Interview with Dr. Donald J. Weeren**  
**Conducted by Angela Baker, 1993**

Transcription by Jeff Lipton, February 9, 2000

Position: Lecturer, Education (1962-65), Assistant Professor, Education (1965-67), Associate Professor, Education (1967-73, 1977-95), Professor, Education (1995-96); Acting Dean, Education (1964-68 and 1992-93), Academic Senate (1964-69, 1973-75), Dean of Education (1971-76), Senate Quality of Teaching Committee, Chairperson: Senate Scholarship Committee, Chairperson: Senate Library Committee (1980-81)

Dates associated with Saint Mary's: 1962-1996

Scope and Content: Major topics include: the School of Education over the years, changes at St. Mary's due to secularization, the notion of Christianity still reflected at St. Mary's.

Transcript:

AB: Alright, let's start with a little bit of background information. Could you state your full name please?

DW: Donald Weeren.

AB: And your date and place of birth.

DW: August 11, 1935, London, England.

AB: And can you describe your educational background?

DW: I went to boarding school in Wales during the Second World War. I came to North America as a boy went to schools in New York, college in Montreal, graduate schools in the States, and I've been here ever since. I completed my graduate degree.

AB: Where did you complete your graduate degree?

DW: At Columbia, in New York.

AB: Could you describe some of your research interests over the year?

DW: My research, I would say, has been primarily in the area of religious education values education. That's been an ongoing interest right from the beginning. I haven't always been able to pursue it as much as I would like but it's been that sort of a theme that's been running through my years from the doctoral degree on. My dissertation had to do with the inter-religious relations in Dutch education and society. So I was into an aspect at least, of religious education at that point and I've, that interest has not lapsed.

AB: So when did you come to Saint Mary's?

DW: I came in September 1962.

AB: Sixty-two? And what was your position when you first came?

DW: well, I'm not sure what the rank was, whether I was a lecturer or assistant professor or what they called it, but anyway, I was a professor in the, at the time it was called The School of Education. So I would teach in the School of Education.

AB: Okay, let's see. So the size of the university was a great deal different then it is today.

DW: I'm not absolutely sure of the exact size, but I think it must have been in the 500 range, something in there.

AB: So how has the education department changed over all those years?

DW: We've become considerably bigger. I mean at the time, I think we were about 4 professors, something in that order, and some, some part-time. Even the number of part-time people helping us would have been, I don't know, perhaps three, four, something like that. We'd be that small. The BA-Ed classes when I first came here were, I think, somewhere as small as 14 or 15. I think they may have ranged up into the low twenties and so forth, but the masters program was on-going at the time and rarely would there be a full-time student. It was just part time, where as now we have quite a contingent of full-time students. The total numbers would have been quite modest compared to right now proceeding, those proceeding toward degrees. We probably have between 2 and 300. I would guess at the time, maybe we were talking about perhaps 25, 30. Anyway, it was small. I'm not sure of the exact numbers.

AB: How was the curriculum different in the early year then? The academic program?

DW: Well, in the B-Ed program, there was less practical work than there is now. We had a month, an aggregate of a month in schools, or 4 weeks. I think it was split 2 weeks in the fall and 2 weeks in the spring whereas now we have double that. Students are in the school for 8 weeks, and they also go into school in September, what we call early school experience, which is not a fulltime, but each week 5, 6 hours in schools doing what's going on. Playing the role of a teacher's aid, up to a point. In that sense, practical contact with the schools has gone up. We've also had, at the time there was an arts elective in education. People actually took one of their courses in the arts faculty, but since then that's been dropped and all our work is in the faculty of education. There's more work in methods that there used to be at the time. More has been added to the program. Not that much has been taken away from the program which is one of the problems we're now facing, that we've got the same length. It's basically a 7, 7-1/2 month program. More has been put into it. For instance, the province required a special course on special education. All of that has been added in, and we packed more in, so we haven't really taken much out.

AB: So it's an intensive a...

DW: Yeah, it's a very, very intensive program. At the master's degree, I would say perhaps our program has become a little more focused than it was then. I think it was perhaps broader in its content then. I'm not sure that when you really come down to it, underlying changes in titles and so forth of course is whether there is all that much difference. Obviously the content has been updated, but I think it's still making people look critically at underlying issues in education. The things that really matter. Or at least trying to come to grips with those. We have still, courses in administration and supervision. We had courses in those areas, I don't know if they were the exact courses we have now in terms of titles, but we had those courses at the time. People were looking at the practicalities as well, not just theory. I think you could say it was intended to try to come to grips with the important issues. One recent addition that is quite significant is the addition of the Teaching English as a Second Language Centre. The TESL Centre downstairs in the building. That has had quite an impact on the program because now teachers can come and specialize in that area in their master's program. So that would be a very significant change. Through the addition of faculty over the years, the master's offerings have been extended and expanded. This relates perhaps more to the underlying concern that it look critically and fairly deeply at educational issues. That can express itself in a diversity of ways. For instance, we have had, for a good many years now, a colleague on faculty who's a specialist in science education. When I started here, we didn't have that. We have colleagues with special competence in the teaching of English, for instance. So, those would be, I suppose, would make really, for fairly significant expansions, or at least the spread or the scope of the masters program.

AB: Have requirements for entrance into the programs into the education department changed over the years?

DW: Yes, I would say at the B-Ed level, laterally, in the last half dozen years, or perhaps a bit longer, it's become a very competitive business. People find records are being turned away. It just seems to be so much demand and the number of places, while it's much greater than it was when I started, still is, there's a ceiling on it. There's a quota so we, let's say we admit, in the last year we had 56 B-Ed students, I think there would be close to 500 people bidding for those places. You can get an idea of the competition. In that sense the requirements have gone up. I had a feeling though, that Saint Mary's always was committed to some kind of sound academic stance in the admission of B-Ed students. Back in the days of, I may be mistaken but, it seems to me that in those days we said there should be a 70% average to gain admission, rather than a mere pass or something like that. Now, how faithfully we stayed to that, or how lax we became, those are other questions. I don't think there was a sense that education was simply an open door for anyone who had an undergraduate degree.

AB: What differences have you noticed in the student population itself over the 30 years?

DW: In the student population.

AB: In terms of gender, age, ethnic origin...

DW: Well, you'd really have to look at the date, the enrolment date to really, but I think we definitely had women in the education, in the School of Education when I came here. Even though it was an all male institution, our classes operated at the end of the day. So they were officially evening classes. There was no reason to keep women from attending evening classes. So we had, we had female students back in those early classes both in the master's degree and the B-Ed degree

AB: What were the...

DW: Well the number, this is see, to get that you'd really have to go and look and then the facts would speak better than my recollection. I'm taking a guess now. I would say that the balance was, favoured males. That there were more males that were, was not evenly balanced, whereas now in the B-Ed program, you would have more females than males. I suspect that's the reverse of what it was then. We are gender imbalanced right now, but in favour of females at the B-Ed level. At the masters, it's hard to say. I would, not sure what it must be. I would say it would be pretty well balanced now between the two. At the time though, there were definitely more male students. The proportions may have changed, the concept has not changed. The concept, at least in the school of education, both genders were equally entitled to pursue studies here and were given equal treatment. I don't think that's ever been an issue in education. In the rest of the university, it was an issue because they had to get over the, how do you admit day students who are female. The policy was that it was a, basically a male institution.

AB: So what changes did you see after 1968, after women were introduced to the day classes? Did that make any difference?

DW: You can see that it wouldn't have made a great difference because we had them, they were part of the School of Education all along. Now, of course what it would do, it might have contributed to the changing of the proportions as female students went through the undergraduate programs, while that probably would increase the tendency for them to continue in a B-Ed program. See, you had the maybe higher amounts and so that's, there was an impact. In the day-to-day operation, I would say, I'm not, I can't think of any real, real impact that that would have had.

AB: So when you first came, it was a Jesuit administered institution.

DW: Yeah.

AB: And then in the 70s, it changed over and became secular. What changes did you notice, if any, in the institution?

DW: I think I'd correct you a little bit on the use of the word secular. I think basically, I know what you're after. Secular, in some uses of the term if we mean an institution that avoids or bypasses, or declares itself, not interested in, or that it's whatever, things having to do with religious aspects of people's education and so forth. I don't think Saint Mary's even

now has gotten quite to that point. There are certain linkages with its background. I mean, just the Act, the Charter still says it's intended to give particular emphasis to the Christian values and tradition in higher education. That's in the Charter. You might say it's just rhetoric in the Charter, but that's, I think still has some, some guiding force. I think the role of the chaplaincy at Saint Mary's is probably a bit different from the role of the chaplainry at secular institutions. Now, never the less, in going public, I think Saint Mary's has shown a, a continued or, see I'm guessing. The going public accelerated or confirmed certain trends that were already at work. I think, whether, if Saint Mary's had, let's say Saint Mary's had not gone public. Would it have retained the same kind of religious character that it had when I came here? I have some doubt about that. It's hard to, it didn't happen that way so that that question can never really be answered. I think there was a certain secularization process at work in society, in universities. As the university expanded, it had to, and there was an under supply of university teachers in those years of rapid expansion. It perhaps, had to be less attentive than it would have been under other circumstances to people's religious outlooks and so forth. If they were seen to competent, whatever it was, chemists, or psychologists, they might be hired whereas, in an earlier time, I think there would have been a closer look at what their own background was in terms of their attitude toward these, the matters of, the importance of religion and education and these things. Even there, one has to be really careful because when I came to Saint Mary's, there were already on staff or at the very time I came on there were people from other world religions, Hindu, Muslim, who were fully accepted as colleagues and fully welcome. I don't think the university ever had a closed-door policy or a very protective atmosphere. I don't think that, at least in my time here, I don't know about before my time, I don't think that existed. But still, even, I think the people of other faiths who joined the faculty, came with the understanding what this was, chiefly, catering to a Christian group and drawing from a Christian tradition or even a catholic tradition. That played itself out so that in the early days, just to give you one example, the Patronal feast at the university December 8th, was an important holiday which was celebrated with a liturgy and then we all had lunch together or some kind of a brunch. Anyway, it was a festive day, which was seen as important. After all, it was the name day of the university. But now, that day is just a total zero, as far as, I mean, people stay home and they cram for their exams, or whatever they do. They don't do anything. It doesn't have any real meaning now. Sometimes some of us have made little attempts to try to revive something and have a gathering. We've had some nice gatherings, but we're talking about small, small groups getting together for a discussion or a liturgy and then maybe some food or whatever. It's been a minor event whereas before, it was a university wide thing. That's just one example. I could give you others. The practise for instance of opening classes with a prayer. That was quite standard when I came here. As far as I know at least I was certainly encouraged to do that. That's gone. There were a few changes in that regard.

AB: When you were hired yourself, do you feel you were examined in that way?

DW: No, but I wasn't examined, but I think the references, I mean, I went to a Jesuit school, Montreal, for my undergraduate degree. The people there would have known the people here so I was pretty sure that father Stewart must have talked at some point to some of

my former teachers there. There was a kind of an informal network and they would have been satisfied. There was no examination that I was aware of in that regard. How it would have been with the non-Christians who were hired, the Muslim, the Hindu, I suspect, I'm just guessing that you'd have to talk to them. I suspect there would have been a chat with them to find out if they would be comfortable here and whether they could see themselves operating in an environment that was not their own. At least from a religious point of view. Maybe there would be some sort of meeting of the minds. At no point did I ever get a sense, either from them or from myself, that Saint Mary's was a place that discriminated let's say. In the bad sense of discriminated. I think it had to discriminate otherwise it wouldn't have survived, in picking the people who came here, but not in a narrow or a bigoted sense. I don't think that was a part of the institution in my time anyway.

AB: In the 1970s a faculty unionization took place. What effects do you think that had on the school?

DW: Unionization was in a sense, a confirmation of oppositions that were already there. It didn't come out of the blue. It, there was, there had, in the years preceding unionization, there were faculty-administration conflicts or tensions. In a sense the unionization sort of confirmed those, and almost said these are part of the reality and we may as well structure them and enshrine them in a collective agreement and play it by the rules, and act in accordance with the labour relations board. In other words, it all became sort of regularized, legitimized, and so forth. I suppose in some ways that's good. If people are not going to get along in a kind of partnership basis, well then you better regulate the relationship in some way. So, I don't see that the advent of unionization itself that was not, that itself did not make that much difference. But, it, through this regularization that I've alluded to, it has maintained over, since it came in, maintained a relationship of, well a certain adversarial relationship between faculty and administration. There's a certain they-us ethos I suppose and we live with it. It diminishes or increases depending on the personality involved, but it's there. The collective, a lot of the life of the institution does revolve around the collective agreement.

AB: Through all the changes in size of the university, have you noticed any changes in the size of your particular classes and responsibilities?

DW: There have been changes but I think they've been cushioned in the case of education. The, in this sense that through the way work has been assigned and sections have been divided, all of this over the years, by and large we have not been a faculty that has had sort of huge classes. There may have been particular years where people were combined in a single section and so forth but over the longer haul, I think you'd have to say that our class size has been probably 25 and under. That kind of class size. Now, as I say, this could have happened differently, it could have been that with the increase in numbers one year, I discovered, I had it confirmed the other day, we had about 160 full-time B-Ed students. As I said a moment ago, now we have 50-60 or so. We had a very large group moving through. It could have been that in those bumper years, the decision would be right. You've got 160, put them in a big room and lecture to them, at least in a number of

the subjects, but whether we ever had that in a given year, I can't recall exactly. As I say, the prevailing pattern has been that no, that does not suit our objectives as a teacher training faculty and we've got to get into smaller groups. That's been the pattern of having a rough ceiling of somewhere in the 25 range. I've had classes with, in recent years with 30. There's one class where all the students were gathered together, and I taught it last year, we had 56 in the class. It isn't as though we don't have bigger classes, but if you are trying to look for your typical education class, it would not be, I would say, in excess of 25, 26, something like that.

AB: So do you feel that your relationship with your students has changed at all over time?

DW: No, not really when you come down to it. I think that we went through the difficult years in the early 70s where there was a more adversarial relationship with students. Where students would, there was, where students really felt that they were disenfranchised and they needed more power, and they wanted representation. There was one point where our faculty council, that's the equivalent of the departmental meeting, was 50% students, 50% faculty. The students were put on it; the number of students was adjusted or made equal to the number of faculty. That's just a little indicator of the kind of expectation that was there, and was there on the part of many faculty too. They didn't just march in and take over. Faculty was thinking this was the democratic way of doing it, and so forth, and so on. At times. I think the student were more adversarial then they are now, although even today, you get, either it's a little group, or sometimes a bigger group, and they say we are not satisfied with this or that. I don't think that it's totally, that when I say they were more adversarial in the early 70s, I don't think you can say that they're just sheep now or fodder. There was a period where it was; there was a greater consciousness of student power. That, I can recall some incidents where that was manifested.

AB: Have you noticed a difference in the student's family backgrounds, or geographic origins over time?

DW: I wouldn't, we still have mainly Nova Scotian students. Although, there I have to be a little careful. We have, I mean back when I started, I'm pretty sure we would have had exclusively Nova Scotian students in the B-Ed, let's take the B-Ed. Whereas, on and off in the last few years, some, there's been a considerable contingent of Ontarian students. Partly, that's due to the fact that they have a hard time getting into education programs in Ontario so they look across the country and so forth and so on. So that has changed. I think this past year was a bit more back to the traditional one. Has there been a change? I'd have to say yes on reflection, in the sense that there is a greater mixture of non-Nova Scotian students. I'm not sure that that has really changed the predominant character of the student body. Likewise, in graduate programs, we have now a noticeable contingent of foreign students for instance. People from Africa or China or whatever. Numerically again, compared to these hundreds of people in the Master's program, that's pretty small. In the alumni list, I looked at the alumni list, it had a thousand names on it. There's a longer alumni list, but let's use that as a, say that's a random sample. Four percent recently had addresses outside Canada. So, you're not talking about a big number. So, that's the addresses of the alumni. Sixty to seventy percent had addresses in Nova Scotia. So you

can get a little bit of a sense from that. But there is more, there are more of the non-Nova Scotians. Family background, I don't have a real feeling that there's that much change. We've got people of probably the spectrum of family backgrounds. I think we probably have more minority student than we had. We've had, like this last year, we had 2 black students and that would probably be typical in the B-Ed class. Two, three, something of that kind, for the last maybe dozen years or something like that. Whereas, in those very earliest days, I don't recall having one. Yet, there was, I'm pretty sure there was a black lady at the masters degree early on. Probably if you were to follow that one up you'd find a shift as well.

AB: Well, those are about the areas I wanted to cover unless you can think of any other changes over time, or events that stand out in your mind.

DW: No, I guess for me the big area of interest, and to some degree concern is in the area of character education and values education. I think we've taken more of a hand-off policy on that. There's a lot of, going back to the earliest years that I can recall, and I wasn't really, I was not one of the Jesuits. I wasn't a resident on the campus and I hadn't been through residence life here, but you got the impression that residence life was monitored. Of course there was, would be the pranks and the escapes and the windows open at night so someone could sneak in and out, and all of these sorts of things would go on. The notion was there, that somehow or another, the university had some sort of responsibility to see that people behaved in certain ways or avoided certain types of behaviour or what have you. That would be one, one way in which I think the university has rightly or wrongly, I'm just describing things as, sort of stepped back, and said. It has to be, things have to be pretty far reaching before the university will step in and say we can't tolerate this. A lot can go on in relation to drinking, sex, and what have you, before the university will intervene in any way. There's that. Another thing is I think the university, even though I mentioned earlier, on. I said it has not become a totally secular university. I don't think it has done as much as it could have in supporting that charter to give special emphasis to the Christian tradition and values in higher education. It's very tricky stuff because you're getting involved with potential charges of being, discriminating in the bad sense and so forth. It's easier in a way, to step back from it, but I don't think we had the focus on that. We have instituted values on campus which, one sign of an interest in that area. I don't know that it has been sort of put on centre stage to say that here's something that is special about Saint Mary's. This is Saint Mary's education, does this and that. It's very difficult though because there are many things going on, on campus and through campus that help people develop into caring and considerate and generous people. Projects to help this or that group. Saint Mary's racket with the handicapped is probably above average. I don't see it all negatively. These things have been going on, a greater respect in Saint Mary's along with other institutions, tries to show greater respect for women. There's so many things going on. Maybe the focus, or the sense of making this more explicit and clear and maybe drawing on some kind of philosophical underpinnings for it, that's been I think weak so that you, Saint Mary's reflects now, many of the fine things that are going on in society. I don't think it's making a unique contribution to say that here is something that, drawing on our tradition, we can offer to this point of view, an enrichment of it, a strengthening of it. That I think has, to me, and I know this is a



personal view and you may not hear it from anybody else, but to me that's the disappointment of the last three decades. That has taken place. All is not lost. There are lots of these other very good things going on and looking at it from someone with a particular faith perspective, I would say God is doing his work here. You can't second-guess God but humanely speaking. I would say there should be more. I was on the committee on the future of the university some years ago. I ended up having to give a minority report because I couldn't persuade my colleagues on the committee to highlight or to give some recognition or more recognition to the area of values and how religion might contribute to values. I ended up issuing a short minority report which was attached to the main report. That's symptomatic. These were all people, fine people, people of goodwill, handpicked people across the university, the ten of them, the president. These were not, these were people with Saint Mary's interest at heart and everything so I have a lot of respect for them. It was curious that that's what the outcome was. I was the odd man out and had to take that route which, that I think is perhaps a good symbol or a symptom of what I'm talking about.

AB: Okay, that's great.

Tape ends here