

This is Malcolm McBain interviewing Mr Leslie McLoughlin at his home in Exeter on 8 July 2003.

MM Could we start by you telling me about how you came to be involved with the Arabic language and how you came to be an instructor at MECAS?

LM I began learning Arabic in 1960 when I was still in the Army; I was in the Educational Corps. I was an instructor officer and at that time the Education Corps had the requirement, or commitment to teach Arabic to the Army. I learned Arabic at the direction of the Army at the University of Durham between 1960 and 1961. At the end of that academic year, those of us who passed were sent off to MECAS, the Middle East Centre for Arab Studies, Shemlan, Lebanon. I arrived in MECAS in August 1961 and I remained as a student there until February 1962. After finishing at MECAS I began my job as an instructor in Arabic at the Command Arabic Language School, Arabian Peninsula, in Aden. I spent two years teaching there until February 1964. During 1964 I was posted to Germany. Whilst I was in Germany a posting came up to Sharjah, in the Arabian Gulf and I went to Sharjah as officer in charge of an Arabic radio station which was being set up through the agency of the Army on behalf of the Information Department of the Foreign Office. I spent a few months on that job but left in November 1964 and came back to this country. I took the decision then that I was so interested in Arabic that I didn't want to remain in the Army doing the types of job that I would have been doing as an instructor officer in the Educational Corps so I resigned from the Army in the spring of 1965. It just so happened that MECAS needed a Chief Instructor because their traditional arrangements had fallen through. The arrangement was that normally an academic would do the job for one year as the person in charge of the instructional programme at MECAS. The person they had in mind seems to have let them down at the last minute and therefore when I was free it turned out that MECAS had a problem. The director of MECAS at the time was John Wilton of the Foreign Office and I had been in touch with him ever since leaving MECAS. When he knew that I was, as he said, on the beach, he suggested I apply for the job. I applied for the job and I was accepted in August 1965.

MM Who did you apply to?

LM To the Foreign Office, Training Department, and I was interviewed by the late Anthony Elliot, (T A K Elliot). He was the person who eventually had the final word, and he arranged for me to be incorporated into the system. So I went out to MECAS in August, 1965.

MM And you went as a regular member of the Foreign Office?

LM As a temporary civil servant. I forget the exact title but there was a grade and there were arrangements for pay and pension and so on. All of that was organised and I spent three years doing that job at MECAS.

MM You had had a good deal of experience of teaching and speaking Arabic by then of course?

LM Yes, I imagine that one of the reasons why John Wilton was interested was that, although it was quite a good system to have an academic on board running your programmes, as often as not the academics themselves could not speak Arabic. They tended to be traditional 'dead language' people. I had at least been using Arabic continuously for the best part of three years and I had experience of different dialect areas, Lebanon, The Gulf and Aden. Although I didn't realise it myself at the time, these were assets that John Wilson and possibly other people were interested in.

MM When you were teaching Arabic to presumably British troops in your early days what sort of Arabic were you teaching? I mean by that what sort of situations were you dealing with, were they military situations or market place or...

LM It varied a great deal. The thing was that I was an assistant instructor officer and the programme and the instructions were laid down by the Commanding Officer. At the time I was in Aden there were three different C.Os, and they each had their own approach to how Arabic should be taught. To give you a very simple example, under one of these C.Os if you wanted to say the Arabic for 'good morning,' you had to be able to write it in Arabic script first, read it and write it. There are many other ways of teaching Arabic than that. That was

the system that was applied and we just got on with the job and somehow people acquired a certain amount of Arabic but, looking back on it, it wasn't the most efficient way of handling the problem.

MM What I am really getting at is that if you were teaching Arabic to soldiers who would have a military task in mind most of the time, were you teaching them the essentials of the requirements of field craft...

LM Yes, the instruction was meant to be focussed on Army requirements because 95% of the students were Army, and they were mostly officers or occasionally NCOs. The trick was to find situations which would encourage them to use Arabic and create situations that would replicate the situation they would be in themselves. This wasn't easy to achieve because it would have required a great deal more imagination than was actually available to advise on the courses. It was slightly hit and miss. There were good reasons for this. The students were going to Aden, or to Bahrain, or to Kuwait, or to Oman; a variety of dialect areas and a great variety of jobs that they would do. So it wouldn't have been possible to devise tailor made material for every single person. As a result, they tended to go for something in the middle. It worked more or less but there were problems in the product and this situation did lead to a certain amount of discussion that I referred to in at least one of the books I wrote about that period. The people who were using Arabic, officers who were in Oman or Bahrain or wherever, it was noticeable whether they spoke Arabic well or not, and some people commented that although they had gone through courses they weren't terribly good at Arabic. If that situation arose then obviously they would have to try to improve the product. So I was involved in that kind of situation where we were always being judged from the outside. Looking back on it, it was a good thing for the school and for me. In my own particular case it meant that I had always to be aware of the need to teach things in a way that was interesting and realistic, and be ready to take advantage of new techniques. The use of a tape recorder in those days was audacious; one had to try to move with the times.

MM Did you specialise in imparting knowledge of Arabic culture?

LM Oh yes, I thought it was absolutely essential. I wasn't alone in this but it always seemed

to me to be so blindingly obvious that the connection between Arabic and Islam is an organic connection. Some people would say you can't understand Arabs without Islam, and you certainly can't understand Islam without Arabic; that is certainly true. And the reason why we are all involved in Arabic and the Arab world is because of the Koran. It is the Koran which has been not just (in the Moslem view) the word of God but has been a model for correct Arabic. This unique status of the Koran as a model for Arabic is the reason why these days, after fifteen centuries of Islam, there is only one standard Arabic throughout the Arab world, because you cannot tinker with the status of the written Arabic. It has this elevated status because of the position of the Koran.

MM How does that tie in with the widespread belief in Islam in countries like India or Pakistan where you have Urdu speaking people, or Indonesia, where they speak an entirely different language?

LM Well, the connection is this: all Moslems accept that the Koran is written in Arabic, and they all accept there is no such thing as a translation of the Arabic. In their view, the Koran has a unique quality, which is called 'i'jaz', which, roughly, means 'impossible to translate'. It means it cannot be replicated in another language. That is the meaning of 'i'jaz'. Of course even Urdu speakers or other non-Arab Muslims, pray in Arabic. The call to prayer is in Arabic. So there is this unique connection between the language and the religion. But in answer to your question as it applies to soldiers, and later on to civilian students, it was important to get over to them that the simplest thing you can say in Arabic relates to, takes you directly into, the culture and the religion. If you ask someone, 'How are you?' the reply is, 'Praise be to God.' So immediately you are talking about a relationship with the divinity, which is quite different from our own language. So it was very easy way to explain to people that this is a different culture.

MM Could you give some examples of how people, who revere the Koran, or who believe in the Koran, might be different from your standard Christian?

LM There are so many ways. What we share is pretty important. The idea of one God, an omnipotent God. There are elements like that which are in common, but when a Muslim says

he believes in one God he means something very different from what we understand. Firstly, Christians who believe in the Trinity possess beliefs that are completely incomprehensible to a Muslim. The idea of God having a son is completely incomprehensible to them. The idea of three persons in one God is completely beyond them, so they say, 'Well, you believe in three Gods.' So things like that are very clear differences when the appearance is that there are some things like the belief in one God in common. Another very striking example of the way in which their belief in Islam, their belief in Allah, makes them different from ourselves arises from an incident that happened to a friend of mine, a Lebanese Christian, who was treating a Kuwaiti. He was a medical doctor treating stomach problems, and over the years got to know a certain Kuwaiti merchant very well and also got to know his family. After a certain time he didn't see him for a couple of years and when he met him after this period apart he was asking him how the family was, and so on. He asked 'How is your son?' The Kuwaiti said to him, 'Al-hamdu Lillah,' (meaning 'praise be to God'), he is dead. The Lebanese as a Christian was so shocked by this 'Praise be to God, he died', that he didn't realise what it meant. It meant, 'My son has died, nonetheless all praise is due to God.' He then went on to repeat an Arabic phrase which I won't repeat, but the meaning is, 'Praise be to God, other than whom no-one is praised for something hateful.' Meaning even if something dreadful happens, this is the will of God, and so, nonetheless, praise be to God. So that is an attempt to answer the question.

MM Thank you very much. That is interesting. Can you explain from your knowledge of the culture of Islam, how it comes about that several people have recently committed suicide in pursuit of acts of terrorism?

LM I don't think those people who committed suicide would express it in that way, of committing acts of terrorism. If I were to try to comment on that I think I would have to start from first principles. For Islam, suicide is not acceptable. Suicide is condemned. In addition, Islam has an attitude of principle in relation to violence and the taking of life, which says in many well-known Hadeeth that if a life is taken, if one person is killed, it is as if the whole of humanity was killed. So there is a principled objection to the taking of life. I think what you are talking about is the situation of Palestinians reacting against the occupation, and also possibly the attacks on New York and the United States in general, and other US targets.

The starting point for those actions is political. It is an attempt to engage in acts of resistance to what is regarded as being illegal, for example the illegal occupation of Palestinian territory. What the supporters of those suicide bombers will say is, 'We have tried all manner of means in order to deal with this problem, we have tried negotiation, we have tried going through the United Nations, we have tried peaceful resistance, civil disobedience, and none of this is of any use because Israel is totally and blindly supported by the United States; and therefore we see no option but to attack them by the only means which are left to us. Their military means are far superior to ours, they have used F16 aircraft against civilian centres in Palestine, particularly Gaza, and therefore we have no option but to use the last thing that we have which is our lives'. I think they would argue along those lines but it isn't the case that Islam itself advocates either suicide or suicide in furtherance of some political aim.

MM Well, what would the attitude of the Muslim clerics be towards such acts? Would they condemn them?

LM In Islam there isn't a clergy. There isn't a separate body of people who go through something like ordination as there is in Christianity. There are people who are qualified in Islamic law and they have a certain status in the Moslem community. They take a view on these matters and many have made strong pronouncements on the subject in the last three years in particular, and in particular since the attacks on New York in September 2001. They have taken the line for the most part that such acts are to be condemned, namely the killing of thousands of totally innocent bystanders; this is completely to be rejected. That has been the stand of many people. There are problems, which, for example, Baroness Thatcher has pointed out. She says she hasn't heard this strong rejection, the condemnation by Moslem leaders, as strongly expressed as she would have liked. Well, that is a judgement. Some people take the view that they haven't noted strong condemnation, but there is certainly plenty of evidence that leading figures such as the Sheikh of Al-Azhar have taken a very strong line condemning this indiscriminate attack on the civilian population.

MM Thank you very much. You did pursue knowledge of Arabic quite extensively after your career in MECAS, didn't you?

LM Well, I spent three years in MECAS, 1965 to 1968, and in one sense I was learning Arabic all the time as of course teaching very bright people as I was, I had to keep up my own standards and improve; but I was always very conscious that if I had the time I must take a degree in Arabic, because there were so many things that I simply hadn't had the time to read, basic texts in Islam or Arabic for example, so I took a degree in the second period I spent at MECAS. I came back to MECAS in 1970. I was there in the first period until 1968 before I came back in 1970. I studied for a Master's in Linguistics at Leeds University 1968-69 and then I taught at Edinburgh for one year until 1970, then for two Summers, 1969 and 1970, I taught Arabic in the United States in the Universities of Pennsylvania and Columbia. So I was always engaged in things relative to improving my theoretical knowledge, the framework of my Arabic. But actually doing the degree only began in 1970. I registered with SOAS to do an external degree, as you could in those days, and took my degree in 1971 in Beirut. The exams took place in Beirut.

MM So who were your examiners?

LM Well, they were all SOAS examiners. I never met them. It was all done in writing in London; the papers were done in Beirut and corrected in London. One of the examiners was a man, David Cowan, who had been Principal Instructor at MECAS.

MM You went back to MECAS again in 1970?

LM Yes, the summer of 1970 and stayed this time until late in 1975.

MM And what were you doing on that second occasion, still teaching?

LM The second period was very different from the first for many reasons. One of them, strictly related to the teaching, one of the main differences, was I now had a much better theoretical framework. I had done Linguistics, which helped very much to formulating ways of teaching Arabic better. And I had also improved my own Arabic by taking my degree. Another factor relating to actual teaching materials was that I had taught in the United States

where they had laid down the materials. They prescribed certain texts which I had never seen before and they were actually very innovative and useful. I incorporated parts of that in the teaching programme at MECAS by arrangement all the time with the successive Directors, because in that time there were several Directors of MECAS. It was important, of course, that people felt that any changes that were being made were agreed changes, that they were implemented in a way that didn't cause upheaval because if you make changes in any well run organisation there are always unforeseen consequences. I took the line that it wasn't even worth my while thinking about making a change unless I could guarantee an improvement, to put a rough figure to it, of 20%. And one was able to think in terms of percentages because the exams were marked by outside examiners and percentages were used. So to some extent I was sticking my neck out in saying I would advocate this change because I think we would get a 20% improvement. When this was agreed, and it was agreed in most situations, not all, the result was that a 20% improvement was achieved, and there was plenty of external evidence to support that. That happened in the second period from 1970 to 1975.

MM And had you a large throughput of Foreign Office staff at that time?

LM No, not really. The British eventually were a minority at MECAS. By the time I left they were a minority, and of the Brits I suppose in most situations the majority were FCO, but it wasn't as if the FCO dominated, as had been the case when I began, when I was a student in 1960. The emphasis was very much on what was appropriate to Foreign Office students, for perfectly good reasons. They were the main body at the time and their requirements were important to this country so there was no great argument about that. But by 1975 things had changed enormously. The student body included many individuals, either at their own expense or working for commercial companies, who wanted to get results in the shortest possible time. They certainly couldn't afford 18 months to send them on an Arabic course, so one had to cater for people who only had a limited amount of time. So that was a new feature and this prevented MECAS being identified as something purely for the Foreign Office. There had been criticism in the 1960s from the commercial students. I remember one particular individual from BP who was extremely bright and very articulate, who said 'This is ridiculous. This is not appropriate to my company's needs at all. It is designed for the Foreign Office'. He was fairly blunt. This made people think and changes were made. I'm

not saying that I made them, other people were involved. I was away completely for two years, but changes were made by successive Directors to meet that kind of situation.

MM And so the purpose of the school as a training centre for the Foreign Office gradually disappeared.

LM The Foreign Office still had fair numbers at the end. When I left I imagine that in the first year there were 7 or 8 students, which is a fair number of students, so they were always considerable and the text books used certainly catered for their needs in terms of examination requirements and work in the field subsequently. So the Foreign Office in its various departments was well represented at MECAS and even to the end in 1975.

MM By that time you must have become quite a valuable property as far as the Foreign Office itself was concerned. Why did they let you go?

LM I don't know. It's no secret that language skills are highly prized. My own skill in Arabic was fairly highly developed. I did actually apply, before I went to MECAS, for entry, main stream entry, so I went through all that process and reached the final interview in 1964, and also in 1968, so if I'd thought about this at all I thought to myself, 'Well, they already had plenty of evidence, so if they don't want to make me an offer presumably they have their reasons.' So by 1975 I let them know that I was planning to leave and I was interested in academic work and made some enquiries then. I didn't find any posts available so it seemed to me that I had to think in terms of finding my own niche. So I applied to a firm, which was in need of an Arabic speaker and worked for them, actually in the civil engineering field for a few months. That didn't work out for reasons which we will go into if you like, but it was only for a few months. It was from September of 1975 until about March or April of 1976 when I came home from Amman. The base was in Amman.

MM The base of this company?

LM Yes. It was a base there mainly to operate into Saudi Arabia. It was a good idea; it was a feasible idea but I didn't think the company was completely ready. They hadn't really taken

on board how expensive that would be. Amman itself was expensive. We were a family, the usual expatriate requirements, and then there was all the question of operating into Saudi Arabia. The job came to an end in about March or April because they had not fulfilled their obligations; they were actually in breach of contract and paid me compensation for termination. And so then I worked for OUP...

MM Oxford University...

LM Oxford University Press. They advertised at just the time I was coming back to this country and I was given the job of Middle East representative from the Summer of 1976. So that's a sort of answer to your question about the FCO's lack of interest. There are subsequent developments to that particular story and I became involved with the FCO in all kind of ways as an interpreter but that's some years down the line.

MM Tell me about that. I think it is quite important.

LM As you know, the British system for interpreters is in many ways unique. It is totally different from the French or German system. In Germany you have a Sprachendienst within the German Foreign Office, i.e. a service for languages, and there are people who are trained to be interpreters and that is what they do. The British don't do that. The British have people who can speak the various languages, and certainly there are plenty of Arabists, but it is not everyone who feels confident of being an interpreter for the Prime Minister or the Foreign Secretary. So it is left to individuals. 'You have qualified, will you do this job?' If the individual says, 'No,' they can't be dragooned into it. So in order to meet that situation the Foreign Office uses what are in effect freelancers, people who are competent in the two languages, who have a track record of being able to interpret and who are security cleared. I came into this particular field only in 1983. I'd come back to this country from the Middle East and I set up my own company for teaching Arabic and translation and through this I was again in contact with the Foreign Office. Some of our students were Foreign Office students including Patrick Wright. He was going out to Saudi Arabia and he came to us for a refresher course. So we had that level of contact. The introduction to the field of interpreting happened in a different way. I was doing some translation on one occasion for the Ministry

of Defence in 1983 and it was quite an elaborate translation and required a great deal of care and we spent quite a bit of time on it, myself and a colleague. The branch of the MOD concerned was DESO, Defence Export Services Organisation, and of course there was a Foreign Office link to DESO. I was talking to the Foreign Office representative on one occasion and I said to him, 'Look, I cannot only do translation, I can interpret. If you ever need an interpreter, I'll be glad to help.' They went through the process of interviewing me and vetting me, checking up and so on, and I was given my first job of interpreting, real live interpreting at a high level, for Mrs Thatcher in October 1983. So that was the first time that I had actually interpreted live. I had taught people the rules of interpreting, but I had never actually done it myself.

MM And you started with Mrs Thatcher?

LM Yes. It was being thrown in at the deep end, but it was a very good school. It was sink or swim.

MM And where was that done?

LM In Number 10. The very first time I ever did any interpreting, and that was for a visiting Arab delegation.

MM And did you have any other high level interpretation jobs?

LM Yes, and there are several pictures around the walls here. I interpreted for the Queen on two or three occasions, and I interpreted for John Major and many Ministers. I interpreted for lots of Ministers in the 1980's and 1990's. In fact I interpreted just at the beginning of this year for the Secretary of State for Defence. So I have been involved over that period from 1983 until 2003. As time goes on, of course, your brain doesn't work quite as quickly so it may be time to hang up my boots, or my earplugs. I didn't find any great problem in interpreting for the Secretary of State for Defence.

MM Are there people around who are capable of taking over from you?

LM Well, in one way I suppose the answer is 'I don't know.' I began doing Arabic 40 years ago so that is two generations and a bit, so I have no illusions. There are probably youngsters out there, by youngsters I mean people aged between 30 and 40, I literally don't know and it could well be that of those 40 year olds there are people of sufficient maturity and knowledge of the background plus the linguistic skills to be able to handle that kind of job confidently. I always felt after the first year or two that I was quite confident of being able to handle it, there would be problems with concentration, but I felt confident about being able to handle it, largely through this very abrupt introduction, through Mrs Thatcher. Whether there are people who feel confident about it I have no idea. But theoretically it is not to be ruled out. I have never had any illusions about it, I have never believed that Arabic is uniquely difficult, or there are special problems about interpreting, I think it is a problem on a par with other languages.

MM There are no sort of cultural problems with Arabs or Muslims?

LM Well certainly you have to be aware of how to put things and this is all part of what one can bring to the table. I should say that I have always interpreted consecutively, i.e. normally at a table, with the parties on either side of a table or, in some cases, sitting on a couch. But I have never, or very little, been involved in conferences sitting in a booth, I don't particularly enjoy that. It's a different technique, different requirements but consecutive interpreting I have done a lot of that.

MM You mean somebody says something, pause, then you...

LM Then you interpret English into Arabic and then I have done a lot where I have been doing the two languages, English to Arabic and Arabic into English, and I didn't feel that was a great problem because the discussions tend not to go on for hours. If you have got something complicated, after an hour it is going to be obvious that you need another session or whatever. So it's not interminable. So one can handle doing the two languages; it does require intellectual effort and it does require concentration so you can't go on forever, but I have done it in both directions. In other cases the visiting teams brought their interpreter so I

would do it one way and he would do the other, or she in two particular cases, and then equally the visiting interpreter might prefer to do Arabic to English as opposed to English to Arabic; it varies and one has to be ready to make the change at the last minute.

MM That's very interesting.

LM It's a story in itself, the whole business of interpreting. I personally think that the Foreign Office hasn't given sufficient attention to purely language matters at the crucial point. They very often leave the subject to the last minute, 'Who are we going to get as interpreter?' To me it always seems obvious that interpreting is so important, it should be the first thing you think about. That is not sort of professional ambition, to me it seems common sense. I am not a professional interpreter, I have no axe to grind, it simply seems to me to be common sense that you start from the language. You say that Prince so and so is going to visit, we'll say, Tony Blair. The visitor doesn't speak English, how are we going to handle this? And that should be the starting point. For example, how are you going to sit? I have been in situations, even in the Foreign Office, where the actual seating arrangements have been left totally unclear, which is part of the dynamics of any meeting. You have to get the seating right. I have been surprised to find this kind of thing left until rather late in the day. But, as I say, I am not a professional interpreter and I am not claiming more for my profession than is justified. I am speaking as an outsider. I have only been an interpreter for the Foreign Office and for the MOD.

MM Thank you very much for that. Could you just say a word or two about the Institute for Islamic Studies?

LM Yes, well I am a Fellow of the Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies so I know a fair amount about it. The Institute was actually founded in 1999. It's a result of a lot of development at Exeter over the years. Arabic began in about 1975. It was then part of the Department of Theology. Over the years bits were added to it and the great golden age for the present era was when they had a thing called the Centre of Arab Gulf Studies in the 1980's. This began because of the growing importance of the Gulf, and also because there was a Professor here at the time, an Egyptian Professor, who saw very clearly that the Arab

countries could be persuaded to help financially in establishing a good research centre. To cut a long story short, he did manage to get support from the Gulf countries so, for example, in the University of Exeter the main library of the whole University was partly financed by one of the Gulf Rulers, the Ruler of Dubai. So that happened in the 1980's, this involvement with the Gulf, so there was a Centre for Arab Gulf Studies. At the same time there was the teaching of Arabic language, the teaching of Arabic history, Arab literature and something called Middle East Studies, or Islamic Studies, but it wasn't clear what their focus was because there were a number of targets that people were aiming at. The big change came, as I say, in 1999 when they founded the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies. The Centre for Arab Gulf Studies doesn't exist any more. It has now been incorporated into something called the Arab World Documentation Unit, which is within the Institute. By and large everything is under one roof now but there is an outstation, which is the Arabic Library. The Arabic Library is the collection of books in Arabic, and on the Arab world, whereas the Arab World Documentation Unit's focus really was on basic research material such as White Papers, reference books and so on. We have, if you like, two research facilities, two study facilities. One is the library and the other is The Arab World Documentation Unit. Within the Institute there are several Professors. There are two Professors of Arabic, one is British and one is Egyptian, there is a Professor of Islamic studies, who is himself an American. The overall director is Professor Tim Niblock, who is a specialist in politics and in particular Middle Eastern politics.

MM That is a formidable team.

LM The Institute is well endowed now. It is well funded and has continuing connections with the Arab world. It does a lot of contemporary work and that is where I come in. They asked me to be a Fellow because I have written a good deal about the Arab world as well as teaching Arabic. I've written a number of other books because I began life as an historian. My first degree was history and since leaving MECAS I have done very much more in the way of historical work. I wrote a history of MECAS and I wrote a history of British Arabists in the 20th century which includes the story of MECAS but focuses on the whole century. MECAS only existed for 34 years. So I've done historical works like that. I've also done a history, or biography, of the first King of Saudi Arabia, King Abdul-Aziz Ibn Saud. That

came out about 10 years ago.

MM Thank you very much indeed.