Gordon Wells

Speaking Gaelic, Gordon Wells, researcher with the CIALL project, recounts the various stages of his career, including his time with Birmingham Industrial Language Training Services in the 1980s and what he learned from that experience for use in later years, including with Island Voices. Part of the "Multilingual Memories: Birmingham 1984" project.

Hello, I am Gordon Wells, the youngest son of Anna Sheonaidh ’ic ’Illeasbaig from the Paible district in North Uist. But I was born in Edinburgh, and was brought up first in India until I was four years old, and then in England. I did a BA in Linguistics at York University, and then spent two years in Japan teaching English, and then, after that, another year in India, where I had the opportunity to pick up my Hindi anew, as it were.

So, then, coming back to this country I went to Leeds University where I did teacher training, and I started working at Birmingham ILT – Birmingham Industrial Language Training Services in July 1983. And I worked with them until the end of ’89 – except for a year spent in Edinburgh at the University of Edinburgh where I got the opportunity, on secondment, to do an MSc in Applied Linguistics. So, I’m very grateful that I got that opportunity, and I was really lucky that I had that opportunity.

Anyway, after that I worked in colleges on the Scottish mainland until 1996, when I finally got the job I wanted in Uist itself as a development officer for Further Education in Uist and Barra. And that is how my connection began with the network of colleges that became the University of the Highlands and Islands. And I still work with that university. Now I am a manager and researcher at the “CIALL” project based at the Language

Sciences Institute. And I also still coordinate the community project “Guthan nan Eilean” which has been going on since 2005 – that is not a short time.

But, going back to Birmingham ILT, I think it was a very, very important time for me to work – starting out at Birmingham ILT, because everything I’ve been doing since – I think it’s based in some way on what I learned on that first job – taking me out of the world of academic theory that I was studying at university, into the real world that people live in – so looking at language as a “grounded social practice” as it were, rather than just a “disembodied” or even “displaced” subject, which you would want to break down into tiny little pieces like, say, the code-breakers at Bletchley Park during the war.

So, those were “seminal times”, as they say in English, for me.

And also, what was important about it, was that there was an emphasis on “community languages” alongside English at that time at Birmingham ILT, and that’s how I eventually decided to learn my own mother’s mother tongue. That’s the language I’m speaking right now, Gaelic itself. But I also got the opportunity at the same time to get involved in the new BBC series at the time called “Hindi Urdu Bol Chaal” – and that was an opportunity to learn, and gain a deeper understanding of the recording methods for languages as they are spoken, as opposed to languages as they are written – a very, very important difference between those two delivery methods.

So, yeah, Birmingham ILT was really important to me.

But doing a Fast Forward now to Guthan nan Eilean, the interest in many languages, not just in one language, English – I’ve had that interest since that time at Birmingham ILT. And also, as technology had moved on since then, there was the opportunity to be a one-man TV crew and editor, just using a laptop and maybe a small video camera – or even a mobile phone. And as the internet was coming up then too, you also had the opportunity to start and run your own TV Channel, as it were.

And that is the recipe for Guthan nan Eilean, I would say. An example, I would hope, for anyone who is interested in doing something practical to record the special ways of speaking around them, say in the family or in the community, and then distribute it to others who might be interested in hearing those distinctive voices. So, that is the link, as it were, between Birmingham ILT where I started and Guthan nan Eilean where I am now. But, going back to Birmingham after forty years, I was so pleased to see that the linguistic richness that existed at that time is still there. And I would hope that there would now be opportunities for new developments and new collaborations to begin between language communities in this country that are not at all as far apart as you might think at first glance.