

FERGUS O’GORMAN

Edited transcript of a recording of Fergus O’Gorman, interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on 30 October 2010 at Windermere Hydro, Cumbria. BAS Archives Ref AD6/24/1/102, transcribed by George Kistruck, 19 February 2015.

[0:00:00] Lee: This is Fergus O’Gorman, recorded by Chris Eldon Lee, on the 30th of October 2010. Fergus:

O’Gorman: Fergus O’Gorman, born in Dublin, on 26th of October, 1934.

Lee: So how old are you now?

O’Gorman: Seventy six, would you believe?

Lee: Where does it all go?

O’Gorman: Where does it all go? Down the tube, mostly!

Lee: What sort of childhood did you have? Did you have a private education, or a public education?

O’Gorman: No, I was in a state school – free education, in other words.

Lee: What were your parents?

O’Gorman: My father was a civil servant. My mother never worked, of course, and then once she got married – in fact, mostly, if women were working when they got married they had to leave, in those days. Certainly if you were in a State occupation there were no married women allowed.

Lee: And what led you down the trail of Biology?

[00.01.09] O’Gorman: Well, it all started, in fact, because I was interested in adventure, and all that sort of jazz, you know, teenagers and Scouts and getting out in the woods, and what have you. I remember when I was probably about 15 my brother got a present from my father of E.R.G.R. Evans’ book “South with Scott”. It was a schoolboy version of it, and in due course it was passed on to me, and I read it. I remember saying to my brother Brian ‘How do you become an explorer?’, and he said ‘You have to be a scientist,’ and I said ‘What’s that?’ So, I did chemistry and maths in school, of course, but no biology in Ireland. Girls did botany, flowers, and that was perfectly reasonable for girls, but boys didn’t do biology. Also girls did physiology, but my girl friends of that age, 16 or 17, had a text book in which the nuns had eliminated the bottom half of the human figure! [Laughter] This was physiology without a sex!

Lee: Physiology with no fizz?

[00.02.44] O’Gorman: Exactly! So that’s the way we were brought up, and in fact it wasn’t until I wanted to do geology, which was the only sort of geography I had done,

with a bit of geology in school, that I said I'd do geology, because explorers were geologists, you know. But when I got to college, the fact that animals jumped up and ran and did things, and I was at that age when if it moved you squeezed it, I rapidly grew interested in biology, particularly when the professor brought in two copulating frogs to talk about sex, and most of us hadn't got a clue! So, anyway, zoology was far more interesting, in that sense, and I ended up – I did do geology as a separate, as a minor subject for my degree – but I ended up a zoologist.

[00.03.54] During that time, it was a four year course. I remember in the second and third and fourth year I applied to FIDS. Every time I saw an ad in "Nature" I applied, it didn't matter what it was, glaciologist, geophysicist. I never heard a word from them - eventually in my last year I applied for a nest (???) job and I got a reply and was invited to come for an interview. So that's where it all started, and in fact Frank Elliott, who was the Secfids in those days, and – you know Frank Elliott is still alive? He's *hundreds* of years old! I'm hoping Keith will be here because I must write him a letter. But anyway, Frank Elliott and Bill Sloman – don't know whether you ever knew Bill Sloman?

Lee: Yes, I did know him. He comes up an awful lot.

O'Gorman: Yes, of course. But they interviewed me. I remember there were four people in front of me, and they all came out red-faced. I remember asking the last one, when I was due to go in, I asked 'What was it like?' He said, 'Terrible!' You know? They were really stressed out. Anyway, I went in, in fear and trepidation, and the interview was going on, and at one point what I remember is that I was talking, Frank was asking me questions, and Bill jumped in and said 'By the way, you are a Catholic, aren't you?' I went, 'Err, er, yes!' and he said 'You know most of these chaps will be Protestants? Will that be a problem?' And I go [indrawn breath hiss] What do I say? I took a deep breath and I said 'Some of my best friends are Welsh...' [Laughter]

[00.05.40] - and Frank just split his sides laughing! But when they got to the end of the interview, Bill said to me 'By the way, we have a job for a biologist, would you be interested?' I [thought] 'Do I jump up and throw my arms around now? But that would probably not be the right thing to do.' [So] I said, 'Yes!'

Lee: So was the interview strenuous? Because most of them say they were quite easy, really.

O'Gorman: Well I thought that, other than that (the question that threw me) the interview was OK: I don't remember anything else stressful about it. I then had to go to the Colonial Office, to the Medical Officer, to be psychologically examined. Oh yes, they said they had to make sure you were suitable, you see. So this pukka fellow, who was wearing a tie with XVs all over it and little Cambridge, or college, insignia sort of thing, and after he'd gone through the bit about, you know, all the medical sort of thing he says 'Well, now we have to talk about your suitability, and I said to him, realising obviously he had played rugby, 'Were you at the Oxford and Cambridge match last weekend [sic] at Twickers?' which I had, and he said 'Yes – were you?' and we spent the time talking about the match. At the end he said 'You'll do fine,' he said! Obviously if you played rugger you were the right sort...

I had to have another interview then, which was Francis Fraser, who was [with] the *Discovery* expedition in the Twenties in South Georgia. He was the biologist, and he was the whale man, and he was the Head of Mammals in the Natural History Museum and the BM, and so I had to go and see him in the basement. We were surrounded by these giant skulls and all sorts, you know, and he said, 'I am just' (he was a nice, very small Scotsman) 'I'm just making a cup of tea, would you...?' and we talked, chatted around, and after about half an hour I thought 'This is a very funny interview.' He said 'I'm supposed to be interviewing you for a job, amn't I?' and I said 'Yes,' and he sort of scratched his head, and then he said 'What does a Leopard seal look like?' and I said 'Long and snaky,' and he said 'You'll do!' [Laughter] And that was the end of it.

[00.08.27] I got no training, absolutely none. When I came back to go down south I was a month in the office trying to discover what sort of equipment I needed, to read all the material about seals because I was going to be a seal biologist.

Lee: You knew what a Fur Seal was?

O'Gorman: Well I'd heard of Fur Seals, of course, but I mean, I'd never seen one. That was the time when Bunny was down south doing the TAE and Raymond Priestley was running the office. And so Sir Raymond (and there was also a whole clatter of Sloane Rangers in the office) and me. In the afternoon Sir Raymond used to come out and say 'O'Gorman, tea and muffins!' Or whatever he had – biscuits or whatever. So every afternoon he would reminisce about Scott, and Shackleton, and everybody: unbelievably interesting stuff. And I can remember him saying to me 'Now, when you come back, come down and see me in Tewkesbury,' which of course I never did, which I always regretted.

[00.09.46] Lee: Did you come across the redoubtable Ann Todd at this time?

O'Gorman: Oh yes! Absolutely. Ann Todd was in the office, and I keep – I had lunch with her about three weeks ago, in Cambridge: [a] lovely woman.

Lee: We're trying to get her to do this, but she's a bit shy...

O'Gorman: Oh yes, well, but she would be. But she must have immense memories of FIDS, and BAS of course...

Lee: And Fuchs.

O'Gorman: And Fuchs, of course.

Lee: Well, if you see her again, please try and persuade her.

O'Gorman: Oh yes, I will, yes!

[00.10.20] Lee: So you're still in touch with people like that?

O'Gorman: Yes, absolutely.

Lee: You ended up going on the RRS *Shackleton* and there were 28 Fids altogether.

O’Gorman: Yes, I think there were 28 altogether.

Lee: Tell me about two of them in particular, because you went with Alan Sharman and Tink Bell, who were fated, weren’t they, sadly?

O’Gorman: Yes, they both in 1959 died at Admiralty Bay. I had just spent three months in a tent with Alan on Livingstone. We were taken off by chopper from *Protector*, and I was dropped in Deception waiting for the *Biscoe* to come up and Alan was taken to Admiralty Bay. Within three weeks, can’t have been long, a month perhaps – he was dead.

Lee: How did you hear the news?

O’Gorman: Over the radio. It was the only communication we had.

Lee: What are your memories of him? You camped with him for a while. What sort of a guy was he?

O’Gorman: Ah, he was a very nice fellow. He was a mad keen bird-watcher, that’s why he was on our summer party, and he had been at Signy and done bird work, and so on. He had been in the RAF and in Mountain Rescue and all that sort of jazz, he was a very nice guy. I went to see his parents when I came back, which was very difficult. They were in Bedfordshire somewhere, and I went up to see them and it’s interesting – Tinker I didn’t know as well, obviously, but it was a very sad episode, really.

[00.12.35] Lee: Do many Fids go and visit Alan’s parents? Was this something you chose to do, off your own bat?

O’Gorman: Yes, I felt I needed to because I had spent so much time with him, essentially the last time he was in the field, basically. It’s interesting because there is a book called “*The Christian Desert*” written by an American biologist about biology on the Peninsula. It came out at the end of the Nineties, yes that’s right, a very nice book, and he describes going into Admiralty Bay and going up to the graves. He prints out what it says on the graves, and I got stuck there, I couldn’t read the book. I’ve only just recently re-read it, and that’s ten years. I just couldn’t pass that point: I was amazed that there should be so much emotion after that length of time.

Lee: Well, it was someone you didn’t know for very long, and the death was fifty years ago...

O’Gorman: Yeah, well I knew him all the way through, because we’d been in contact. On the network you knew everybody. I had gone down South with him, he’d gone to Signy, I should have gone back to Signy but I didn’t because of the *Shackleton* crash. We were on the same wavelength: we did all the bird obs on the boat together. We got on very well. I liked Alan a lot.

Lee: *Shackleton* had quite a bit of trouble, didn't she, at that time?

O'Gorman: Oh, stop! Well, I mean, on the way out we first had Asian 'flu, which meant that the whole crew, aside from a few of the officers, were all laid up, and the Fids had to do all the work, even steering the ship in fact. And everything else, cooking and so on, in the heat, but anyway, not only that but the engine broke down, or something went wrong, and it took us the best part of a month to get to Montevideo. Then we had to hang around while they flew out new parts, so we were ten days in Montevideo, which was an interesting experience.

[00.15.13] Lee: Dare I press you on anything there?

O'Gorman: Well, you can imagine, coming from my sort of background, unexposed to anything, basically. My mother, if you said 'bloody', she would thump you round the ear. There was no bad language allowed in the house, or anything like that. You get dunked with a lot of that through being in the Services, just the compulsory couple of years and the language there, to me I found it astonishing, but of course I rapidly caught on. You learned some things that you'd never heard about, and when we got to Monte I learned something else because John Graham, who was one of the medics on board, gave us a lecture about venereal disease which even though I was a biologist I knew nothing about! It was news to me!

So we all went ashore, and it can't have been the first night but we ended up in a place called the 'Cubilete' which was a notorious knocking-shop in Montevideo: an experience which I could not possibly cope with. This girl came and sat on my knee, and put her arm round me, and there was music, and what have you. I think after half an hour I got up and ran out the door! I couldn't cope with this. But there we were. You learnt, from these sort of experiences.

[00.17.03] Lee: Who was the captain of the ship?

O'Gorman: Norman Brown, who hammered the ship into the dock at Stanley, and then finally, just after the summer party I was on, on Powell Island, was landed in the ??? [inaudible] Strait, he hammered a piece of ice and practically sank the ship. They were up to their tonsils. Very lucky that *Protector* was around. Two of the [crew] I'm not sure if they were officers or not, they went over the side and pinned a tarpaulin or something over the hole.¹ Both won Albert Medals, in fact, if my memory serves me right, [for what] must have been a horrendous experience.

[00.17.53] Lee: Did you get some sort of notoriety from that incident as well?

O'Gorman: Oh well, only in Ireland. My mother, I remember her telling me that she opened the door to a knock one Friday or Saturday evening, and there were flash-bulbs going off, and they said 'Have you heard from your son?' She nearly fainted on the spot. FIDS didn't know then whether we were on the boat, and put out a list of names, so that the major Sunday paper in Ireland had the headline: 'Irish Man in

¹ Suspended on a platform in the rolling swell, Sub-Lt Avery fired the first three studs into the hull. He was frequently totally immersed and at one stage was swept off the platform and rescued by the lifeline he was wearing. After the third stud was fixed, Master Norman Brown insisted he came aboard, and Able Seaman Woodhouse completed the task and a metal patching plate was finally affixed. (*Daily Telegraph*, 5 December 1957)

Antarctic Drama', about two double columns, across the top. And I wasn't there at all!

[00.18.44] Lee: You weren't even on board?

O'Gorman: No, no, we'd been dropped off about four or five hours earlier. We were setting up camp at that stage on Powell Island.

Lee: Let's just talk a bit about Stanley, because you went through Stanley, obviously.

O'Gorman: Well, we went through Stanley on the way, and then came back to it because the *Biscoe* came and pulled us off Powell Island, much to my regret...

Lee: Let's come back to that in a moment. What was Stanley like, as a first-time Fid in Stanley?

O'Gorman: What was my impression of Stanley? That it was a town – a one-street town, practically – but, you know?

Lee: So it was no more advanced than some towns in Ireland? Or backward?

O'Gorman: Oh yes, much more backward, tin houses, tin roofs everywhere, that sort of stuff, it looked very primitive, in fact. There was only one pub,² and there was the church of course, but lots of social activity. Because once the ships came in everybody descended on everybody, we had a great time.

[00.20.00] Lee: So you were chatting-up local girls?

O'Gorman: Yes. But not only that, to my amazement I got invited by the Governor to go and have dinner with him, myself and Jim Shirtcliffe, do you know Jim?

Lee: I do, yes.

O'Gorman: Just the two of us, I don't know why he invited us, but he had two beautiful daughters: Arrowsmith, a very nice man, his wife was Irish though she didn't like to pretend she had any Irish connections whatever in those days, but anyway we had these lovely girls, I remember, but anyway! Urrh! So. An interesting episode.

[00.20.45] Lee: So you were heading off in this first season, that was '57, to South Georgia and you came face to face with the whaling industry.

O'Gorman: Yes. Unbelievable smell, which the minute you got there it just sort of enveloped you, the smell, and the butchery. I of course spent subsequently nearly three months in South Georgia so I saw it in detail but whaling! The whole set-up there was dry, there was no alcohol allowed. I remember the first night I was there – and I was a teetotaler, I didn't drink at all – I remember coming down the gangplank and there was a very nice blond-haired young Norwegian asking me could he get a

² There were five pubs in Stanley in 1957 – The Globe Hotel, The Stanley Arms, The Rose Hotel, The Ship Hotel and the Victory Bar.

bottle of whisky? He said 'I'll give you a sweater for it.' 'I don't need sweaters!' I said, and he said 'I'll give you a pair of skis,' and I said 'Skis – a pair of skis?' and he said 'Yes, I'll be back in a minute,' and anyway, he disappeared and came back with these seven-foot original wooden skis. I said 'Well now, that's a different matter.' I went and got a bottle, which cost negligible, I think it was about a shilling, a very small amount of money anyway, and I gave him the bottle. I still have the skis.

[00.22.30] Lee: Did you use them much?

O'Gorman: Yes, I did, but not much because the shorter skis were coming into vogue then and FIDS had supplied shorter skis for field work

Lee: There's reference to you meeting Dick Barton, did you actually meet Dick Barton? Was that Duncan Carse?

O'Gorman: Duncan Carse, yes: he came along, again everybody else was, I don't know where [inaudible] It was probably shortly after I met this young lad because somebody turned up on the dock. I said hello to him I said something like 'And who might you be?' and he said 'Duncan Carse'. And I thought, I said 'Dick Barton?' and he said 'Yes'!

Of course he was doing the survey at the time, the survey of South Georgia, and he was living in the jail. He was well-oiled, I might add, which apparently was par for the course. I had a short conversation with him and I think I left it at that.

[00.23.40] Lee: So you were on Powell Island, and you were going to be there all summer I think, weren't you?

O'Gorman: Yes. I was to go into Signy [inaudible] I knew nothing: I arrived in Signy to be told the following morning we were leaving for Powell Island. So I had to go and sort myself out, gear and everything else, and we went down to Powell Island and got dropped off there.

Lee: And suddenly Biology had to start being done, did it?

O'Gorman: Yes. Suddenly it's there in front of you, so what do you do? Well, I had to learn to ski, having never been on skis. Cecil Scotland, who was the Base Commander and also the leader of the Powell Island group said to me 'Just put those skis on, tramp them in,' and I said 'What do I do next?' and he said 'Just go down the hill,' and I said 'Go down the hill?' and he said 'Yes!' and he pushed me and I shot down the hill ending up in a heap on the ground, of course. 'That's your first lesson,' he said. That was the only lesson I ever had, I would say, but you had to learn the whole business of survival, camping, everything in the Antarctic. And manhauling! Oh God! When I think about it! And the Biology area.

I shot a seal, we were going to eat it, but I wanted some experience about it. It was a Weddell Seal, and I opened it up, and I said 'Oh, my God! What is different? This is supposed to be a mammal, isn't it? It doesn't look like anything I knew!' I had only dissected a rabbit before. Because seals have an enormous vein down the middle in which they retain all the blood coming back from the muscles, and it's clamped off so that it doesn't flow back and it has to stay. So you have a vein that's probably four

inches across, running right up the middle of the body, you see? ‘My God, what is that?’ Anyway, the whole thing was news to me.

[00.25.57] Lee: Why were you dissecting them? What were you looking for?

O’Gorman: Well, I was trying to get experience of [incomprehensible] because we were interested in the reproductive physiology of it. I was exploring, basically, how do seals function: what I was reading in papers and things.

Lee: So it was to educate you, basically, not for educating other people?

O’Gorman: Yes, yes, but we were going to eat it anyway. We ate everything. We shot everything, we ate penguins. I was collecting black-bellied Storm Petrels for the British Museum and they are tiny, tiny little seabirds, one of the smallest in the world. Having skinned it I said ‘We now have to eat it, because that’s the right thing to do.’ We peeled off the breasts and put them on a matchstick and singed them over the Primus. You know the sort of thing! There wasn’t anything I hadn’t tried to eat, and of course we had no fresh food, you see, so it was important that you ate.

[00.27.07] Lee: You were actually pulled off Powell Island rather unexpectedly, weren’t you? What was the story behind that?

O’Gorman: Well, once the *Shackleton* was rescued and went to South Georgia they had to re-route all the ships, and the *Biscoe* came along three weeks later.

Lee: So it was just logistics that pulled you off?

O’Gorman: Exactly. I presume! They could have come back two months later, but anyway, the powers that be said ‘No, take them off.’ We were totally unaware, until the ship arrived on our doorstep, even though we had a radio of sorts. It threw me. Cecil said to me ‘We’re going to be pulled off,’ and I said ‘Tell them to Eff off! I’m staying here for three months.’ I wanted to stay for three months. He said ‘You can tell them yourself,’ so I got on the [radio] and Tom Flack came up on the air, and I said ‘We’re not leaving. Sorry.’ He said ‘We will send some chaps to help you pack,’ and these three burly seamen arrived, and Cecil said ‘I think we’d better go.’ And we did. I ended up back at Signy...

[00.28.30] Lee: Didn’t they know what to do with you next?

O’Gorman: Well that was the whole point. They didn’t. The *Shackleton*, when we were in Montevideo, Professor Cragg from Newcastle and Lou Chandler from the *Daily Telegraph* came on board. They were in fact on board when the crash [happened], but he was there to set up a biological programme for FIDS. He rapidly realised that I had no positive training, and what have you, so you see – I’ve read the files subsequently, and there was a row going on between the Governor on one hand who felt I should stay in the Falklands and do something about the seal industry there, the Fur Seals there. It wasn’t Cambridge in those days, but Sir Raymond and the Governor felt that they really didn’t want somebody from the North of England running the biology programme in Cambridge: [this] was their act, you know, being all Cambridge chappies.

[00.29.42] Lee: So they didn't want you back in Cambridge?

O'Gorman: Well, no, they didn't want him to be running the programme. He then recommended that I should go, once the ships came in, to Montevideo to the professor who ran sealing research, didn't run the industry but there was a Fur Seal industry off Punta del Este. I would spend the winter there, and that would be much more productive. So that's what I did, in fact.

[00.30.11] You spent that winter of 57/58 in Montevideo?

O'Gorman: Yes! I was the first Fid ever to winter in Montevideo, at Her Majesty's expense! (Laughter)

Lee: How long were you there, then?

O'Gorman: I went up on the *Protector* when she was going home, and stayed on the *Protector* while she was in port. I met everyone, and [went to] innumerable parties, as one does on these occasions. That would have been April, and I went back to South Georgia [in] late August when the sealers were going from Buenos Aires to start the sealing industry. So then, it was that winter.

[00.30.56] Lee: Did you know you were going to go south again when the spring came?

O'Gorman: Yes, of course, because I had two years to go, and that's what happened. I broke my jaw playing rugby the week before the South American championships. I would have got an International for Uruguay!

Lee: That led to some restrictions, didn't it?

O'Gorman: Oh yes, that was a rather expensive exercise. Very good for my figure though – I lost about a stone in the process. But FIDS sent around a thing saying 'No more Fids playing rugby anywhere', so it was banned. You could play soccer, but you couldn't play rugby.

Lee: So when did you head back south again?

O'Gorman: In August I went to Buenos Aires, and the [my] gear which had come out to Montevideo to pursue me sort of thing: I had to go on board the ship and Maclean and Stapleton, who were the Crown agents, had to bribe the guy to let the gear on without opening it. These are crates, with scientific equipment in, and I remember asking him afterwards 'How much?', and he said '£100.00', which was no small amount in those days.

Lee: Why did the gear have to get on without being looked at?

O'Gorman: Well, they would have wrecked it: they were only doing it for the bribe. They came along with three fellows with large hooks and crowbars, and you know it had gone on for about two hours or more. Anyway, we got to South Georgia, and I was then being used as the acting Seal Inspector because Nigel Bonner, who was the

Seal Inspector, his wife Jenny was having a baby and Nigel stayed in the UK and came down with the ships. He arrived and I transferred back to the *Biscoe*.

[00.33.17] Lee: Was Fuchs in Montevideo with you at some time?

O’Gorman: Bunny? No: not at all. I never saw Bunny, in fact, until I came back to London to work up my results afterwards. He was then back running the office.

Lee: So you’re heading back south again, you’re ending up on South Georgia, and again you came face to face with the whole whaling business, didn’t you?

O’Gorman: Yes, the whole whaling business was in decline, as you can imagine, and they went out of business in the mid-sixties, completely. Well, by ‘62 or ‘63 it wasn’t worth it down there. The Japanese tried for a couple of years, and then gave up, all the Norwegians, and [Cia Argentina de] Pesca which had been there since 1904, gave up as well. It was a disaster in that respect.

The Elephant Sealing industry in South Georgia was quite productive, and was well regulated. Dick Laws had been involved in doing the original regulations, allowing how many they should take, etc. That worked, and it used to be an important element because they provided probably 50% of the oil that the whales did. So it was a fairly lucrative part of the activity.

[00.34.50] Lee: So was the whaling industry not quite so well policed, then?

O’Gorman: No, well at every turn, I wasn’t involved but if I wasn’t at sea I was hanging around because there was nothing else to do. All the immature or female whales weren’t on the plan, but as soon as the inspector went for his lunch or anything else there was an immediate whistle and they whistled up these whales and chopped them up before anybody saw. I took photographs of pregnant females with foetuses out on the plan which, of course, were prohibited. But they were killing anything they could get, at that stage.

[00.35.44] Lee: So which countries were these? Which nations?

O’Gorman: Oh no, sorry, the company in Grytviken is Pesca. It was an Argentine company but run by the Norwegians. So I mean all the whaling was run by the Norwegians, all the operational thing was run by Norwegians. They had it very tight. Stromness, Husvik, the whole lot of them, probably 90% of the workers were Norwegian, and the managers and everything else, and the [incomprehensible] important people.

Lee: And they were flouting the regulations?

O’Gorman: Yes. They were killers. If it’s there, just take it! They were doing that and of course the population was going down the tube very rapidly.

Lee: Was that because of the industry was dying, do you think? A sort of final...

O’Gorman: Yes. I think probably in the late fifties that’s what it was, but whether they’d behave otherwise remains to be seen. I think in the sixties and seventies, I know, the Southern Ocean fishery was being exploited outrageously by the Russians and the Japanese, because they exchanged inspectors and they made up the figures. And they’ve admitted it since. So when there’s money involved, it’s all about greed, of course.

[00.37.20] Lee: So where was your second winter then spent? If the first one was spent in the fleshpots of Montevideo, the second one was somewhere else?

O’Gorman: Yes. I went from South Georgia back to Stanley, and then down to Livingstone for the summer. That’s where Alan and Pete Hodgkinson, who was Base Commander³ at Deception, the three of us, spent that period looking for Fur Seals. The survey on Livingstone had been the previous year, and they had seen quite a lot of individual Fur Seals. A lot, like twenty or thirty: that sort of thing.

Lee: Was this when the Fur Seals were beginning to come back?

O’Gorman: Yes. In South Georgia, at that point in time when I was there, there were probably anything up to fifteen thousand Fur Seals on Bird Island. They were obviously coming back. And then, individually, the immature males were scattered and they used to turn up on Signy, and all around the South Shetlands. The survey party which had been doing Livingstone the previous year decided that there was a potential population, a Fur Seal population, on Livingstone and we were landed there to pursue it. In fact I fell over the first pup that was ever found in the Antarctic! I was walking along this beach and I stumbled over what I presumed was a rock, and the rock reared up and went ‘Rerrhh!’ It was a baby Fur Seal, it was about ten inches high! That was the first one probably for a century that had been recorded, south of what was to be the Antarctic Region (as per) the Antarctic Treaty. South of 60°, in other words.

[00.39.36] Lee: What did you do with it?

O’Gorman: We spent ten days just looking at it and then searching the area hoping that we might find more along that coast. There are now five thousand females along that beach, would you believe? That’s the current estimate.

[00.40.01] Lee: So it’s gone from one to five thousand in fifty years?

O’Gorman: But then the population has gone [up] – I was down in 2006 in South Georgia and they were saying half a million, and the most recent estimate is six million Fur Seals on South Georgia alone.

Lee: As somebody who has studied them, can you understand why they have made this...

O’Gorman: Really, what happened is that when they wiped out the whale population there was all this food. So the seals had a bonanza: an unlimited amount of food.

³ The term Base Commander did not come into use until 1967.

When we went down to Stonington and got in there in 2005, all the way along the western Peninsula there were beaches where in my day there was never a beach, it was all ice cliffs. You had to climb up the ice to get ashore, always.

[00.41.03] Lee: So their breeding grounds are increasing as well?

O’Gorman: Somewhere they can land, in other words. In fact at 68° South we went into Stonington and Horseshoe, and there were fur seals on the beach! I said ‘NO!’ They weren’t breeding: these are male dispersed young animals. You know, dispersion. Unbelievable. But very successful, in that sense.

Lee: You did some manhauling, didn’t you, at one point?

O’Gorman: I had very little manhauling on Powell Island but I had enough that I knew I didn’t like it! [Laughter]

But on Livingstone we had to manhaul and gawd, having been in the fleshpots, I was completely unfit in that sense. Alan and Pete had put a winter behind them and they were really fit, and I was, oh, did I struggle? Quite a lot of the time I had to rope on behind, just to keep [up] I just couldn’t cope. That was some of my worst days, I can tell you.

[00.42.12] Lee: How were your navigational skills?

O’Gorman: We didn’t have a problem with navigation most of the time, though [on] one of our first forays from the base camp, heading west, we ran into a blizzard, and of course we couldn’t see where we were: there was whiteout. I said to Pete ‘You’d better check the compass’, and he said ‘What compass?’. I said ‘Compass!’ He said ‘You’re the leader, you’re supposed to have the compass!’ And of course I didn’t, so we wandered around for hours, really getting worried. You know this thing ‘If you keep on turning right you know which way the wind’s blowing,’ sort of rubbish, but we ended up on the coast and had to work our way back along the coast. That was one long day, I can tell you. I remembered it the next time, about the compass.

[00.43.22] Lee: Yet again the helicopter came to get you? You didn’t seem to have much luck with helicopters!

O’Gorman: Yes, that’s right! Not only that, but I had Pete, who got snow-blindness, which held us up for ten days. But however, the helicopter arrived saying ‘We are taking you off,’

Grrrh, why, I never discovered, but the amusing thing was that when we were helicoptered on to the *Protector* the first officer said ‘The captain wants to see you,’ looking at me...

Lee: Had you been doing something wrong? Were you in the wrong place, or something?

O’Gorman: Oh no, no no. We were just running a survey, we still had the eastern part of the island to cover, and we never got there in fact. We didn’t have dogs, because the previous Hope Bay people who had been there said ‘Oh, absolutely not

necessary, you can manhaul anywhere'. Yes, if you want to manhaul thirty miles, something like that! Anyway, I was dragged up to Captain Butler, who was a big, burly naval officer, and he had a tiny little admiral with him, who was the first admiral of the South Atlantic Fleet apparently. A very nice man, but I don't remember his name. They offered me a drink, but I didn't drink, you see. Of course the other two lads, not being officers, weren't being invited at all. Good navy tradition. You only speak to officers, you know!

After about ten minutes, perhaps a bit longer, I remember Captain Butler goes over and rings a bell, and the First Officer comes in, and he says 'Take O'Gorman down and give him a bath. You do need a bath, don't you, O'Gorman?' We hadn't washed, of course, for the three months we were there. I can imagine the smell, because I had been dissecting animals and I was covered in blood and grease and every other damn thing, from living in a tent of course! I remember I had to have three changes of the water before I could see the bottom!

[00.45.44] Lee: The admiral was called Dymock Watson, the little guy.

O'Gorman: Was he? I didn't know that – that's interesting. A very nice man.

Lee: So what did the *Protector* do with you?

O'Gorman: Well, they just dumped me on Deception. I think they may have dumped Alan on Admiralty Bay, because I don't remember that Alan was on Deception at the same time. I was there for about three or four weeks I suspect, waiting for the ship to do its final round and pick me up on the way out. I enjoyed Deception, because the Argies and the Chiles were there, and because I'd spent the winter in Montevideo my Spanish wasn't great, but at least I could communicate. We went to some very nice parties, which were pleasant enough occasions. Anyway, I ended up then back at Signy for the winter: and for the following summer.

[00.46.58] Lee: And so you were back to Fur Sealing again, I presume?

O'Gorman: Well, no, because there were no bloody Fur Seals on Signy, so I was doing all the bird-ringing programme, a penguin study programme: there were all of the Giant Petrels ringed about three or four years ago starting to turn up and we realised that in fact they navigated the Southern Ocean. Nobody knew that.

Lee: And that was your discovery?

O'Gorman: No, it was probably Lance Tickell, who had been not biology but a met. man, and he had been part of this programme. When I was in the office in London Lance had come along and said they were running this programme and they were starting to get returns from Australia, from South Africa, and it looked like this was what was happening. And that's what it proved to be. That was quite exciting, in fact.

[00.48.16] Lee: A little 'discovery moment', perhaps?

O'Gorman: Yes, that's right, yeah. There were a few of those moments: not many.

Lee: There's one word we seem to be missing from all this, and that's 'Organisation'. One seems to get the impression that FIDS didn't quite seem to know what to do with you, Fergus?

O'Gorman: No, no. There was nobody in charge, because having dumped Cragg when he came back – in fact I was told as a result he went to Canada – so it wasn't until several years later that they had a Biological Programme with any control over it.

Lee: So you weren't receiving signals from London telling you what to do.

O'Gorman: No, nothing! Never! I had no professional support whatever. I don't believe I ever had one signal saying 'Here's your programme,' sort of thing. There was an outline, 'Do this, do that, or the other,' but I got it because the Weddell Seals had a very nice breeding population on Signy, but Arthur Mansfield had worked on them and Dick Laws had done all the work on Elephant Seals – and there were no Fur Seals.

I ended up getting involved in reproductive physiology, which I was quite interested in, and the whole question of delayed implantation which was a very... How are we doing for time?

[00.49.50] Lee: We're doing fine.

O'Gorman: Delayed implantation I had never heard about, because nobody talked about it. It didn't appear in textbooks in those days. Suddenly you have an animal here, all the species in fact, who instead of implanting once they are pregnant wait three or four months before implanting, so that they pop at the same time each year, but they don't have a twelve month pregnancy, a nine month or a ten month pregnancy depending on... The whole physiological mechanism is really interesting, and I spent a lot of time shooting seals and trying to recover the blastocysts, as they are called. I got involved in the whole development of seals, from interuterine development I mean.

[00.50.45] Lee: So you were shooting seals in various stages of their development?

O'Gorman: Trying to. In fact I even delivered a few.

Lee: You delivered a few seal pups?

O'Gorman: Oh yes – but their mothers had died, from lead poisoning.

Lee: How did they get lead poisoning? Oh, right...!

O'Gorman: I shot them! That was the days when that sort of thing, it sounds horrific now, but it was par for the course. We were shooting seals all the time for feeding the dogs. We ate them. And we were doing it for scientific reasons, and there were no objections then, it seemed to be quite a reasonable thing to do.

[01.51.27] Lee: The survival of a pup whose mother has been shot is nil, isn't it?

O’Gorman: Well, the one that was full-term that I delivered, I tried to feed it myself. We kept it for about three weeks in the lab, and it was going down the tube of course. We didn’t have rich enough food content, so unfortunately it had to be put down.

Lee: Tell me about the Midwinter’s Day.

O’Gorman: Oh, Midwinter’s Day. We had a very nice party. We all dressed up, and when I look at the picture we’re all wearing ties and that, which maybe sounds and now looks rather ridiculous because it seemed to be the thing to do, to dress up.

Lee: You, being a non-drinker, could you get involved?

O’Gorman: Well I didn’t drink and I was very popular as a result. All my allowance went to everybody else. We had the party which went on well into the night and I remember having to go round retrieving bodies from the snow outside the house. Yes, human bodies! Make sure they didn’t end up there, you know. People dozing off with glasses in their hands, that sort of thing. But we all survived. Looking back, I am amazed that we had very little conflict. George, the diesel mechanic, who came from Wooton on the Edge in Gloucestershire, George used to say ‘I’m having a black,’ and George would then retire to the diesel mechan-[???] and you know he mightn’t come out for days. But aside from that – because he was a Trade Unionist, and very adequate – we all wound him up like mad. He was a nice fellow, I liked George.

[00.53.45] Lee: Did you live at Tonsberg House, was that it?

O’Gorman: Yes, we had this very nice insignia over the door, you know that?

Lee: No, tell me.

O’Gorman: Oh yeah, with two, in fact I think Robin Sherman, who was one of the surveyors, actually made it, but it was two Elephant Seals rampant, and a crest underneath which said ‘Semper in Excreta’, which of course amused everybody – except the Governor. He turned up and said ‘Outrage! Take it down!’

[00.54.26] Lee: I was reading there was also a painting of an Antarctic map on the wall: in the dining area. What’s that like?

O’Gorman: That’s right. Yes, and Robin had done that, too. That was a grand fun map, with pointers as to where you saw things. It had [on] Laurie Island, ‘Argies Here’. It was covered up eventually, and then when they were building the new hut they discovered it and brought it back to the UK and restored it, but they crossed out the Argie base. It’s now back at Signy. Political Correctness, it’s ridiculous, but you know...

[00.55.14] Lee: And, bearing in mind the quality of organisation so far, how did they get you out of the Antarctic, in the final analysis? How did you get home? How did you get out?

O’Gorman: Well, would you believe, the actual ship turned up! The *Biscoe* turned up and that trip was a non-event. There was no problem: we didn’t have an issue coming home

Lee: There had been a previous occasion when you actually had to go out and meet the *Biscoe* ?

O’Gorman: Oh yeah, that was when they were coming in. That was the spring arrival, you know, the new boys. In ’59 in late November. We had a really heavy ice year. Everywhere was clogged with pack ice as far as you could see. I used to go and do ice obs on the summit of the ice cap, and all you could see of course was ice in every direction. The *Biscoe* tried to come in for about five or six days, and I think went off and came back, and eventually help (???) The edge of the ice was about three miles off from Borge Bay and we had been demanding the mail, because whatever else we wanted was the mail. So they finally decided ‘Yes, we could get the mail,’ and a pinnacle was put over the side.

Woodlouse – as we used to call him, the Third Officer – Woodhouse was his name, he came down with us and everybody called him ‘the woodlouse’ and he liked to be a martinet, he was only the Third Officer, and anyway, he was well known as ‘Woodlouse’. Woodlouse, in this pinnacle, comes along the ice edge. The ice at this point in time is about fifteen feet thick, and I am standing there with Ken and the dogs, the huskies, The Bitches as they were called, and we’re waiting on the ice for the sacks of mail. He leans over, and has an ice axe, and starts prodding the ice between us like ‘Was it safe for him to get ashore?’ I said to him ‘Give us the f***** mail!’ I got the mail, and we turned around and shot off. [Laughter]

[00.57.55] Lee: It was a three-mile sledge back to the base, wasn’t it?

O’Gorman: Yes, and then the lads, the new boys, started to arrive later in that day and apparently the message got round that ‘There are some pretty peculiar people on Signy!’

Lee: Including you, presumably?

O’Gorman: Absolutely!

Lee: You have been back, haven’t you, in more recent years? Tell me very briefly, tell me about that.

O’Gorman: I was back in 2006 in Signy. I’ve been back four times, been South four times this decade, but I only got into Signy once. It was such a contrast, it was unbelievable. For those who will know Signy, there’s a Bernsten Point which is just above where the huts are, still. It overlooks the strait between Coronation and Signy itself, and it was one place I used to go for rest and recreation.

You’d walk up a couple of hundred metres, and sit and watch what was happening, the ice, the icebergs, the penguins, whatever. I spent a lot of time there, so I went up, and I could see the indentation of my posterior [on] this rock so that must be the one! And I looked across at Coronation, which is a beautiful, massive, beautiful island,

ninety miles long and covered in ice, two big glaciers pointing out, the Sunshine Glacier and the Laws Glacier protruding at you, they were always present, and I said ‘Where in God’s name are they?’

They had disappeared. Where you had a nunatak, just appearing above the ice, the tops of the mountains, now, all the flanks of these mountains were just scattered with snow. There was hardly a piece of ice to be seen. It was like somebody had punched me in the gut, I felt ‘Jeez!’ I was absolutely shocked. It was because I had become so used to the scene, it was imprinted on my mind: I can still see it in fact. Suddenly: the new thing. Wow! And the new map of Signy shows that the ice cap has declined by a third at least, and they’ve had to re-do the geology as a result.

[01.00.43] Lee: Did you say you’ve been back four times in this century? Since 2000? I think I was with you on 2000. Marguerite Bay? So why do you go back so often? Is it something in your blood?

O’Gorman: Yes, I would go back every year if I had the opportunity. A lot of it is nostalgia, but it is such an unbelievably beautiful place, and I have such good memories of it. In a sense, I grew up there, because I left Ireland as a very naïve twenty-one year old.

[01.01.25] Lee: Turned the boy into a man, did it?

O’Gorman: Well, I’m not sure about that! (Laughter) We made some progress, shall we say, in that direction!

[01.02.26] Lee: It’s been a real treat. Thank you, Fergus.

O’Gorman: Not at all.

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Significant extracts:

- Recruiting process [00.03.54]
- First Fids winter in Monte [00.36.11]
- Whaling at South G. [00.20.45]
- Fur Seal population explosion [00.39.36]
- Giant Petrel migration discovery [00.46.58]
- Delayed implantation [00.49.50]
- Loss of ice cover at Signy [00.58.38]

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