

***Due North* Speaks to Dr. Bill (W.H.) Crawford**

former Development Officer of the Federation for Ulster Local Studies and highly regarded local studies authority.

DN: *Can you tell us a little about your background?*

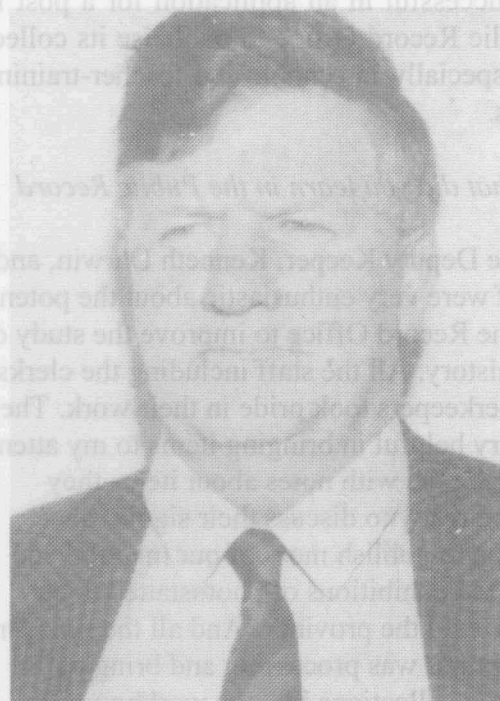
BC: I was born in 1932, the eldest of four brothers from a working class background in Coleraine. Both my grandfathers were descended from tribes of metalworkers: my mother's from blacksmiths about Castleterg and Killeter and my father's from nail-makers in Captain Street in Coleraine. My grandfather in Coleraine, however, was apprenticed to a plumber and subsequently he trained several of his sons to work in the family firm. My father was the eldest boy in a family of seven while my mother was the eldest of eight girls (6 of them nurses: their mother had been the Infirmary Nurse in Castleterg workhouse) in a family of eleven.

DN: *Would you say your upbringing influenced your later career?*

BC: My mother had remained at school until she was 'woman big'. She read widely (the Bible, poetry, history, novels and biography), attended lectures, bible classes and extra-mural classes, and was very interested in politics and current affairs. She was ambitious for us, emphasising that those who did not study would become 'hewers of wood and carriers of water [Joshua 9: 21]' to those who did. She was never satisfied unless I came first in the class, first in Coleraine Model School and later in Coleraine Academical Institution. There in my final year I was given plenty of personal tuition and learned to work on my own.

DN: *Do you see yourself as part of any particular tradition, locally, nationally or more generally?*

BC: When I tell you that both of my grandfathers claimed to be present at Larne harbour for the gun-running in March 1914, you will know that both families and their connections were Unionists. Both of them were Orangemen and Worshipful Masters of their lodges. Although I understood their points of view I did not have any inclination to join the organisations. My



passion was rugby for which I gained university colours.

DN: *Do you feel that you have been influenced by the past either personally or generally?*

BC: From an early age I took a notion to become a Church of Ireland clergyman and so my mother expected a special standard of behaviour from me and required me to attend church regularly. To train for the church I went to Trinity College in Dublin and read history. There, however, I reacted against my vocation and so, after four years in Trinity I became a history teacher in Lurgan College where I remained for twelve years.

DN: *How did you become interested in local history?*

BC: While I was teaching I became interested in studying the archive of the Brownlow estate, then held in a solicitor's office in Lurgan. The archive taught me much about the administration of the estate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but it lacked correspondence which is essential for explaining the nature of change. To place the study in its context I used

to travel to the Public Record Office in Belfast and I spent several days in the Registry of Deeds in Dublin reading valuable information into a portable tape recorder. After several years I was successful in an application for a post in the Public Record Office to publicise its collections, especially in schools and teacher-training colleges.

DN: What did you learn in the Public Record Office?

BC: The Deputy Keeper, Kenneth Darwin, and his staff were very enthusiastic about the potential of the Record Office to improve the study of Ulster history. All the staff including the clerks and paperkeepers took pride in their work. They were very helpful in bringing items to my attention, plying me with notes about items they knew and ready to discuss their significance. We began to publish more of our material and transported exhibitions of photostatted documents around the province. And all the time Dr Brian Trainor was processing and bringing in more huge collections like the workhouse records and the archives of the town commissioners and district councils! During the 1970s we worked with many history teachers in teachers' centres throughout the province. We were also involved in the launch of the journal *Irish Economic and Social History* in 1974 and the creation of the Federation for Ulster Local Studies in 1975.

DN: Where did you go after leaving the Public Record Office?

BC: In 1980 I was appointed Keeper of Material Culture at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum with responsibility for four distinct sections each headed by an assistant keeper: agriculture, textiles, crafts, and domestic life. Anyone who undertakes a curatorial job in a museum needs to be dedicated to the care of the objects in his/her care and to be prepared to carry out research into their significance by searching for specimens, trying to place them in context and understand their relevance. Historians learn to appreciate just how little evidence has survived from previous generations and how weak are the tools we have got to understand them. We often fail to realise that the past was always changing and that our ancestors were always struggling to make sense of it. If

we wish to communicate with the past we need to be very humble and always prepared to revise our approaches.

In 1981 the Department of Material Culture was given responsibility by the Director to furnish the large new triple gallery that had just been completed near the village. This gave our curatorial staff the chance to display many important specimens from their collections and explain their significance. We became involved with many individuals throughout the province, notably in textiles, crafts and farming. In 1984 in association with *The Flute in Ireland* we organised a series of six concerts. In 1987 *Our Linen Industry* exhibition was well supported by the Irish Linen Guild for whom we produced a brochure and poster in return for their contribution in photographs and modern specimens. Probably our greatest challenge was to provide the paraphernalia required by the Little Bird film company when Thaddeus O'Sullivan made a film around Sam Hanna Bell's novel *December Bride* in 1989: it won a special jury award in 1990 at the European Film Festival in Cannes.

DN: How did you manage to return to our Federation as development officer in August 1993?

BC: Important changes were taking place in the museum world in Northern Ireland and I was coming near retirement. When I saw the post of development officer advertised in the newspaper, I believed that it would provide me with fresh challenges and opportunities. The Community Relations Council at that time provided funds for the Federation to employ an administrative officer and a development officer. In less than twenty years the Federation had tripled from thirty-five to nearly a hundred societies. My remit was just as broad: 'The duties of this key post include the co-ordination and direction of the activities of the Federation and its member societies; organising seminars and local history workshops; editing and preparation of Federation publications and promotional materials; and identifying areas for expansion and improvement'. Our accommodation was in the Institute for Irish Studies in Queen's University, thanks to Professor Ronnie Buchanan and his successor Dr Brian Walker. I like to believe that we were very successful. Read *Ulster Local Studies* for those years and make your own judgement!