

Oral History Interview with Dr. Cyril Byrne
Conducted by Hansel Cook, March 10, 2006
Transcribed by Heather Zinn, July 2006

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Tape 1:

Hansel: It is March 10th, 2006 and we are doing an interview with Dr. Cyril Byrne. Dr. Bryne, if you could state your date and place of birth, and your full name?

Cyril: Well, I was born Cyril Joseph Byrne, at least baptized that, after I was born, the 6th of August, 1940. And I was born in Corner Brook, Newfoundland. And my father and his people had been on the west coast of Newfoundland for a while; in fact his mother was a Gushue, and the Gushues had been there from ancient, ancient times, and my mother, on her side, she was a Wade, from the east coast of Newfoundland; Conception Bay, a place called Kitchuses, which nobody seems to be able to recognize, even then, even in the '40s. If I said I was going to Kitchuses: "where is that?" But it was a place that the Wades had settled for, at least at that time, 200 years. I don't think much more, I think they just moved down from the settlement and picked up territory there. So, that's the background, two big families.

Hansel: Could you spell the name "Gushue"?

Cyril: G-u-s-h-u-e.

Hansel: Thank you very much.

Cyril: I'm sorry, there are Gushues, but her name was not Gushue, her family name was, there were Gushues mixed in there, but her name was Buckle. And the same thing was true about the Buckles, they had been a long time on the coast, the first of them came there around the end of the 18th century and where they were was in the southern Labrador, and they came down to the west coast of Newfoundland the turn of the century, 1900 roughly. So that was the mistake I made, because I was so pleased with that, the Gushues were roughly connected with the man who just won the gold medal (laughs).

Hansel: I know a lot of your education was done in the U.K. and Ireland and at Oxford. Can you maybe talk a little bit about how you ended up going over there?

Cyril: Well, my first university was St. Dunstan's in P.E.I., which was great, marvellous, I really enjoyed it and I still have good contacts with people from there. Ken MacKinnon, who taught here much roughly the same period with me, was one of the people who was there. When I finished that, I went to Dublin and UCD, University College Dublin, I was there two years and got my M.A. from there. And that was an incredibly good experience, in fact I met a couple of people here

recently, one of whom is Jim O'Brien, a doctor here, and he was -- I didn't know him until I came here, but we talked back and forth about experiences we had because he was ahead of me in terms of time, but we were there, all sorts of things had happened, it's just real fun to have him talking about the experience there. UCD now is not where it was, UCD at the time was right in the centre of Dublin, not far from the river, or from Trinity College, which is where he went. Ireland was a very, very different place than it is now. It was, the whole country was not as rich, money-wise, now it's got more money than we have. But it was a great experience. And I did Anglo-Saxon there, was one of the chief things that I did, and one of my -- it was Father Dunning who taught that, but there was some very, very fine instructors there and I had an experience there that was very quite interesting. When I came there I had never touched Anglo-Saxon, and the first day in class, actually we were given -- now these people who were in my class had done Anglo-Saxon I think, for two years, they'd done two courses in it, I hadn't done anything, and I was scared because it is a tough looking language. So we were given a piece from the beginning of Bede, and to work on that for the weekend. So I took a dictionary, and my grammar and paper, and I spent the whole, whole weekend, just all the time hanging on this thing to see if I could get it roughly, and I bought back a very, very rough translation. Anyway, on Monday when I went to class, Dunning sort of went around and said, "Who'd give us . . . Mr. Byrne we'll leave you aside because you've just come in." I said, "Well, I've got it . . ." "Oh well, go ahead," so you see. So I went ahead, and he had gone around a number of people afterwards and asked them and they didn't do it, they didn't work on the weekend. So I had done it and he said, "Oh, that's marvellous, absolutely marvellous, very interesting." I get this thing roughly, very, very roughly done, and a friend of mine, some years later, was in that class and said Dunning would come in and people would be complaining that it was too tough, the thing he'd given them, and he said, "I had a Canadian in here and in one weekend the man had learned Anglo-Saxon perfectly!" [laughter] But, yeah, Dublin was a great experience, always, everything we did was fun.

When I left there I came back to Canada, and I taught at Mount Saint Vincent. I was asked, well first I taught in the school in Newfoundland, and after that, school days were over, now before that actually, I had a letter from one of the Sisters out there because they were having some difficulty getting someone to teach a group of MAs they had, who were coming up from Boston, from a college they had down there, and they wanted someone to teach Chaucer, that was another thing that I had done when I was in Ireland. So I said "Yes, I wouldn't mind doing Summer School." So I went to do the Summer School there and I taught the Summer School and then, as I was doing it, they offered me a year there, and I took the year, I liked Halifax, hadn't been here really for, I'd been here but not for any length of time, and as I was finishing there an old professor of mine from St. Dunstan's was looking for someone to go over there for the next year, so I went over there and had a great year over there as well. And in that year, I won a scholarship to Oxford, so I went to Oxford for another two years, and when I was finishing that year there, I thought I'd really like to go to university college in

Canada, and I did my PhD at university in Toronto, the University of Toronto. And when I was finishing there I had an offer of a job there; I wasn't sure how it would end up. I had worked actually during the summers at CBC as an announcer, and that was great, a lot of fun, but I didn't really see it as a place that I'd like to be, although a very good friend of mine ended up having a great job there at the CBC, and I really wanted to come East. In fact, to tell the truth, my preference would have been for Newfoundland, but there wasn't anything going, and I thought, well, if I could get something in Halifax that would be just as good.

So I applied for a job here, and there were, I think, three of us who were applying that year in 1970, and came here. I didn't actually finish off my thesis for my degree until 1975. But it was great to be here at the University, because it was just beginning to become a more secular, I guess, university than it had been -- all along it had been a Catholic institution, for years, which would have been fine for me, I'm basically a very firm Catholic myself, but I'm also secularist, and that was a great thing, it was moving out and opening up. So I've been here from 1970 to the date we're in now. I finished off in August of last year, 2005, and it was a great period and one of my big interests was Irish Studies and the older English, Anglo-Saxon, Middle English, especially Chaucer, and the literature that surrounded him, and I loved Shakespeare as well, in fact when I was in Oxford I didn't do much more than, I didn't pass much more in time than 16th- 17th-century. I did some 18th-century stuff, but basically, that early, early period that we did over the two years, and it was great. And I was interested in that, but there were people here who were interested in it as well, and teaching it, and over the period of years I taught a lot of the introductory courses in English.

I remember one year, I'm not quite sure which year it was, we had a really bad storm, class I think started at 8:30, if I'm correct, yes, it was 8:30, and I didn't live too far from here, so I came down in this storm and there were five or six people there, and I said, well, they came out of the residence here, and so we might as well do, so we did the class and I said, "By the way, did you see anybody else coming here from away, from outside?" They said, "We're from outside." I said, "You are?" Nobody came from inside the University, these five or six people were from the Dartmouth side and they struggled their way to get over here, it was quite funny. But that was in the early part of the years.

And Ken McKinnon and myself were quite interested in the whole of the culture of the Atlantic area: Newfoundland, P.E.I. and Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and we struggled actually for a couple of years to try to get people, people didn't seem to be interested in doing anything in this area, it's hard to believe but it's true. We finally got the Atlantic Canada Studies program running and the funniest thing in that, I guess, was that I had to face a committee in the University about that so that, were they going to approve it or not approve it? And one of the people, whose name I won't mention, sort of said, well, one of the courses we were offering, which was a science course, was nonsense. He said, "Where did you get this?" It was almost if he was accusing me of lying about this course. So I said, "Well, the man who has set it up for us, I can get him. He said, "Well get him

now.” Now it was about 4:30 or 5:00 on a Friday, now how many people are here at that time? And the man, whose name I can’t remember now, it was a Spanish name, and he had done this for us, and I went outside and went “My God, we’re not going to be able to get him,” and I phoned -- he was in his office. He was in his office! I said, “Could you come down and meet a meeting and tell them,” and he came down, of course, and just cut down all of the opposition, and we went through, and for the first couple of years I was chairman of that, and then after that, I thought, well, where I really want to get, and where I really need to move, is into Irish Studies. It was my favourite area, it was an area that tied in with the literature of a lot of the area as well, and I thought, well, maybe we’ll be able to raise enough money to get something going here.

And so I started at that, and the government at that time was offering these amounts of money for the setting up of Chairs, and we tried to get the money here, and of course we were -- at that stage there were two other universities which were offering something like what we were going to offer in Irish Studies, so we had -- it was a tough place because of the fact that, now Ottawa was looking at an Irish Studies, but they called it “Celtic Studies,” I think, was the name they had on it, and Saint FX had something like “Scottish Gaelic,” as their thing, so I had to put this, because Saint Mary’s itself was very heavily an Irish place, and it was what I wanted anyways, so I went after Irish Studies. Of course you had to get in and try to find the politicians who would help you out to get the money, and Gerry Reagan, who had been the Premier of the Province, he and his aide became very, very helpful. He was at one point, head of the department where the money came from, and he promised that we would get it. It was \$300,000 and nobody had gotten \$300,000 at that time. So what we pushed for was that, because, I think in terms of our application we were, I think, five or six down from the top, and people here were saying, you’re never going to be able to make over that, you know they’ll give these ones first. But Gerry was able to push us up to the top, but there were lots of people, you know the way politics will work, he got, just as soon as that was done, he was shifted out of that department into something else, but he was very pretty strong in the relation to be had with the man who was now head of the place, and he got a promise from him that he would get the Chair, and we had a man who came down here, there were things you had to have, like for instance, the University library, they wanted to have a look to see what was in the University library that would back it up, but we had very little, but I arranged to come down and I got books down here to shut them aside. And the man who was doing the business, he was a French-Canadian, and I spoke French, so we talked French, and he his English was probably not as good as my French might have been at the time, but we had a great session when he was here, and he went back and he recommended us, that we had a good library for this, when in fact we didn’t. There was a fair bit of, some people may call it lies, that were being passed back and forth. (laughter)

So at that stage things were looking good for us, but we needed to get, if they gave us \$300,000 then we had to base it with \$300,000, and at that time I had talked to the President about it, and the President was very, very kind on it, but we

had no \$300,000 laid at the time. But at the time, he had gone down, I think it was the Spring Break, and he and his wife had gone down somewhere, and he wasn't on campus anyway, and the AVP at the time was very, very unwilling to make any decisions on money. And so I needed to get this decision done, right now, otherwise we would be shipped out and that would be the end of it. So I said, "Look, phone them up, phone the man." "No," he said. I said, "Phone them." So he got on the phone with him and he said, "Of course! I'm going to put \$300,000 into it." So that was it, and in the Fall of that year we were granted the Chair, and this is the twentieth year of the Chair, and twenty is an important date in Irish, [phrase in Irish], "twenty years of growing", rather than twenty-five, so this is a great year.

Hansel: I had no idea.

Cyril: For us, yes. [phrase in Irish] And from that point on, we had \$600,000, and as you probably know yourself, \$600,000 is not enough, because you're living on the interest from that; what was that going to produce in terms of hiring someone? Not much. So, the University of course has been very, very helpful. But, I went to the President at the time, and I said, "Look, we're going to have to start raising money for this Chair." So we started. And we had great luck; I can't imagine more luck in terms of raising money. I have never raised any thing, except begging money from my parents at some stage, and I had no knowledge about raising money. One of the people here, who eventually came into the thing, was Don Keleher, and Don was a marvellous guy. He ran that department, gathering finances, and he worked with me and other people, but just basically the two of us put these things together, and the President as well was very helpful.

We had a dinner; we had two dinners, for raising money. To give you an idea of how this stuff worked: the first one was run by the President of the Bank of Montreal because we had already gotten from him before he became the President of the thing – he was Irish – and we said, "We'd like you to put some money in it." And O'Hara, I think the man's name was O'Hara, he had been the Secretary to the Prime Minister of Canada at the time, and actually he had had good contacts with Saint Mary's and actually had graduated from some part of Saint Mary's, in any case, and he's still living, and I've in fact talked to him only last month about a new fundraising thing I'm trying to get moving. But at the time, we went up to the Bank, and they said they would have a dinner for us, and he organized it, and each person at the dinner was going to pay a thousand dollars. And at that dinner, we raised \$92,000. And a very dear friend, and a relative of mine was married to a guy who was the chief, I suppose, man in Newfoundland of money, Donovan (?). And Donovan (?) was a great, great friend of ours and we talked to both of them, and she said "You're going to set up a dinner for them. We are." So they were going to rival the Bank of Montreal in Toronto, and they had a dinner in St John's at his house, I forget now exactly when the date was, probably '92, '93, anyway, we set the dinner up, well they set it up down there, but we were just making contact back and forth as to how this would be done, and it

again it was a thousand dollar a place just to come to this dinner. Well, it was an incredible dinner! I mean Newfoundland is Newfoundland, I'm a Newfoundlander, I mean it was absolutely just incredible, but when it was all over, \$72,000 from that one.

So those were the two large things that got money to us, but there were people who gave money to us, organizations, individuals -- there's a lady, I think she's still living, she was a 100 years old, and again, I can't remember the name, but she came here. Actually, I had led a group to Ireland about 1985, '86, a very dear friend of mine, Dick Walsh there, and I, wanted to bring Newfoundlanders. He had been over from Ireland to Newfoundland and found the place so Irish, just so much like Ireland, that he fell in love with the place as much as I had fallen in love with Ireland and we were great friends. So, we said we'll bring people over, so we had a group of about 50 people from the Atlantic region, they weren't all from Newfoundland, there were people from here, a couple of people from New Brunswick, and we went over. It was an incredible, incredible trip for those people. They organized so much beautiful stuff over there, they had a tour of the rivers that run down towards Waterford, we had a special mass in the cathedral there because that was the 200th anniversary of the first bishop of Newfoundland, and I had done an edition of his work and the work of two other bishops that had followed him there, so it was a good connection with them, and the bishop was a marvellous man, a very, very lovely person. In fact, one of the things that happened that, which if you told Catholics they wouldn't necessarily believe it, but we had only one Protestant who was in the group, and they had this mass and everyone is going to Communion, and there was a little gathering before mass was to start and she was talking to the bishop and they were having a great conversation, and she said, "I will be at mass, but I'm not Catholic and I won't be able to go." And he said, "You won't? Well, you come to me," he says "and I'll give you Communion." And she told that story to people, that she was Nova Scotian, that she had been given Communion by the bishop, which of the time it was a very, very unusual thing.

But it was a great period that we had during that trip in Ireland. And there was a woman who came to us, she wasn't part of the thing, but she asked me one day, she said "Can I come to some of these things?" I said, "Of course, come along." I said, "Where are you staying?" She was staying at one of the hotels; I said, "Well, just come down to our gathering group and be part of it." She was from Ontario, and I think it was her and her sister. Anyway, that became an incredible source of money for us, because when I was leaving, I guess we were coming back here, she gave me a cheque for five thousand dollars for the Chair.

Hansel: Wow.

Cyril: And I was just, you know, bang! And from that time on, every anniversary we'd get a cheque for two thousand or three thousand or a thousand, whatever it was. And I think, over all, she probably gave us something like forty or fifty thousand dollars. And was again, what great luck; that was part of putting this thing

together. So we had lots of things until finally Don phoned me one morning, and I can't remember what year it was, Don Keleher, he said, "Cyril, we've got a million dollars." We've got a million dollars. Everything had added up to a million dollars at that point. And it was just unbelievable. We went out that evening; I had a little drink [laughter] to celebrate it.

And we had great things happen to the Chair, that probably wouldn't happen to any place else in Canada. One of the things that we had was when the Chair was opening up, Dick Walsh, a friend of mine . . . Dick, he taught at UCD, and he taught the language with me. He had done a great deal of work on the Irish language in the Southeast where language had almost died out as a generally spoken language, and I had marvellous, marvellous stories told by him to me, over the years about his collection of that material back in the '40s and '50s when he was a young student; he was older than I am. A marvellous guy, and he was able to do these things, and he was a great friend of the Prime Minister of Ireland, they were friends from way, way back, and I had said to him, when I was over there, I said "Look, do you think we could get him to have an honorary degree from Saint Mary's for the opening of the Chair? It would be a marvellous thing." He said, "Well, I'll phone him up." So he phoned him up and he invited us down to his office. So we went down to his office, we had a marvellous morning with him, and Dick and he were great, great friends, and he said, "When are you going to do this?" so we gave him the date and he says, "Oh yeah, we can work that out." And so he became the first Irish Prime Minister to get a degree in Canada [Garret FitzGerald, 1985], I think, to my mind I can't recall one, but FitzGerald became the first, and he and his wife came here, and he in fact ended up going back to Ireland, and Ireland of course, they weren't a rich economy at that time, but he sent us twenty-five thousand dollars. And that was the sort of thing that was going on constantly, you'd get money and that business of giving degrees to Prime Ministers of Ireland didn't really end here until, well, I don't think it's even ended, but the last one we had was the first woman president of Ireland [Mary Robinson, 2003]. She came here after she had left the presidential, but she'd become a very important diplomat at the U.N., and that was only what, three or four years ago.

Hansel: It was during the 200th Anniversary, I believe.

Cyril: And so we've had these kinds of things that are marvellous to be able to cite to people. And in the meantime, we also didn't have a huge amount of money. If you look at, even say a million three hundred thousand, and you're looking at the interest that generates in a year, we had hired a marvellous teacher . . .

[Tape 1, Side 1 ends.]

Cyril: Okay.

Hansel: Teacher?

Cyril: Pádraig, he had come here in, I guess it was, gosh, he must be here pretty close to twenty years. And Pádraig has been great, been a marvellous teacher, and he came after...the first man we had who was here for a year, and he was -- again, my knowledge of colleague names, he would kill me if I couldn't remember his name -- he came here, for a year, and in the meantime we had arraigned for Pádraig to come, and Pádraig has been here, he's been a great teacher, and the Department has offered three courses in Irish, from one, two, three and they are going up in the capacity of the language. And a number of his students, well, I would say just in sense, the number of students that are doing the major, finally we had a major in Irish Studies, which was really unusual; I don't think there's any place in Canada that had a major in Irish Studies. And when we had students who had majors, we also had, I think, the only student we've ever had who won a very, very good scholarship to the great American university of . . . Yale? I want to say . . . it's top, top American . . .

Hansel: Harvard?

Cyril: Harvard!

Hansel: There we go.

Cyril: He won a, I think it was a 4 or 6 year full . . .

Hansel: And that was one of our Saint Mary's students?

Cyril: One of our Saint Mary's students. Otherwise, we didn't have a lot of monies available to give to anybody, but we had, I think, I've counted correctly in saying, six students who on their own went to Ireland and did degrees there. And I hear from them, every now and again. It's marvellous. And one of them is a young woman who, she is now working in one of the government offices; at one point she was in the Prime Minister's office in Ottawa. She speaks French, but every now and again when she writes me, she'll write probably two or three lines in Irish, so she's obviously kept the thing going. She's a local girl. We've had also another person who went over there and she'd kill me if I can't remember her name, because she's still teaching here, but she'd forgive me because of the injury I have. I had the brain with this thing. But her father, her family, they've always had a very, very close connection with Saint Mary's. But she went over and she went to University College in Galway, which is a very strong Gaelic courses and area, and she speaks perfect Gaelic. She came back here, she teaches Gaelic for us. And she spent, I think, two years there and I was over one year, making some visits to see people, and I said we've got to go out to Galway because I knew she was there. And I didn't know quite where she was, and I was walking across the campus and bang! There she was. She was speaking Gaelic to one of the fellow students and she gave me a big hug. And she speaks two dialects of Irish, and she's taught here and she's great, a marvellous teacher. Her father is a judge in

the court here, and he apparently, I don't know this myself, but Pádraig has said, he has very, very good Irish as well, and I don't think he's ever been on a course in Ireland, I think he's just learned it here.

So we've engaged people to do great stuff. In the first years, when we were raising money, things opening up, I was much younger, a lot more energy. We had great programs here to attract people to the fact that we had this. We'd have music programs, dance programs, it was just absolutely marvellous. As often as the weekends, we'd get somebody here to teach, we'd get someone here to give a lecture, we'd get someone here to have a great mess of Irish music or just the general Gaelic music; Scottish Gaelic as well as it's a part of the same culture. I suppose Irish and Scottish Gaelic cultures could be seen as first cousins, or something like that, they're so close. In fact the Scottish Gaelic is a language and a culture that came out of Ireland quite a few years back, back in the, I suppose, third and fourth centuries. That's the connection between them, the same culture, the same cultural base, but then it shifts and changes things. You can see quite nicely if someone is a good Gaelic speaker in Scotland, they'll go to Ireland, same way in fact, especially in the north of the country. That whole thing, it's been my life. I've enjoyed it, I've done a hell of a pile of work to get it in to place and am just glad that when I leave here I'll be leaving a good place, and right now I'm working at doing a little fundraising, that we will get going, see if we can't get another million dollars.

Hansel: Is this fundraising for the Program here?

Cyril: For the Program, yes, absolutely. So that we can probably hire another person, and also get a couple of scholarships that we can offer to students to go to Ireland, because it's very expensive. If you're a student in Ireland now, I think in a year, if you haven't got about fifty thousand dollars, forget it, it's immensely expensive. So, if we can get something that we can put together, and parents behind it, we have . . . I mean, the six who went over, I think it was six, it might have been seven who went there, they went on their own, we didn't have any money to give them, and they went over on their own and they did very, very well. Were very much liked, they liked it over there. And God knows, there may have been others, these are ones I know. But students whom we have had finished off degrees here, they may have gone over for some time, they may have visited Ireland, done something, and it doesn't matter to me whether you get a degree or not, as long as you've -- you know, when I was in Oxford one of the people whom I had there as my professor was a man, all he had was a B.A., the M.A. is an additional two, and he would probably, you know, make anybody who was here with a PhD sort of look very small in relation to what he had. So it doesn't matter as long as you get there, and you absorb the stuff and are able to pass it on to others. That's the great thing about it.

Hansel: This is great stuff. You talked briefly about how you came here in the 1970s to Saint Mary's and there'd been a lot of changes at that time. Could you talk a little more about that period and any changes within the faculty?

Cyril: The department I was in, the English department, has remained one of the largest departments in Arts, and everybody who was in that, at the time, they were marvellous people. I mean we, presently I think, you know, people will talk back and forth, but at that time we would have parties together, and it was an unusual period in terms of our sort of our co-working and our personal working back and forth. And if you went through and got the history of the department at that period, we'd say, oh my God, the kind of lifestyle these people were living was shocking to some people. And I don't think you get that now, it's just not there. These were people who knew people coming in, and enjoying one another's lives.

And it was also the period when, as I've indicated to you just a little while ago, I got terribly interested in these two areas, the Atlantic area and the Irish one. And so I spent a good deal of time working at that. I didn't have a lot of time to cast my eyes on how the University was going. There are probably people here who could tell you a hell of a lot more how the University was hanging at the time because I spent it raising money, working to get these things together, and I enjoyed it very much, but you've only got so much time in your life, and most of mine was spent sort of, and you know having a family. But, it was changing in a sense that in our Department, most of us felt, as long as you have the good capacity to teach, it doesn't matter whether you have a PhD. But at that time it was becoming more and more a demand by the Administration that you have a PhD. So we had two or three people who were in there who did a hell of a job getting out and getting a PhD. They were here, they had families, they didn't have a pile of money, of course it's constantly more and more to get a degree, but they went and they got degrees, they got PhDs, because I don't think that either of the two people, I think in the back of my head, would be any different in their capacity to teach as long as they read the stuff, but they had to go outside the University and they had to do courses and get these PhDs, so that I think I'm not incorrect in saying that we had the highest number of PhDs in the faculty of any university in this area, because there was a demand by the Administration that we have these PhDs. Now a PhD is a nice thing to have, but a PhD is like anything else, it doesn't necessarily make you anything but a PhD. And you can be an excellent, marvellous teacher with a simple BA. You really can. And having a PhD gives you, you know, you have to call them a doctor and this sort of thing, but it doesn't mean they're any better teacher, and you know that, I know that, everybody knows that. But I think we did have, the whole Department, with maybe one or two exceptions, but I can't think many more than that, everybody had PhDs and the same thing was true in the Arts and in the Science. So I don't know what the percentage is today of people, but I think it's still pretty high. Because if you get it, you can do it, but at that time it was tough for people to get out and get these PhDs, but they did do it. And I think to some extent, the walling-in of PhDs has to some extent, and I don't know why, cut down on the

kind of inter-relationship between people. In those days when I was here, '70 up 'til '80, it was marvellous because you were constantly (unclear) people back and forth, talking and enjoying it, and the general attitude in the Department at that time, and it was, you got to teach these students how to write, and we had lots of things that we were doing.

One set of tests that we did, I'm sure when, but every student had to do one of these tests on their English, had we had to spend a long time marking them, correcting them and the whole thing was trying to emphasize students' capacities to write English well. It was terrible. You had to spend a long time marking papers, thousands of these things to do. Then of course, they gradually moved out of that and we don't do that anymore, but at that time we had these kinds of English tests that were done by every student who was in the place, not just the English ones. And I suppose we also were trying to see, what do you do with someone who can't pass one of these things, one of these tests? It was a period of great stress, but people believed in it. And then of course, when it got into the '80s, I had to shift myself into my own courses, getting those written, because the rest of it was spent trying to raise money for the Chair of Irish Studies, to get that done, it was kind of semi-political, semi-economic job as well as teaching at the same time. And I enjoyed my teaching, I still do, I mean, I would still love teaching; I loved it then and I had some very, very fine students, people whom I love very much, and saw their work and saw their interest built up in the areas I was teaching, which was great.

I had been, for a period, on the Senate of the University and I gradually had to get out of that as well because I didn't have time. If I was going to raise money, I had to give it over to that, so what I'm really trying to say to you, is after the '80s I spent a huge amount of time, other than my teaching time, working at the raising of this money, organising it, fundraising and it might have been a bad thing in some ways but a very good thing in others.

Hansel: I know you served on the Board of Governors for a few years during the '70s and '80s and early '90s; can you talk a little bit about what was going on then or any particular memories of your time?

Cyril: Well, there were lots of things that went on at that time. One of the big problems that the whole, not only Saint Mary's, but we were all facing was the price of gasoline that suddenly – boom! – went up, and there was all sorts of real horror in people, "What are we going to do?" because there was this huge change, we didn't have, we didn't seem to have as much fuel available as we needed, and the price went up and this is the thing, and of course places like Saint Mary's, what are you going to do, how are you going to pay for this whole thing? So I remember one night we were having a discussion of this whole thing and one of the people, who was the chairman who looked after this stuff, he still lives here, he's 99 years of age I think, and I knew him quite well, I've spoken, seen him a couple of times; amazing man. And he was there, and we had another guy who

was a lawyer and a justice, and so he started talking then as if he knew all about this, and everybody was listening, very, very kind to him and a lot of people were very dubious about how much he knew about this, and when he finished he passed the thing over to this man that I was mentioning who was in charge of the committee, and he said, "Well, when it comes to the price of gas and how much it is, and how much we need," he says, "I don't know anything, and you don't either." And the place went up in laughter because that was exactly what people were thinking. He was just so straight, bang, threw it in.

And in that period, we mentioned earlier on the whole business of unionization. We got unionized pretty largely through reaction to the man who was President at the time [Owen Carrigan, 1972-1979]. I think he didn't handle that whole thing very well, and it pushed people who ordinarily would not at all have voted, to have it. We were one of the first universities in Canada to have a union, and if someone had asked me, say when I came here first, I wouldn't have thought we'd ever get a union. But the pressure that was put on was, you know, the attitude of the person who was the head of the University body, you know, and people just got so whooped (?) up on this thing that they decided, we're going to unionize. And there were two sets of people, one which was sort of very tied into universities, and the other one was a union which was just outside, anybody could have taken those kinds of unions, but the other one, they wanted a secret private union that would just be part of the unions associated with the universities and that sort of thing. And I was on the other one. I was on the one that would join a natural union where you can have several kinds of trades and things all in the same thing, and it was fought over very, very hard. I remember one of the people whom I loved very much, and he fought, fought for this: Terry Whalen. Terry is a great friend of mine; he had done a tremendous amount of work to the point that he nearly died: he was driven to sickness as a consequence. We lost out as that side of the Union, but we unionized, we had the Union. And that was an incredibly interesting period, everybody was very . . . it was like they had been hooked into electricity and fwwshh! -- flashed on, you know, it was an incredible period.

And finally we became unionized and we're still unionized now, but the period in which it became unionized was really quite incredible. The thing that we would have had at that time would have been to get a movie made of the whole thing, it would have been marvellous to have movies shot of seeing us at huge, huge meetings, and everybody went and talked and argued, it was marvellous. It was just the sort of thing that you think is part of what a university life is all about, to argue about whether we should or shouldn't. But that was done, and once it was done and out of the way as far as I was concerned I then felt, well I can go and raise money; I won't worry about these things. But at the time that I was on the Board, I enjoyed it but I don't recall specific things that were happening at that time, except that big question that was going on about the fuelling, the actual material and how are we going to be able to pay for it, the monies that were needed to heat the place and keep it going. But it was an interesting period, the unionization, and if you were to talk to somebody who was actually in on the

actual unionization itself, that would be something worthwhile for you. I wasn't a member, I just went to meetings and things, but I wasn't one of the Executive members of the thing that were fighting.

Hansel: You talked earlier about some of the graduate students you worked with in Irish Studies, you probably taught quite a few students over the years and quite a number of classes. Can you talk a little bit about how the classes have changed, the student body has changed, whether in terms of teaching style or class sizes or anything like that?

Cyril: Well, I didn't really see a huge change myself, maybe because of the kinds of courses that I taught. For a long while I taught the three courses that we all had to teach, but I got into trying to raise the funds, I couldn't teach as much, so I had two classes that I taught in, of course both of these tended to have a smaller number than you would if you were just teaching the introductory level. But the people whom I had in those levels all along, and I don't recall a huge difference to it. I would talk with them in the class, but then you have lots of talking to them: they'd come around to the office and they'd come in and have questions about an essay they were doing. There was a lot of very, very good possibility of having student/professor talks back and forth; sometimes you'd have two or three people. The classes tended to be, you know, the professor was there giving the lecture, the student was there taking it. But I would try as much as I could to get the students to throw questions at me and that continued, I continued it up to the very end of my days. It was fun and unusual for someone to say something in a class, for instance, that didn't make any sense. So, I would say, "Look, if I say something that doesn't make any sense, would you please challenge me." And you had that occasionally, something, "I said that? Oh, God." Or mispronunciations of something, that would come out. So what's the matter? Those kinds of things were good, because the students felt then, I've got a good view of this thing, I can talk to the professor, maybe he doesn't know as much as I do about something. And these are, I think sometimes . . . I remember one student came to me and said, "You know, we have a prof over there," and named the person, and he said, "He came in and he gave a lecture and he said to us, 'I know everything, you know nothing' and went on to emphasize this." And I said, "Yeah? That's just terrible." I said, "Yeah, because he probably doesn't know everything." But putting that kind of "I'm up here and you're down there" is a terrible thing. I always felt that you talked about the stuff, the student was reading Shakespeare, and you had these views of Shakespeare, things that you wanted them to know about the Age in which the thing was written, about why such a thing was said, and why did Shakespeare pick that up and use it here, that kind of thing and get them to do the same thing themselves, go out and find in issues, of the play, specific sort of explications of things that ordinarily you look at it because it's almost five hundred years away from us, would not make much sense to us, and once you understand, "Ah! Yes, well, that's why she does this."

I thoroughly enjoyed teaching, loved it, and I had lots of good students who'd come in and treat their work quite seriously; there were others of course, they would just not be in class, they wouldn't show up and then they'd come in and you'd say, "Oh, you're going to do the exam, are you?" And it was possible, I suppose for someone to come in and not having had class but studied it on their own, get it done, there's no reason why you can't do that, but if you haven't done this stuff you're going to flunk the exam, so in that sense there's a necessity to do it, but generally the classes that I had I enjoyed thoroughly, I enjoyed the students and the students were generally very, very good people. They'd come, they had questions, if they were missing from class for a period . . . sometimes someone would be very, very ill, but they wouldn't come and tell you they were ill, they'd just come in class after about two weeks or something, and I would say, "Come here." "Well, I was really ill. Do you need me to get a doctor's note?" "No, no just tell me." And that was the way I felt. If someone tells you they're ill, that's it, I don't need to have someone go out and get a doctor's certificate, and I used to say to them, "If you want to tell lies, go ahead. People will believe you. But you're making yourself a liar. You're the one that really suffers from it, not me." That's something that I think people really had to learn in the University, was the value of the truth; that your life and your whole being has to be tied around the truth, because if you live on something else that's not the truth, it's an awful way to live.

But I enjoyed my life here, and the thing that has the problem now is just memory, with the disease I have, has flushed an awful lot of memory of dates and person, but I do have a general sense of having had a great enjoyment here and feeling very dedicated to the students wanting to learn and to do for themselves whatever they really needed to have done, that was, go on urge them to finish a degree here and go some place else, and go to a another country, go to another university, maybe even go into another area of . . .

[Tape 1, Side 2 ends]

Tape 2:

Hansel: Sorry about that. So, that sounds like a wonderful place to finish up, actually. I didn't have anymore questions for you, but is there anything you'd like to raise, any overall comments on Saint Mary's, anything you'd like to give, before we finish up?

Cyril: Well, I think, one thing about Saint Mary's, I don't if this is always the same in every place, our department, the Department of English, has always to my mind been very good to students, there was a good relationship between those who taught and those who were being taught. In the early years I was here, it was marvellous, because we had, what now are rooms because we don't have enough space in the place, we had a good little area where the students could come in and

have their lunch. This is English. And we could go in and sit down and have lunch and chit-chat back and forth, it was marvellous, absolutely marvellous. In the evening sometimes, the evening classes, people would come in and be in there, and you'd go in and talk to them, and they'd be asking you questions about things, they may not have any question about the class you were doing but, "Where can I go to university for an M.A.?" or "What's a good place to go?" All those kinds of things were done. That isn't as easy now because there isn't the space. If I were an English student and knew what it was like 20 years ago here, I'd say we need to have a place where English students could go in and it didn't mean that every student in there was English, it could be any other subject area that came in with their friends, but they were great, they really were great places after you were finished class; you could go in there and chit-chat with them, and it was great. Lots of times they'd go in there and have a few heavy drinks of stuff, that was allowed as well, nobody getting drunk, it was just go in, and it was a good spot where the University life could be real and people could feel quite happy with their knowledge of the profs and the profs would have knowledge of some of the students -- oh, that guy there is such-and-such. But you had that as a good reality, and I enjoyed the student body here because they weren't arrogant. One of the things, students weren't arrogant here, they never were, and that was great, I mean they could ask questions about things and sometimes you felt they might have been more asking than they were, but they felt so simple in a way, and there were lovely people. I really loved the students here, they were just from simple life, they weren't from high, rich existence; most of our students are middle class or even lower middle class. I had some students here and I had to let them know that their education was so poor that they had to really, really get on it, getting at what they were doing here, and sometimes people wouldn't do that, they'd give them a 'B,' a 'B-', ' you know the thing, which really didn't deserve a 'B-', ' probably if it was really probably something like a 'D+' or something, but you had to tell the person that, "Look, you might get out of here with a degree but you're not going to have anything, you've got to start learning something, and you're going to have to really be worthy of a 'B+' or an 'A'. These things are going to have to really be earned." I know that there are people who gave . . . they didn't want to have a row over it, so just let this person go by, and that was pretty awful. Sometimes, what I would do was, pull someone aside and say, "Look, your English is horrible and you're going to have to really, really pull yourself up and do much better and put the time in on it. If you need another week for that paper, another two weeks so that it will be well written, do it. Take that time but don't pass in something that's not worth anything." But, as I say I enjoyed it here very much. I'll try to add some more money so you'll have a good Irish Program here.

Hansel: That's good. It sounds like you'll have a good legacy. Thank you very much Dr. Byrne.

Cyril: Thank you.

[End of recording, Tape 2, Side 1]