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Sir Roy Calne FRS in interview with Dr Max Blythe
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Interview Two, Part One

MB Sir Roy Calne, you were born in December 1930 into a fascinating family, perhaps you'd tell me about that family and your early life.

RC Well, I was born in Richmond, Surrey and brought up in a large house. It was the old manor house which was adjoining the garage that my father had built and developed and he had lived in that house for a long time. And he had to work to give a dowry to each of his seven sisters, five hundred pounds was the rule his mother and father said. So he had to work very hard because that was a lot of money in those days. He also had a brother who died of kidney disease, who I don't remember. He died shortly after I was born. And when my father was allowed to marry, having found this dowry for his seven sisters, then he and my mother lived in a flat above where my grandparents lived.

MB I think it was an Irish family.

RC They'd come over from Ireland, yes that's right.

MB Roy, just picking another point, I think your mother actually did some nursing of that brother who was to die.

RC Yes, she looked after him. She was very fond of him and he died slowly and inexorably as everybody did with kidney disease in those days.

MB And you heard of kidney disease as a small boy.

RC Yes.

MB Roy, it was a prosperous existence you had. You had a nanny and you were taken out for nice walks in Richmond Park. You felt pretty good there.

RC I suppose one is content according to one's environment, and prosperity isn't something a child thinks about, but I liked my nanny and I liked my parents.

MB You were a close family, but a large family because all these seven sisters...

RC They were married now, they'd all gone.

MB They came to see you, though, in this large house.

RC Yes, that's right. They weren't all great friends necessarily. There were a lot of rivalries amongst the sisters, which is quite common in large families.

MB I got the impression from what you said before, that you were regarded as bad

news by some of them because you led their children astray.

RC Because I was a bit dangerous. Yes, I think that's true. I was a bit aggressive I think.

MB You were a tough youngster.

RC I don't know about tough, violent.

MB You were.

RC I don't think I would regard myself as somebody who was out to find a fight with somebody.

MB But you could be difficult?

RC Yes, especially if I didn't get my way which has always been a bad trait.

MB You tended to rebel against petty restrictions and rulings. Roy, we haven't talked about mother in any great depth apart from working for the health and the care of you father's brother.

RC My mother was extremely keen on anything to do with scholarship, work, school, achievements and sport, but especially on the scholastic side. She herself had matriculated and wanted to go to a university but I think her family was poor at the time and she had to go out and do a job. This was something that she was always sad about and I think she wanted to see her sons do what she would have liked to have done.

MB So you had a strong academic base.

RC Certainly plenty of pushing and encouragement, yes.

MB Your father on the other hand, he was a hands-on mechanical engineer running a garage next door to the house.

RC He had worked as an apprentice at Rovers in the twenties and taken engines to pieces and put them back again, living in very squalid digs. And he felt that the future of the motor car and the motor industry was going to be very bright. I think his predictions have been correct, they've been too bright now that we've got gridlock on the roads.

MB Was he a good engineer?

RC Yes, very good, very skilful with every kind of tool and putting things together and inventing things. He had a number of patents. One of them was a method of burning paraffin in petrol engines which was useful when petrol was short but otherwise not commercially valid.

MB Did you nip round and spend time at the garage as a youngster?

RC Yes, I used to like to be near anything mechanical, taking things to pieces and

putting them together again.

MB So that was a natural part of very early background.

RC I haven't changed.

MB It's been the same ever since. Roy, eventually you have to go to a kindergarten. That wasn't a comfortable start, I think.

RC Well, I didn't like it there, no. I remember rushing out through the door which had not been locked correctly and finding my way home which was quite a long way, causing a lot of worry and consternation amongst the teachers and also my parents when they heard about it.

MB So this five or six-year old goes home, but education was to clutch you back. You subsequently went to Collet Court which was still quite close by.

RC I didn't go to Collet Court in Richmond, I went to Collet Court just as the war started and that was near Marlow, and it was in the beautiful estate of the biscuit manufacturer Weston. It really was a very nice place for youngsters. There was water all over the place including the Thames, but there were little streams and ponds and boats and we used to choose every opportunity to get out in these boats and have adventures, or what we regarded as adventures, and in fact, we were swept over the weir at Marlow. I think it was one of the places where the current wasn't very strong but we had no chance of getting back and were a bit depressed, about two miles down from the weir with a boat we didn't own. And very kindly a motor boat towed us back. Several of us were in the boat, two or three of us, and it took us back to the Weston estate. I do remember that well enough, that was by the Complete Angler Hotel.

MB I think I've heard you describe it as a time of 'Swallows and Amazons'.

RC Well it was like that a bit. It wasn't quite so romantic as 'Swallows and Amazons' but it was exciting and it was close to nature. It was rather an unkept area so it was like a mini jungle in the Weston estate. There was the garden and then there was a less kept area.

MB Did that make any impact educationally, apart from that outdoor life and the pleasure of being in that crook of the river near Marlow?

RC I don't think so, except I was interested, I'd always been interested in animals, and there were plenty of animals and birds around there, but I don't remember actually studying biology as a subject as early as that.

MB Did that make any impact, that war breaking out?

RC Very much so because everybody talked about it all the time and I do remember my parents discussing Mussolini invading Albania and then Ethiopia, and the war, the bellicose speeches of Hitler. And I think he marched, it must have been 1938, into Czechoslovakia and in 1939 into Austria. And then the final point of threatening Poland and that is where the line was drawn. I don't think he'd ever expected that Britain would go

to war over it. I remember everybody talking about it all the time, it was the major conversation.

MB I think your father had talked at some time about air-power being the future?

RC Yes, we had good friends who came from a naval family and they felt that the warships would always win, but my father used to argue that aeroplanes had their superiority and manoeuvrability and speed and would probably be the winning arm in a war. I haven't got too many memories of that early period but I do remember just before the war there was a huge review of the fleet, it must have been the Jubilee of George V. We had the biggest navy in the world then and I remember we went on a paddle steamer round all these ships. There was H.M.S. Hood, the biggest warship in the world, which was very easily sunk by the Germans a few years later. This huge naval power was very impressive but there wasn't very much in the way of aeroplanes around then.

MB Yes, but your father saw the future.

RC Yes, both in the car industry and in planes winning.

MB When the war started, things were going to dramatically change in your life.

RC In everybody's life.

MB You were going to move, and move away and change schools. Tell me about that move and how it was precipitated.

RC Well, it was precipitated by, first of all, because there was no petrol, or hardly any petrol as rationing started, I think, right at the very beginning. It therefore became very difficult to make a living from a garage but any worries and decisions about that were taken out of my father's hands because the Bristol Aero Company requisitioned the garage to use for various war work to do with airplanes. So, shortly after the war started he gave up everything as far as the garage was concerned and was looking for another job and he had difficulty initially. And we moved to Marlow and that was quite near where Collet Court was. So I was first of all a boarder there and then, I think, a weekly boarder. And then he got a job in Wales. It was a garage that had been converted to assemble jeeps and other military vehicles and he was involved in that. So he got a job up there and the family moved to Wales, so we weren't in Marlow very long but it was a very nice short period. MB Where in Wales did you move to?

RC To Old Colwyn which is close to Colwyn Bay, beautiful area, very close to the hills and to the sea. I like both the hills and the sea. And for the first time we were able to have a dog and we've never been without a dog since. And again proximity to animals and farms and nature, which is something that I would always like.

MB That really gripped you. That was an important part of that growing up period. You went to school in Colwyn?

RC I went to school at Rydal in Colwyn Bay for a short time and then moved to Dulwich College Prep School which was at Betws-y-Coed where I boarded.

MB They had moved out there.

RC And that must be one of the most beautiful settings in Wales, in the British Isles, with the River Conway.

MB And the Horseshoe Falls.

RC And there was an old coffee pot train that went along there from Blaenau Ffestiniog to Conway.

MB A great stretch of river there isn't it? Quite wonderful. So you enjoyed more biological paradise.

RC The headmaster got into trouble, he was arrested by the police for shooting a salmon, that's not the way to kill salmon according to the locals. He saw this salmon in the shallows outside the Royal Oak Hotel, which is where we were, he shot the salmon and was arrested by the police. We were delighted all the boys, really pleased to see the headmaster arrested.

MB That school, Dulwich College Prep School at Betws-y-Coed, was that where you really began to feel that you were stacking up with some education?

RC Yes, I had been quite interested in biology at Rydal. I didn't like the school, I wasn't happy there but I did get some minor prize for biology, a book, so I must have exhibited an interest in biology, and that became much intensified in Dulwich Prep School. I did reasonably well, I wasn't fantastically good but I did reasonably well and got a minor scholarship to Lancing College.

MB Were there any teachers at that time who registered?

RC I can't remember any, no, but there must have been, I can't remember the names of any teachers from there.

MB But you go up to Lancing College.

RC Yes.

MB And that's at Ludlow at that time?

RC The main school was near Ludlow. My house was five miles away from the main school in a village outside of Ludlow and this was the village of Caynham and we were in the rather beautiful house then, Caynham Court. And we used to cycle ten miles a day minimum and were by far the healthiest house. Hardly anybody ever got ill, I think it was all the cycling. And that was a good school for teaching biology and other things.

MB You had a remarkable biology teacher.

RC Yes, who only recently died. Ken Saw his name was.

MB Who kept in touch with your career.

RC Yes, I think it was when I was elected to the Royal Society he wrote me a letter, which was amazing that he remembered after all those years.

MB But he was a good biology teacher. Were you confirmed at that stage in the kind of science area of education?

RC Oh without any doubt although I was interested in art, and we had a very good art teacher there too, Russell Flint, Francis Russell Flint, the son of William Russell Flint. He gave us a lot of free rein in art and tried to allow us to express ourselves. At that stage I was interested in drawing biological drawings, dissections of plants and animals, and also doing I suppose what we would call aesthetic art or fine art. Both subjects were available and practised, so I think that was an early interest in what has lasted ever since.

MB So these were the roots of the career as an artist and an art lover?

RC And we were encouraged to have outside biological interests and I was especially interested in birds. I had forty pigeons at one time and a couple of magpies and jackdaws, and all the birds we were able to keep and look after they tended to flourish except for two owls, two beautiful barn owls, which just pined and we had to let them go. They were only chicks when we had them but they did grow enough to be released free. We couldn't train them to do anything, they just wanted to take your finger off.

MB So this was a great love of wild creatures growing, and the art was growing. It must have been a great time being at Lancing, those were really important years for picking up that feeling. You also had a rather good English master who got you into listening to Beethoven.

RC And he would tell us to act a little bit out of Shakespeare or to listen to a piano concerto and then discuss it afterwards or just debate any subject under the sun. Mr Chamberlain, I think he's still alive.

MB What were the thoughts of medicine, when did they arise?

RC At Lancing. When the war ended Lancing moved from Ludlow back to Lancing in Sussex and I was anxious to get into the medical or the biological lower sixth form which was where I was established as a potential medical student. All the subjects were well taught, all the biological subjects were well taught, all the pre-medical subjects, biology, zoology, botany and then physics, chemistry, maths.

MB What I was trying to do Roy, was to trace where that first germ that was going to be medicine came from.

RC I think the decision to do medicine was before I went to Lancing when I was still at Dulwich in Betws-y-Coed. I suppose I must have been about twelve or thirteen, my father came to visit me when I was boarding there and asked me if I wanted to join him in his garage after the war or wanted to do medicine. And we had a long talk and he knew I was interested in cars and taking mechanical things to pieces and putting them together again, like making model aeroplanes. He also knew that I was very fond of all things biological and I think that I expressed a view then, which would certainly be one that I

would hold now, that it is the mechanistic and the way in which things work that was the attraction to biology and to medicine. So it's very easy to say that spare-part surgery is very similar to spare-part car mechanical work, and I think, although one shouldn't draw too strong an analogy, that is related. So it's how things work and what happens when they go wrong and whether you can put them together again, it's a rather mechanistic approach.

MB You were taking your father's mechanistic interest to a new domain.

RC Yes, I had that same interest as he did and I remember telling him that it was probable that I would become bored eventually with the car engine because I would know all about it, but I'd never know all about the human engine or the biology engine.

MB The choice was motors or medicine but you chose the medicine. Was that a disappointment to him?

RC I think it must have been a minor disappointment to him but not a major one, it didn't rankle with him. In fact, he was quite pleased.

MB And mother was.

RC Yes, she was very pleased.

MB How did the family do or fare in the war years? With the loss of that garage, had it moved down in prosperity?

RC Yes, quite a lot. We were in a rather small terraced house, that was my brother, myself and the children in the house and my father's father, my grandfather, living fairly much cheek by jowl in a small house.

MB Roy we haven't mentioned your brother much, hardly at all. There was just a reference to the fact that there was another member of the family earlier. Perhaps we could put him on the map. He came a bit later.

RC Five and a half years younger than me, also born in Richmond. And I think he was then an easier-going character than me. As a youngster he was. I am not sure he is now because he seems to have a more rebellious attitude now than I. But he had similar school interests and background except that when he, much later, was doing medicine, it wasn't clear to him what branch of medicine he wanted to do for a long time, or even whether it was going to be medicine or surgery. I knew I wanted to do surgery almost from the age of twelve although I had no idea what surgery was, but I knew it was the kind of removal of bits and cutting and so on that I liked to do. So he had a much harder time in sorting himself out in that respect than I did. I think half the battle is won if you know exactly what you want to do at an early stage.

MB I was interested in what kind of a part he played in your early life. He came quite a bit later than you and it's not always easy to relate to brothers that young. Was it in your teens that he began to register?

RC Well, I was given responsibility of looking after him under many circumstances. I

probably didn't do it very well but that was certainly my responsibility. I don't think we got really very close until after I'd been in the army and he was in Oxford as an undergraduate (open scholar). I went to teach anatomy in Oxford and he stayed with us and then we became very close.

MB We shall discuss that period in due course. Keeping with your Lancing years, Roy, apart from being successful and really pursuing the sciences you took part in sport. I think you had a good sporting career, which you'll tell me about in a moment. I think you were a bit bolshy as well.

RC Yes, I always seemed to be against authority.

MB Were there any particular examples of cocking a snook at authority that you'd like to put on the record?

RC Well, I think there were very very strict rules at public schools, as you know very well, and trying to overcome these rules was always the main objective. In Lancing you could in fact overcome or break almost every rule except chapel. You could never fail to attend because they could see where your seat was in chapel. You could never miss chapel unless you were ill or you fainted. And if you fainted, the matron gave you an enema so it wasn't very much fun. It wasn't worth trying that way out.

I kept some pigeons that I caught up in the chapel of Lancing. It's a wonderful chapel in that it had in the loft about a hundred or more pigeons that nested up there. They were pigeons that had either got tired or exhausted or got swept there by storms when racing from the continent. So some of them were very good stock pigeons. And there was a way of catching them by shining a torch in one direction and coming round with your hand in the other. And then they would become tame very well. But whenever there was a pigeon inside the chapel, I was always blamed for it although I would never admit to it, but because I was the only person who knew how to catch them, I was also selected to catch them. But that was a way of getting out of some of the evening school. We also got into trouble over bees. The housemaster kept bees and one of my friends also kept bees. I was frightened to touch them, but he took extra queens and they swarmed into a tree. And then I was keen on climbing too, so I volunteered to go and take the swarm down, having been assured by my friend that they didn't sting when they were swarming. I climbed and tied a rope to the branch where the bees were and cut it with a saw and lowered it down where the housemaster was all dressed up in his kit. He did get stung, I didn't, but he gave me five shillings for that. I thought that it was a slightly dishonest five shillings.

MB Roy, we could take in your sport at Lancing, if you'd tell me about that. I know you were a tennis player and a runner but there were other things as well.

RC Well I played football. It was a good soccer school, Lancing. I wasn't in the first team but I played in the colts and the cricket colts. Mainly I played quite a lot of squash there but I suppose tennis would have been my main summer sport and running my main winter sport. I wasn't outstanding at any of them but good enough to enjoy it.

MB Have we missed anything of the Lancing years? We've covered them very briefly and those were exciting years. It was a beautiful school.

RC It was certainly a very, very beautiful school. My main memories are of being freezing and hungry there which I don't know is something that you love. The wind used to whistle there. There was hardly any heating because it hadn't got any money for oil, and we used to take little water bottles full of hot water to bed, which was quite forbidden, in order to try and stop turning into lumps of ice in bed. I remember that. I think it was a good school. I think the public school system, in general, perhaps the prep schools more than the public schools, taught you at a very early stage in life how arbitrary and unfair the world was, and after that things were not so bad. Even the National Health Service was pleasant in comparison with the rules of a prep school in England in those days. Of course, everything has changed now.

MB When I said that you loved the school, you just made a beautiful reference to it on one occasion, saying, 'What a magnificent place, I could never look at it without feeling excited'. That was my point.

RC I think the architecture and the site of the school are outstanding. I don't think there's any school in England that is more beautiful than Lancing. And I think the chapel is the best example of neo-gothic that I know.

MB And they kept building it for years, didn't they? They just kept adding metres and metres and metres to it.

RC Well, Woodard who was also a very difficult and rebellious character, he wanted Lancing chapel to be the cathedral of his schools and he wanted it to be, what ever it is, two hundred feet high, and he knew it was going to take a very long time to build. So instead of building it in a logical way, he insisted and oversaw the building of the east end to the full height so they couldn't build it any lower, which was quite clever of him because I'm sure they would have built it lower otherwise. And any building like that, like King's College in Cambridge, takes fifty or hundred years to build. And they were going to have a huge tower there. They've still got the foundations of the tower but never got the money to build the tower. They did collect money, saying it was going to be a tower with a light on the top to act as an extra lighthouse for the seamen, but even that ploy didn't work. I remember very well the foundations because that's where we used to practise in the band for the corps. I became one of the drummers in the corps because that was more fun and it was less heavy than lugging a rifle around. Eventually I became the head drummer, chief I don't know what they called it, head drummer, I think it was. But I didn't do that very well because I got the whole battalion out of step once by doing a six-pace roll instead of a five-roll. That wasn't a great achievement either, but practising for the drums, I used to enjoy that, in the courtyard where they were going to build this huge tower. But instead of building the tower they built a rather lovely rose window which they've got there now.

MB Very beautiful. Roy, when was the decision to go to Guy's and how was that arrived at?

RC Well, I took what was called the school certificate in those days and did reasonably well except in Latin, in which I just got a pass mark, and I think in order to go to Oxford or Cambridge one needed a credit then. I hadn't thought where I was going to go but I did know I wanted to do medicine. With the results that I got in the school certificate I was in a position to apply to London teaching hospitals, and I applied only to

Guy's I think, because I had an uncle who became a dentist at Guy's. And I went up for an interview there and they accepted me. I was only sixteen when I started. I think they were ambivalent, my teachers at school. I remember having an interview with the headmaster about it, and they thought on the one hand I was too young to go to medical school, but there was just a chance that I might do well and bring some kind of scholastic credit to the school, while on the other hand I was such a damned nuisance to them that they were probably better to get rid of me. Since this was a good chance I was encouraged to accept. Actually, I didn't pay any attention to that because I'd already accepted and my mother was delighted. So I left in 1947 and went to Guy's. There were four of us, I think, from school and the average age of the first year students was twenty-six. It was a difficult environment because almost all my colleagues had been in the war, many of them were distinguished, some had been badly injured. They had medals and some of them were even reasonably well-known heroes, and the four of us were nothing, straight from school.