

THE COHEN INTERVIEWS

MARY WILKINSON – Interview No 23

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This is one of 26 interviews with social work pioneers conducted by the late Alan Cohen in 1980 - 81. The period of social work history Alan wished to explore with the interviewees was 1929 - 59. With one exception (No 24, Clare Winnicott), the interviews were unpublished until this edition in 2013. The copyright is held by the not for profit organisation WISEArchive.

Each interview is presented as a free-standing publication with its own set of notes. However, readers interested in the Cohen Interviews as a whole and the period discussed are referred to:

- (a) the other 25 interviews
- (b) the Editors' Introduction
- (c) the Select Bibliography.

All of these can be found at
http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/explorefurther/subject_guides/social_work

Mary Wilkinson

The interview with Mary Wilkinson is the shortest of the 26 and in many ways the most difficult to categorise as the interviewee represents an older style of working, within the probation service, rather than the more pioneering and reflective approaches of the other 25 interviewees. Mary Wilkinson's voice is however clear and forthright and offers valuable points to consider when reflecting on the history of social work development.

She stayed in one area, Bedfordshire, all her working life (1939-1972) and placed great emphasis on the importance of having roots in the community and being widely known in the area. She saw this as enabling her to do a better job and was critical of those who perhaps only stayed for two years. She had a direct and down to earth approach which she strongly believed was of benefit to the clients, being as far from jargon as it was possible to be.

Mary Wilkinson acknowledged that she was a "lone wolf" and was probably an

uncomfortable colleague, representing a way of working that the courses, discussed by many of the other interviewees, were intended to put an end to. Alan had found a fascinating counterpoint to the background and social work philosophy of the other people he interviewed. When Mary Wilkinson says that the clients remember her and that they stop to talk to her as she walks round the town after her retirement one senses a deep satisfaction in a job well done for all that she went against so much of the newer approaches so enthusiastically taken up elsewhere. She is certainly a lively reminder of the other side of the pioneering coin.

A.C. So, how did you come into social work Miss Wilkinson?

M.W. Well, in 1931, I joined the County Borough of Walsall Police Force. And after working there for a long time I felt that I wanted to see what happened to people after they'd been caught and what was being done to help them. I felt very strongly about this matter. I knew that I'd been led into police work for this ultimate end. I saw an advertisement in the paper and on the 8th August there were eight candidates at Bedford and I got the job as the first full-time woman probation officer. I commenced on the 1st September 1939. The salary was £220 per year plus travelling expenses. I had 10 courts to supervise. I had only the supervision of small boys up to 10 or 12, and girls and women.

A.C. What about training?

M.W. I had no training; straight into the job. The Home Office did send me to Southend-on-Sea for a month, for help. But I still consider the training and the discipline of the police service stood me, and has stood me, in excellent stead. It meant that I always kept up to date with records. It also gave me the discipline of treating people in a courteous and proper manner. My first Chief Constable said, "Sir' and 'Madam' them all whether they come from the best road or the worst. You are servicing them." I furthermore had to serve two quarter sessions and the Bedford Assize, and it's here that I met some very fine lawyers. At the time of my appointment there were two full time probation officers in Luton and there were two part time officers which served the Bedford Borough and the surrounding districts of Bedford. And there was myself. I believe I had 26 cases when I took over, I followed, actually, an excellent officer who'd been a part-time officer in Bedford. She was also the superintendent of a Mother and Baby Home. She's now been dead some years, but she was a very good help to me. Only a few days after I took up my appointment war was declared and thousands of evacuees poured into Bedford. It was not an easy task because a great number of these children were on probation and nobody had been informed. So with cap in hand one went and knocked on the door of people in Bedford to tell them that John or Jill was on probation. I remember going into Gladstone Street and telling a lady there that the boy she'd got was on probation, and the probation officer in London had told me he was most difficult. She said to me, "Come in this front room, my dear," and I went in and she said, "Look at these photos." They were four boys. She said, "I'm a widow. These four boys, as you see,

have been to the Trust School, Bedford Modern [1] and they're all rowers. I've had to bring them up on my own, and I'll bring this boy up too!" No more trouble!

War brought also other burdens for me. I took on the managing of a Toc H [2] charity hostel for troops in this town and this continued for many years. I was appointed clerk to the Clerk of the County Council who was Air Raid Precautions (ARP) Controller. So every other night I had to sleep out in the magistrates' room with another colleague ready for alerts. This all took a great deal of time and finally in the war, driving to work one morning, five bombs were dropped on Bedford and some of the fragments fell on my car, but I came out unscathed. With a large country area, the petrol ration was a feature. One had about four gallons a week ration and I was allowed from Cambridge four gallons, that made eight gallons a week for a whole county area. So I began to work in probation circles, and until the day I retired I did that.

A.C. How did you play yourself into the job?

M.W. The discipline of the police, and my work there, was very helpful. For instance all indecency cases in Walsall were dealt with by the police women, so I had a great deal of very difficult interviewing to do. I learned by that, that you don't dissect people, you're patient with them and patience is the greatest thing in the world for any social worker to have. I certainly had to learn the system of probation. I had to grope my way into probation work in some senses, but I found, and I still say patience is the thing. I think the approach to any new client is to be friendly, firm, but you must command respect. I have never allowed anybody to dominate the interview. I think interviews that go on for three or four hours are very faulty on the part of the social worker. I've maintained my standards and I would never allow them to be dropped. They have had to treat me with respect as I have treated them. In dealing with the country people there are many courtesies which must be shown to them. You must shut their front gate I always approach these homes at the back door and I went through the kitchen. It's in the kitchen you can weigh up a woman. And I have become very friendly with these people.

I remember taking over a case in Elstow [3] from a colleague who'd left, and I walked in and we talked general things, and all of a sudden a voice said "You are a bloody liar!" And they looked very flustered, and the father said "It's the mynah bird behind you!" And the bird then said to me, "Did you come on a bicycle?" and I said, "No." And up to this date I'm friendly with that girl. About three months ago she said to me, "Miss Wilkinson I shall always treat people like you treated us." I treat my girls like that, and it works. I'm quite sure with children, they enjoy firmness and I enjoyed very much the little boys I used to have. I well remember two boys coming before the court, both had been put under my supervision and one was really the villain. And the first time I saw him I stripped him down. And the next time he came and as far as I was concerned that was finished. Off he went. Then in came the little second boy who'd obviously been the dupe. And I said, "Have you been playing with that big boy?" He said, "No." He'd got a speech defect. I said, "Do you ever talk to him?" "He said "Yes, just now on the stairs.' I said, "What did he say?" He said, "Go on up, she ain't

so grumpy today!" These are the type of things that you've got to be young like they are, but firm like an adult.

I'm quite sure that when you approach a new case you must be friendly, but whatever you do, don't dissect them, and don't start a psychoanalysis programme at the start. They don't want it. I remember going into a country case for many, many months, and I got a good idea of what was wrong with a very troublesome girl. And one night I went there and they were all out except Dad. And he said, "Come on in Miss Wilkinson. I want to talk to you. You've been very kind to my family and the girl's much better. It's your patience that's paid off and you know what the real trouble is?" I said, "I've a very good idea." He said, "I ain't her Dad. She was born in the war when I was away. And this is the type of thing," he says, "that most people poke their nose into too much.

A.C. So you let it come from him, rather than you being the one who told them.

M.W. I would like to tell you of another case similar to this. I had a prostitute come from London with two little girls. She'd come down to Bedford with a coloured man and she'd lived and had a very bad life in London with another coloured man. It was soon patent to me that she was a sick woman, physically. I saw the doctor and I had a good friend in a voluntary society who said that they would get the children into a home and give her six months rest. I took her into Suffolk to this home with the two children. We left them and when we got to Clare we saw the Bell Hotel and I said, "I'm hungry. Are you?" She said "Yes." So I took her in for lunch. And she said to me, "Miss Wilkinson that's the first English lunch I've had for years, it's been boiled bananas and things like that. Cabbage." Then we got in the car to come home and she said, "You know Miss Wilkinson, my mother deserted me when I was two, and I went into dozens of foster homes, and then I went to an approved school. And then I went to Borstal, then I came to Stepney and that first black man he put me on the streets, - sometimes was very kind to me, and sometimes he knocked me across the room. And then I finally got into trouble, 'cos he used to have all my money off of me, off the streets. And I met this other man and I've come to Bedford. And I was terrified." I said, "Well I expect you've got to know your probation officer, and you've come to someone strange." She said, "I hated her. Do you know Miss Wilkinson, she wanted to know so much about me, there was nothing of me left. But you've asked nothing, and I've told you all."

I'd like to tell you about Florrie. Florrie had a good time at the beginning of the war and she got in with a rotten lot who took her to the pubs and the dances and the soldiers. Her husband was in France. She neglected her children and she came before the court. And she was put on probation and I walked with her from the Court, not saying a word either of us, to my office. I said, "Sit down, please." She sat down and I sat down. Then I said to her, "As a woman I'm ashamed of you. Go home and clean your house up and come back to me!" And she went and the next day came back and she said, "I've washed the blankets." I said, "Not enough." She went off and she came back and she said to me, "I've washed all through." I said, "Right! I'm coming with you." We didn't have a lot of fuss about forms in those days, the early days of the war. I went to the workhouse where

they'd put the children, and she met the famous matron there who tore strips off her. But we took the kids home. Ever since that day I've been friends with Florrie. And she said to me one day, "You know when I went home, the neighbours said, 'What's happened to you Florrie?' And she said, 'I've been bound over and put on probation.' 'Who under?' 'Miss Wilkinson.' 'Poor bitch!'" And she said, "But it didn't half help me, Miss Wilkinson. There was a bit in that probation order that said I mustn't frequent public houses and dance halls. She said, "When old Mother Collie come round, I said I daren't go 'cos that old Mother Wilkinson might come round." And since that day, about every three months a phone call came to the office and it ran like this - "Is that you Miss Wilkinson?" "Yes Florrie." "Are you alright, me duck?" "Yes Florrie." "Alright. Tata." And the last day I worked, retiring, I met Florrie in the street and Florrie said to me, "How are you?" and I said, "I'm retiring today." She said, "You stooped down in the gutter and picked me up, didn't you girl?" That woman's husband did me a very valuable turn during my lifetime. He gave me wonderful advice about my house. During the course of these years, one day I noticed in the newspaper the death of Victor, her son, one of the little boys. So I wrote to her and said, is this your Victor? And she wrote back; she said; "Yes. That was Victor. It was cancer of the brain. And Frank and I thought we couldn't bear it, but when you'd writ, it's alright." These are the things that matter in life. Talking of newspapers I'd like you to know that every day, and now while I'm retired, before I go out I read the newspaper through, so no one can catch me on a question. One of the things I have learned in the police and probation is that you must be two jumps ahead of them, otherwise beware.

- A.C. I'll tell you what was occurring to me when you were telling me about those people, that you've obviously got a very sensitive, intuitive feel for people. And a very acute understanding of what you represent to them as a probation officer. Where does that come from?
- M.W. My faith. I couldn't live without my faith. I want you to know I've never lost a moment's sleep, only once, in my career. I remember one very bad man that I had, naughty man with his wife and children, Borstal, prison, the lot. He served his first wife very badly. And when I put him down out of my car, I used to fetch his child in. He said, "You've tried with me haven't you, Miss Wilkinson?" I said, "Yes." "But", he said, "There ain't nothing else you can do." I said, "That's where you're wrong, Tony, I can pray." I'm a great believer in prayer.
- A.C. I wondered whether as time went on in the probation service, whether you've been on courses or whether you've read articles, or heard your colleagues talking in the office as it grew. And people who'd done these social work courses, whether you found any of those ideas helpful, or whether it had all come from you?
- M.W. It came from me, think. I did go to Bristol University because that was very interesting, because that quite famous doctor, [4] was there, and I talked about cerebral haemorrhages and I fired a question at him.
- A.C. Where have you picked up your social work ideas? Is it things you've worked out for yourself? Or is it that you've heard other people saying and

you've taken it away and thought about it and thought, "Mm, yes, that's right." Or," That's wrong really." Or is it things you've read?

M.W. I've read and I've listened. And shall I say, practised too and found what's wrong and what's right.

A.C. The thing that strikes me listening to you, is that in your role as a probation officer you stood like a very firm rock like figure.

M.W. I think a good social worker or probation officer must be a rock on which people can throw their anchor and it holds. You've got to stand. They've got to know you're there. They still knock at my front door you know, after all these years.

A.C. Throw their anchor?

M.W. Throw their anchor on the rock and it must hold! You've got to hold them fast. This is the thing that matters. I'm sympathetic and think I'm kind, but I'm not soft, I hit hard. I did have two very wonderful parents and I lived in a very happy home. My mother didn't mince her words. For instance, we were told once in the morning to get up. Only once and you had to be up. Now I look back I'm grateful for everything she did.

I want to tell you a story. In the war I had a family that self evacuated themselves from London. They lived in a chicken run 27 foot by 9 foot, spotlessly clean. And their last child was called Dawn. Nothing less like the dawn you've ever seen, and then they had one Edith. One night I ran into this yard where the chicken run stood and they weren't in the hut, but there was a copper, like the old fashioned copper and in it was a naked boy with his bottom in the copper. And she said, "I haven't got a bath Miss Wilkinson, but you can see I get them clean." I said, "You're a most clean woman." She said, "Come on John. It's Albert's turn" and he blushed. And I said, "Mrs. you can't put him in there, the water'll be dirty." *She said, "No my kids ain't dirty." "Well" I said, "It'll be getting cold now." She said, "Course not," and opened the door, and there was a red hot fire. And I said; "Good Lord, he'll hurt himself!" She said, "No he'll only have a bit of a red behind!" Well, the years went by and one day I walked into a court and there was a case going on, a man and woman had lived together for some time and had a child and then parted. Of course their social services were providing her with a lawyer and he was alone. And the magistrates retired to consider, and I felt sorry for the man so I walked over to him and said, "I seem to know your face." He said, "Yes,, I was the boy in the copper." I said, "Are your mother and father alive?" He said, "My father's dead but my mother's alive." I said, "John, she was one of the cleanest women I've ever met." And tears rolled down his face and he said, "There's been a lot of hard things said to me, Miss Wilkinson, about this. That's the kindest thing you've ever done." And these are the things in life that matter.

I remember too going to a battered baby case. The man said to me, "You! Why do you always ask to see her? The other probation officer always talked psychology to us." And to cut a long story short, he reported me to the Home Secretary and the Principal Probation Officer, the Clerk of the Court and others. But I didn't mind, because I'd told him I wasn't frightened of him. All he could do was to punch a little girl of five. That baby is now in care and he's been in prison. It isn't psychology. They want common

sense to help with them. I have the gift of cooking and to me that's been a great asset.

A.C. Can you illustrate that? The cooking.

M.W. Well I had a case where they were always quarrelling. I said? "Well what starts the quarrel?" She said, "You know, Miss Wilkinson, he's a Yorkshire man and I can't make a Yorkshire pudding." My father being a Yorkshire man, and my mother being from Lincolnshire, good cooks from there. So I said to the woman, "When are you going to have dinner together?" And she told me. I said, "I shall be out here 9 a.m." I went 16 miles by car and I taught her how to make the mixture. Then I went visiting round their area and went back at the right time to put the pudding in. And that was the end of that trouble. It always started with Yorkshire puddings. Many, many of my women I've gone in and taught them how to cook. And it pays and it cements friendships, which are insoluble.

I have, you realise, been in Bedfordshire from 1939 until 1972 when I retired, partly because I had my parents here. But staying in the place has allowed me to see patterns of families. I have one very amusing and very sad story. I had a girl under my supervision, who went to Borstal [5], and while she was there a very good doctor saw her and said that if she ever had any more children, she'd had one illegitimate child, that she would die. When she came out I said to her, very plainly, she was a stupid girl if she got in the same position. But she did and she died. It was a very well-known family in the town, and I went to her funeral with the Chief Clerk in my office because we knew her well. I went to the family afterwards and I said to the mother, "Well it was a very nice funeral Mrs. Smith." She said "Yes, Mr. Cirkett the undertaker was good to me. You know, on the parish. Brought the body in the hall; unscrewed the top, let me have a look at her. I give her three kisses on her forehead. I put her high heeled shoes in, her earrings, her handbag, and I says, 'Goodbye Sheil. You'll be alright now.'" Many years after I had to visit one of this woman's daughters about an adoption, and I said, "I see you've lost your old mum, Rita." She says "Yes," she said "I saw her in the Chapel of Rest. Didn't look like our mum, so I give her a kiss on her forehead; I put a new packet of Players in with her and put me handbag in, and says, "You'll be alright, duck!" Patterns! But one has seen many other patterns going through families, just repeating themselves. That's been a very good asset to me you know. One had taken in the early days quite a lot of time with matrimonial cases where we did counselling. And I'm always pleased to know that the first case I went to in November 1939, I got them together again and they still are together. One of the triumphs of my career was that when I entered the musical festival and came out as a winner of two cups, the husband and wife were there to see it. And I expect I shall see them later on today, this old man. He's over 80.

The last three years of my career in probation when I did part-time, I worked in the divorce court. I saw great sorrow there. I found some of the men were absolutely marvellous with the children, and they'd a much better idea of keeping home and things like that. Again it was a very wonderful experience there but I was appalled at the untruths that were said. I will remember the last thing that happened to me in probation. The

last morning, I was the duty officer, and an Irish man came in and he said he wanted some money from me. I told him we couldn't give him any and I said "Have you been to social security?" And he said, "Yes, they won't give me any." I said, "Well I'm not giving you any." He said, "By Christ you will!" I hit the table and said, "You won't blaspheme in this office! You've taken my Lord's name, and you won't do it!" And he stood up, and took his hat off, and he said, "I never knew that anybody would do that to me!" I said, "Don't you take his name again in vain!" He said, "Thank you very much Madam. Good morning." That's the last thing I did in probation.

I think that you must always remember you're there for them to look up to. You don't go down to them, you pull them up to you, and set them out, and make a bad life good, or a poor life good. Always remember, too, their financial position. It doesn't mean giving money away. I never carried much money on me so I was never tempted that way. I well remember one woman, I'd just been to the bank and I was told to go to her home quickly, and I had about £25 on me and I'd forgotten to pick up my bag as I left. She was an alcoholic and a poor mother and when I went to the next call I remembered I hadn't got my bag. So I went back and she said, "It's alright Miss Wilkinson, it's under those rags, 'cos if my family come in that'd all be gone." This is the type of thing.

A.C. Were you a tutor officer during this period?

M.W. I was a tutor officer, yes. Some students came from Universities.

A.C. Were you a tutor officer before 1959?

M.W. Yes.

A.C. Now I wonder how you found the new young probation officers of that period. Because you must have seen the service in Bedford grow up around you, I wonder what you made of it all?

M.W. There were some very good people who did come into it and I thought some very poor material. I thought that their ideas were shallow. This wasn't a job to me, to get the pay packet. Not at all. The thing to me was to go out. It was a mission. You've got to remember that I come from the greatest missionary church there is, the Moravians [6]. One of my Ministers, Wilfred Smith, was Sir Wilfred Grenfell's [7] godson, and it's the only way you can really work. I know we've got to be paid, and every labourer is worthy of his hire. We were paid an appalling wage, but it isn't the end of everything, money. I never go into Bedford now without I see somebody and somebody thanks me every time. They're glad they came. I had a sharp tongue often, but I think that's right.

A.C. You were saying that you reckoned it was very important to stay in one place a long time. One of the things that had gone wrong was the constant chopping and changing.

M.W. Yes some of the young people go in and after two years they want to be a senior and they are not fitted to be seniors.

A.C. What's the advantage of staying in one place a long time?

M.W. You get roots.

A.C. That means what?

- M.W. You spread with roots you know.
- A.C. I guess you become very dug into a community, too?
- M.W. I do think that no social worker should just do social work. They must do something else beside. I'm musical myself. I enter very thoroughly into the drama section and speech section of the Bedfordshire Competitive Musical Festival. I'm a great one in the Old Girls of Dame Alice Harpur School [8]. I'm their treasurer and editor of their bulletin. I go out, you see, and meet people. If you stay and wait for the world to come to you it'll never come. You must go out and meet them! You must be able to give people another point of view, you see. This is the point.
- A.C. I wanted to come back to that course you said you did in Bristol, I wondered what the course was. Did you have a year off or something?
- M.W. No, a month.
- A.C. I see, you were seconded for a month were you?
- M.W. We came from all over the place and just did a month there.
- A.C. You did it while you were in the probation service.
- M.W. Yes. One of the nicest things there was we went to Wells Cathedral and heard the choir.
- A.C. What year was that?
- M.W. I don't remember. It was after '48
- A.C. So can you remember what sort of things they talked about on the course? Did you hear anything there you hadn't heard before?
- M.W. It was quite interesting. Some of it was rubbishy. And they didn't really know what they were talking about. I remember my friend and I roared with laughter at some of the things!
- A.C. In your work obviously, you were pretty directive as well as direct with your clients, right?
- M.W. Yes.
- A.C. At this time we're talking about, up to 1959, as I remember it when I first came into social work, a lot of people talked as if to do good social work, was incompatible with being directive, the whole idea being non-directive.
- M.W. I know that's what they say about me, I'm too direct. It's rubbish to say that, I've got the results!
- A.C. So can you say where you think they have got the wrong end of the stick, with the ideas. What went wrong?
- M.W. They might be a bit politically directed. I never entered into politics at all when I worked. It didn't enter with me. I had my politics. Oh yes. I got my own ideas of what I was. But my father worked for W.H. Smith & Sons and he would never allow any political poster in the window or anything like that. And I was brought up that you think, but you don't say. I'm quite sure people don't like this wavering about, being directive.
- A.C. A lot of it came I suppose from your clients very often telling you that they couldn't stand probation officers who examined them very closely. A lot of

psychology. A lot of those ideas about being non-directive came from that. Did you ever get into arguments or discussions with your colleagues about it?

M.W. Yes I did.

A.C. Can you remember any or is that hard to think back?

M.W. I think I ignored them and got on with it. I knew I was right and nothing would stop me.

A.C. Were you at that time, as the service grew, did you find yourself like a lone wolf in the office?

M.W. Often I was a lone wolf. My Principal said I was too directive. But these people still come to me and eat out of my hand. Only the other day in Clapham a woman said, "Our boy's got trouble, Miss Wilkinson. He said, 'If we'd got Miss Wilkinson here we'd be alright.'" I said, "Well send him down to me, Aley. He came down, talked it over, and he brought me a great big box of chocolates. I'm sure if they know the way you're going, that's it. You see you've not got to love people. You've got to positively like them. This is it. I remember going to a house in the country and they had five children and they were all 'boss-eyed' and we have a very fine surgeon in Bedford who used to operate at Moorfields Eye Hospital. I talked to the family and when I was going out the littlest one came up to me and pulled my skirt. And she said to me, "Miss Wilkinson, can I say something to you?" I said, "Yes dear." She said, "I do like your new hat." And I thought, my word, Mr. Bentley would have a feast with this lot with their eyes here.

A.C. Were you in the National Association of Probation Officers (NAPO) [9]?

M.W. Yes I was chairman of the County Branch. I think now it's too Marxist. I wouldn't belong to it now. And I was very annoyed. I used to go out and speak at these meetings and I never asked for a fee. I asked for a donation and gave it to NAPO and I went to a transport manager's meeting at Northampton and they gave me £25 in notes and the gentleman from here took me to the meeting. I sent a cheque for £25 to NAPO and they never sent me a receipt. I felt very humiliated by that and I'd asked for one. I said, "It's not a small sum I've sent you. I could have put that money in my pocket." And I finished with them then. Then I'd covenanted some money for them and they made a muck of that so I just wouldn't have anything to do with them. I don't deal with people like that!

A.C. What sort of things did the NAPO branch talk about?

M.W. Very much all for organisation. Organisation on their brains. And a lot of it was a lot of things that I personally didn't think would work. Before 1959. I remember the last meeting I went to, it was abominable how the Marxists took it over. People who weren't paying their money were ruling the place.

A.C. Can I ask you two last questions?

Some critical things have been said about social workers during this period up to 1959. I'm thinking about things like Barbara Wootton [10] saying the social workers were too preoccupied with what went on inside people and not enough with the social circumstances they found themselves in. Can

you remember that time? The critical things that were said about social workers. Do you remember any?

M.W. In 1959 I felt that they were trying to make an empire for themselves. I thought they were grabbing too much. The social workers, not the probation service. They took over the blind, didn't they then. But they didn't do anything to help them by visiting regularly. They wanted an empire, they wanted to make themselves all-powerful. They took in the children's department which has never been done as well since.

A.C. When you look back, what do you think of as the best thing you ever did as a social worker? What gives you the most pleasure to look back on? What are you most pleased about in your career?

M.W. Well, I think to rehabilitate these people. Because if you are doing wrong you're not happy. When you make people live decent lives they're happy. There's an "old boy" cycles by here every day. He's grown up now and married and he was the most destructive boy in the next village. He smashed things up, lavatories in new houses and things like that. I had him under me and I joined him in the Scouts which I think is a wonderful movement. From being destructive, he's constructive. If you'll come in my kitchen I'll show you what he did for me. Made my cat door. To build people up, this is the thing. You've perhaps told them off and stripped them down, because a real friend tells you when you're wrong. She doesn't always agree with you: a friend doesn't. And I am friends with them.

I do have good memories. I went to the house of one of the families I had under supervision. With me was a student from Leicester university, who was doing a child care course. The father of the family was having his breakfast, bacon and egg, fried with some bread. He had no fork or knife. It was interesting to watch him devour it. My student said to me, "What if the next course is custard!"

In 1951 I received a visit from a very tall handsome man in my office. He told me he had stopped a policeman at Kempston (the next village to Bedford) and he said he needed help and advice on a family matter-he came from the Transvaal and had no-one to turn to. The policeman told him to go 18A St. Mary's and see Miss Wilkinson, "who is a shrewd woman."

So we sat down and I listened to his story.

He came to England with the army in the 40s and married an English girl. She went back to the Transvaal with him, they had girl twins, now four years old and a baby. The marriage broke down and she returned to England with the children. He felt he could not live without the children so a month ago he had flown to England. He had been to Teesside, Stockport and Stoke and finally he had found his wife and the two children at Kempston. The wife would not return to the Transvaal, but if he liked he could have the twins.

I listened patiently. I tried to explain the difficulties. I likewise explained what was good. I stuck to my moral code.

After one hour he said, "I can now make up my mind. You have proved to me all that my mother taught me. You have not told me what to do, but I feel I can make a right decision now. The next morning I was out visiting when my secretary had another visit from this man. With his twin girls. They were to fly back that day to the Transvaal.

Each Christmas that man has sent me a card and often a short note.

EDITORS' NOTES TO THE WILKINSON INTERVIEW

1 **Bedford Modern School** is an independent school owned and managed by the Harpur Trust which dates back to 1566. The school was given its present name in 1873.

2 **Toc H** is an international Christian movement with Toc H being an abbreviation for Talbot House which was established in 1915 in Belgium as a rest and recreation place for soldiers. It was named after Gilbert Talbot the dead soldier son of the Bishop of Winchester.

3 **Elstow** is a village in the centre of Bedfordshire and the birthplace of John Bunyan.

4 **Dr. W. Grey Walter**, (1910 --1977) neurophysiologist, was for 30 years (1939 1970) in charge of the Burden Neurological Institute at Frenchay Hospital, Bristol. Author of several books including *The Living Brain* (1953).

5 **Borstal** was the name given in 1902 to a new penal institution opened in the village of Borstal in Kent. It aimed to keep youths separate from adult convicts and provide them with a more educational regime. It was in fact highly regulated. They were abolished in 1982.

6 **Moravians** are arguably the first Protestants and date back to the 14th century but were renewed in 1727. The Moravian Church has a long tradition of missionary work.

7 **Wilfred Grenfell** (1865-1940) was a medical missionary in Newfoundland and Labrador

8 **Dame Alice Harpur School** is part of the Harpur Trust group of independent schools in Bedford and was opened in 1882

9 **National Association of Probation Officers (NAPO)** was formed in 1912 and was one of the first professional associations of social workers. The Association decided not to join the BASW merger in 1970.

10 **Barbara Wootton Barbara Frances Wootton**, Baroness Wootton of Abinger (1897–1988). Eminent economist, criminologist and social scientist. After leaving Cambridge, Wootton took up a research studentship at the LSE and later worked for the research department of the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress. She was Principal of Morley College from 1926, and Director of studies for tutorial classes at

London University from 1927 until she became Reader at Bedford College in 1944 and Professor in 1948.

She published widely and her *Social Science and Social Pathology* (with Vera G. Seal and Rosalind Chambers. Allen & Unwin, 1959) remains a classic in the application of utilitarian philosophy and empirical sociology to the enlightened management of society. It is a wide ranging 400 page book and Alan Cohen, in his interview questions, concentrates on a chapter (“Contemporary attitudes in social work”) that was very critical of some approaches to social work and the claims made about what social work could achieve. It would be difficult to find more trenchant and sustained criticism of the attitudes, language and assumptions of the selected social work writers and academics quoted – in particular of the claims made for the more high-flown psychoanalytical approaches to solving human problems. These she ridicules and claims that they do a great disservice to social workers in their daily tasks. It is clear from the edited transcripts that Alan Cohen was keen to gather the views of his interviewees about the impact of the Wootton bombshell and most of them give a response..

From 1952 to 1957 she was Nuffield research fellow at Bedford College. She was created a life peer in 1958 and was the first woman to sit on the woolsack in the House of Lords; and later held several senior public appointments. Her reputation as a fiercely independent thinker was sustained during the following years of public service.

Accounts of her life and work are available from her autobiography, *In a World I Never Made* (1967) and Ann Oakley’s biography *A Critical Woman* (2011).

(Sources: Personal Papers of Barbara Wootton, Girton College Archive, Cambridge; and the books cited above).
