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Miles Buckinghamshire

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Oral History Interview with Miles Buckinghamshire

Conducted over Skype, January 28th, 2018

Conducted by Meg Miner, Illinois Wesleyan Archivist

Meg Miner: This is Meg Miner. I'm the archivist at Illinois Wesleyan University, and today is January 28th and I am on a phone- Skype on my end to a phone call to Miles Buckinghamshire in the UK, and I'm not sure where you are Miles so maybe you could include that in your introduction. So go right ahead!

Miles Buckinghamshire: Do you want to know who I am?

Miner: Yeah!

Buckinghamshire: Okay, I- well I live in a tiny village called Edgcott in Buckinghamshire in the UK.

Miner: And why don't you start by telling us a little about when you got to know President Myers and the nature of your relationship.

Buckinghamshire: Well...going back I think it was in 1987 that Minor first contacted me. I think it was- he was provost and dean at the Hobart or- and William Smith College in Geneva up in New York state. And... because of his interests in the origins of- of the college, he started collecting things about my family, which one of the family names is Hobart. And the...I think he had bought some silver and he because his interest was piqued he started trying to find out things about the Hobart family and that led him to me and that led to an invitation to go and visit him in...in Geneva up in New York state in 1987 I think it was. So my wife went and we...went to visit the-the college up there.

Miner: So you hadn't been before. Wow!

Buckinghamshire: I'd never been before and I hadn't heard of Hobart and William Smith...[Miner laughs]...I certainly hadn't- hadn't heard of Minor Myers...[Miner laughs]...and I got a letter out of the blue.

Miner: That's wonderful- that's very interesting that your relationship started out with his collecting interests then.

Buckinghamshire: Yes, yes he was a great collector of- of things and anything that moved or spoke...[Miner laughs]...or was written, what was played on musical terms. I think I might have called him a polymath. I think he's probably genuinely the only polymath I've ever met.

Miner: Is that right? Wow. Did you collect? Did you bond over collecting?

Buckinghamshire: Well, I collect in a small way but I certainly wouldn't put myself on a comparable stage as Minor [laughs].

Miner: What is your area of interest?

Buckinghamshire: I tend to collect...statues and bronzes and...not- not large but small ones and paintings.

Miner: Hmm.

Buckinghamshire: But it's of a minor- a minor disposition I would say...[Miner laughs]...I've tried to collect things of everywhere that I've visited or worked in the world...and so I've got some American stuff.

Miner: That's great.

Buckinghamshire: And Australian.

Miner: Pardon?

Buckinghamshire: And Australian.

Miner: And Australian. Great...so the- the types of things Minor was collecting...I'm- I'm asking everybody this now because it's- it's quite broad and one of things I'm interested doing in this project is really collecting the stories of other people who knew him. Because so much of this is unknown at Illinois Wesleyan so...did he ever talk to you about how he got started on this? You said he was collecting silver. Was that silver that had your family name associated with it or was it from the college?

Buckinghamshire: No the...every now and again silver or...I think it's battle flags was one of the things he- battle flags of the fourth- I'm the 10th Earl of Buckinghamshire, and the 4th Earl fought in the American War of Independence, on the wrong side you might say...[Miner laughs]...so he- he would find things coming up for sale on Christie's or Sotheby's over here that had to do with the family. So I know he collected a lot of Hobart memorabilia. Whether- how successful he was I- I do not know.

Miner: Hmm.

Buckinghamshire: But...he- he- would have point me in the right direction and...

Miner: Well-

Buckinghamshire: **And he was another sort of collector** (unsure, 5:00?) He certainly collected music and music compositions as well.

Miner: I hadn't heard the Hobart family collection or battle flags before so that's a- that's a new one.

Buckinghamshire: Well I'd try and bid for them but I...I've only once been successful...[laughs]...there's always somebody out there who pays more for these things.

Miner: Oh, so he was alerting you to their presence, he wasn't purchasing for himself.

Buckinghamshire: He might have tried particularly when we was at Hobart College at the time. That was his business, not mine [laughs].

Miner: Sure.

Buckinghamshire: But it's what brought us together.

Miner: That's- yeah, that's wonderful. Did you know- did he ever ask you to look for things for him or introduce him to shops or anything in your area?

Buckinghamshire: No, I- I don't recall him ever doing that. I would hardly think he needed me [laughs].

Miner: Yeah [laughs].

Buckinghamshire: I think his- I think his contacts would have been so broad and wide that he- he could manage quite well by himself.

Miner: That was pre-internet days so I'd just thought I would check 'cause I certainly found a lot from Ebay and other online booksellers' in his collections so I wasn't sure how much he tapped into personal relationships in the days before Ebay and other online purchasing sites.

Buckinghamshire: I think that he was probably pretty determined about the way- and-and quite, what's the right word, innovative in the way he went around collecting things or finding out about things.

Miner: Innovative-

Buckinghamshire: I think he was a member of the Society of Cincinnati by the way, did you know that?

Miner: I did know that!

Buckinghamshire: Yeah...I think probably quite a lot of his information may have come through those sources.

Miner: I hadn't thought of that so that's great. I'll look into that connection [laughs].

[Buckinghamshire laughs]

Miner: It's- it's quite- quite a lot of tendrils spreading out from this one man, so it's very- it's been very interesting for me. Do you know if he ever got started as a child? Did he talk to you about that or was it all sort of in media res when you met- and the particular focus he had with your family?

Buckinghamshire: I think it was the main reason was my family, because he knew that would be of interest. He...he would talk to me about people he met, and...Edward Heath, he had Edward Heath come out to Illinois Wesleyan to- to speak to his students. I just think- I think- I think he was just a really inquisitive individual. I wouldn't necessarily say he was acquisitive, but he was certainly interested in people and things and what motivated people.

Miner: That's a great way to put it. So you then carried on your acquaintance with him after he came to Illinois Wesleyan. You want to talk a little bit about how you knew him in his transition from provost to president?

Buckinghamshire: Well...I knew he had been appointed to the president of Illinois Wesleyan. I think it was 1991 that he would have- I can't remember when he became president, do you know that?

Miner: It was 1989, so not long after you met.

Buckinghamshire: Yeah, so I'd say a couple of years later he contacted me and asked me whether I'd be interested in becoming an honorary trustee of Illinois Wesleyan and...which of course was a huge honor for me, and it was nice of him to ask me. Quite a curious position for someone for somebody from the middle of England to be asked to be...[Miner laughs]...the honorary trustee of a little Midwest liberal arts college...[Miner laughs]...So I agreed to do it and...it was out of the blue invitation really. I must have kept in touch with him after he left Hobart and William Smith but that's going back quite a long way.

Miner: Sure. Did you come to Illinois Wesleyan before he died? I know you- Katie Brokaw had mentioned that you'd come after.

Buckinghamshire: Well I had certainly come for his memorial- what we called a memorial service in the Shirk center.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Buckinghamshire: And I...I made several visits to Illinois Wesleyan between 1991 and his death. I was a partner in a firm called Watson Wyatt, which is a US actuarial firm, and so I combined my visits to Illinois Wesleyan to- to try and help some of your- your business graduates and the math department particularly and the stat-stats department...to go into the actuarial field. I- I had some competition because of the big- is it, Farmers, the big insurance company?

Miner: Yes.

Buckinghamshire: They were- they were be a big employer of those sorts of individuals. So yes, I came, and so did Allison, my wife and I came to visit Illinois Wesleyan.

Miner: [Overlapping]: So you were meet-

Buckinghamshire: [Overlapping] Came to speak to the students about our family.

Miner: So you were meeting with the students in like a career introduction capacity or were you in their classes like Sir Edward was?

Buckinghamshire: Well...well I wouldn't put myself on the same pedestal as Sir Edward...[Miner laughs]...but I did talk to a your family- your history students about my family because they are quite important in- in American history. And I- I came in a business capacity as well.

Miner: That's interesting, I hadn't known that. And we...we do still treasure all of our guest lecturers so it's one of the Wesleyan I think is good at bringing the world to this small part of the country, so...

Buckinghamshire: Yes, so...well I haven't been asked that [laughs]-

Miner: Oh dear!

Buckinghamshire: -to do that.

Miner: Well, I'll put a [overlapping] bug in someone's ear.

Buckinghamshire: [overlapping] No, it's alright dear (unsure, 12:30??). No, no, no...I'm not- I'm only joking.

Miner: Well let's-

Buckinghamshire: I- I think the one thing I was actually quite taken aback just after what we know as the Falklands war so...in the 1980s when we sank-the British sank an Argentinian warship called the Belgrano-

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Buckinghamshire: -and I was quite taken aback or surprised to be asked by an Argentinian student as to what I think about the sinking of the Belgrano.

Miner: Oh dear! [laughs]

Buckinghamshire: Which was a...quite...quite a surprise.

Miner: Was that in the history class?

Buckinghamshire: No, just walking down the corridor, I think I'd just given a politics lecture to some of your students. And...I can't remember, it's so long ago now. I gave the talk to quite a lot of the groupings, probably like so actually...on European union and various issues like that.

Miner: Wow. Well...did he ever talk to you about libraries? So you would have...you would have known him throughout the time he was aspiring to change the library on our campus.

Buckinghamshire: Yes. He- we wouldn't have gotten to that level of detail but...

Miner: 'Kay.

Buckinghamshire: What I do remember about him was at your...Commencement Day, which I was sort of just a...just a very telling thing he used to say, when he dismissed the convocation and he...go out into the world, I think I had picked it up just looking at the things. He said get out in the world and do well, get out in the world and do good, and I think that summed him up. And- and I think- I think he always used a form of those words in...in commencement ceremonies.

Miner: Yeah, he did a lot of...that is a long lasting legacy of his. I would absolutely agree.

Buckinghamshire: Hmm.

Miner: And quite widespread from what I understand too. People have told me they see it all over with his name attributed to it, so it's lovely that it's- it's something that's- that has spread beyond Illinois.

Buckinghamshire: Yeah.

Miner: Yeah. That's great. Well you'd mentioned in your email response to me a story about going to see him with his...with his harpsichord dedication too. Do you know any more about that part of him? I know you mentioned that he was a collector of music.

Buckinghamshire: Well, he was pretty musical. I think he probably- he had an old harpsichord in his house I think but...an antique. All I know...I can't remember the name of the composer I just know he had found a piece of music which had been commissioned by one of my ancestors. And he had- I don't think he played it, I think he had someone from the music department come and played it. Just a commissioned work- I'm pretty sure it was the 2nd Earl and that was a surprise. We had a slightly musical evening [laughs].

Miner: And that was at Illinois Wesleyan when you were on one of your visits?

Buckinghamshire: It was, yes, in the president's house.

Miner: Wonderful.

Buckinghamshire: Yeah, he gave a dinner party for me when I came up to Illinois Wesleyan.

Miner: What a surprise! [laughs]

Buckinghamshire: It was. [laughs]

Miner: Did you have...did you have any awareness of the dispersal of his collections after he passed?

Buckinghamshire: No, not in the sense that you're talking about. I think I know that some of his belongings were sold or put on sale in one or two of the antique shops in Bloomington.

Miner: Mm-hmm. Yes.

Buckinghamshire: I went- I think I went down to- to have a look but I didn't buy anything. I thought it was a bit sad really.

Miner: Yeah.

Buckinghamshire: I'm- I'm not sure what happened to his book collection, you've got them all have you at IWU?

Miner: Actually, not all of them, no. That's how I got involved in- in really becoming aware of his many interests, it was- I was the librarian who was charged with organizing them.

Buckinghamshire: Wow.

Miner: The university did purchase them from family and about then halfway through the process of organizing them the decision was made to auction them so I was the person who worked with the auctioneer to have that happen. We have about ten percent of what- of what the university purchased that fit our collection policies, and so one of the things I think is a bit of a conflict for understanding Minor as a collector was how all of that sort of sorted out. I mean, our library has a specific community to serve, so we kept what we thought would serve our community but I'm wondering if people who knew Minor would have an opinion on that decision. I don't know if you think you can comment on that or not.

Buckinghamshire: Well, no I mean I'm- I think you have to make your own decisions.

Miner: Well is there anything else- oh go ahead.

Buckinghamshire: No, no I think just a...a shame he died so young. And...and he did influence me definitely.

Miner: In which way would you say?

Buckinghamshire: Well I think just to the- being inquisitive and perhaps being more tolerant of other people. Certainly be active.

Miner: Certainly what? What was the last part?

Buckinghamshire: I think everybody- I think everybody knew had been touched in some sort of way. He was not a man you could be neutral about in that kind of way. I just thought he was a...really interesting and great guy really.

Miner: I-I think that is definitely a theme across all of the conversations I've had, so I really appreciate your time and talking with us and sharing your memories, it's- it's a privilege to get to know him through the people he knew so thank you.

Buckinghamshire: Yes, well...certainly too short a time [laughs].

Miner: Yeah.

Buckinghamshire: Well, it was very nice Meg, and let me know how you get on. They're not out to buy back all the books they sold are they? [laughs]

Miner: No they have not [laughs]. But I'll at least bring them together virtually in some way, so I will certainly let the people participating know personally how- how all this sorts out. It's still a little...a little bit un-unclear to me how I'm working all of this together but...it's helping me form a picture that I didn't have before so I think that's all good.

Buckinghamshire: Okay. Thanks Meg.

Miner: Best to you and your family, thank you. Have a good day.

Buckinghamshire: Bye-bye.