Interview with David Laidler

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Pre-University: 1938–56

RL: Where and when were you born?
DL: 12 August 1938, North Shields.

RL: Can you tell us a little about your family and childhood?
DL: Father a fishmonger and fryer in Whitley Bay – born 1899, left school at 11, gassed at Arras at 18, was therefore at home throughout World War II, which was unusual. Mother born 1904, left school at 13, thereafter a shop assistant until marriage in 1929 (i.e., an unremarkable but insecure lower middle-class couple).

Only child, and bearer of considerable parental ambitions, to be fulfilled through education, which of course was to lead to qualifications, a good job, steady income and no other deviations from my family’s norms. I suspect that many of the first-generation-to-go-to-university kids that I’ve taught here in recent years will give their parents the same kind of surprises that I gave mine – which can be summarized in my mother’s complaint that I ‘picked up funny ideas’ along the way. A private school was a manifestation of their social ambitions for me, and must have stretched the budget at times, though we were certainly not poor.

House damaged three times by bombing during war (once seriously), with me in it on each occasion (under stairs or under steel-topped kitchen table – no back garden for a proper shelter). This was unusual for the town, which wasn’t attacked all that often. I just lived on an unlucky block I think. But people did die, though I wasn’t scratched. The experience impressed on me early and deeply the role that luck, good and bad, can play in determining the turns a life can take. I wonder nowadays whether perhaps this experience is one of the roots of my inability to swallow the view that all will be well with society if you simply let people make their own choices and take the consequences.

As a teenager, I worked in the shops during school holidays and sometimes on Saturdays too. The fryer was interesting, since many of the customers were working class – miners, shipyard workers, etc., and during the summer included lots of Glaswegian holidaymakers who were too poor to afford Blackpool. We sold cod
and chips for a shilling – cheap even by the standards of the 1950s. I learned that we really were not quite as far removed socially from these folk as my mother liked to pretend – a salutary lesson that stuck.

RL: Can you tell us a little about your schooling: for example, did you wear that distinctive King’s School uniform in those days?
DL: It wasn’t the King’s School (which I think is nowadays a public school, in the English sense of the word ‘public’) then – just Tynemouth School, a private day school for boys aged 8–18. (It had an elementary school for 4–8 year olds, which I also attended.) The uniform was red cap with badge, red and blue striped tie, and optional navy blazer with badge, grey flannels. Nothing out of the ordinary (i.e., straw hats or striped blazers) – all grammar schools had variations on this kind of uniform.

I always did well academically at school, but I resolutely resisted its efforts to socialize me to middle-class ways, and ended up with a pretty large chip on my shoulder by the time I left. I had a few excellent teachers (English and History in particular) but some were snobs, who made my life uncomfortable when they could, for example, on the rugby field (games were compulsory). I didn’t make my own life easier by figuring out quite early that I was smarter than them, and making sure that they were aware that I knew this.

University: LSE 1956–59

RL: You chose Economics because you didn’t fancy studying French or English literature (your other two A level subjects)?
DL: My third A level subject was History, not Economics, though there was a special paper in Economic History. I didn’t fancy any of these, because they all seemed likely to lead to a career in school teaching. With no science but O level Maths, a social science degree was the only available alternative, and Economics the only social science I had heard of. I thought it would be like Economic History.

RL: Which subjects (and with whom) did you take in your first and second years?
DL: It was a two-year part 1 – large-scale lectures (LSE old theatre) in economics from Andrew Ozga (micro theory), Kurt Klappholz (macro theory), Arnold Plant, Frank Paish, Roy Allen (various applied economics topics including descriptive statistics). Other lectures from Michael Oakeshott (political thought), W. A. Robson (local government), Eleanora Carus-Wilson and Jack Fisher (economic history), and we also had lectures in government and political history (I forget from whom). I took logic and scientific method as an optional subject (John Wisdom and Karl Popper in a class of about eight) and also ‘elements of social structure’ (Norman