

## Life story of Sheila Williams

Sheila Williams is 77 years old, born in 1927 in England. There has been so much change in her life – adapting to different living and working environments, doing socially-relevant work as well as academic-level work, and being married and raising a family that it is almost as though she has lived several lives.



Sheila Williams. Photo  
Sue McPherson 2003

“I’m a Brit,” she says, raised together with her sister in Lancashire. She decided at age seventeen to do English Literature at the University of London. It was 1944, World War II was in progress, and the college she was attending—Queen Mary College—was evacuated to Cambridge. The staff and students were all housed in Cambridge during that time, the students continuing their own programme while also being able to attend lectures at King’s College, in Cambridge. The following year they were back in London again.

Looking back on her childhood, Sheila explains the influences that led her to college, and how she ended up taking a slightly different direction than her parents had planned for her. Both of her parents had wanted her to have a decent education. Her father was an elementary school teacher and had good judgement, she says, her basic staple besides the Children’s Newspaper being “two large books, probably about 500 pages each, that had poems and stories, and non-fiction articles and illustrations . . . and they lasted me for donkeys’ years.” Later, she discovered that “nearly all the boys at her school wanted to go to university, and nearly all the girls were going to teachers’ training college.” Her parents had wanted her to become a schoolteacher but, she says, “By the time I was in the middle of my university undergraduate career I knew I did not want to be a schoolteacher.”

Sheila described to me also how she went about changing the way she spoke, from using a “North country” accent to developing a more “southern model.” At grammar school the pupils took classes in “music and speech training,” although the teacher’s attempts to teach them the southern pronunciation of “vowels and diphthongs” were sometimes met with contempt – “those soft southerners, you know!” Sheila continues, “However, when I went to Cambridge and determined to change my accent I remembered these half-hours and I just remodelled my speech on what I had been taught at school, plus listening to people around me.” She adds later, “I don’t think one ought to do it but anyway I did it.”

While a postgraduate student in London, Sheila had met her husband, and in 1952, when she was 25, they married. The Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II also happened that same year, and Sheila recalls being invited to watch the event on a friend’s television. (She adds that, even more exciting, on tv the following year, 1953, was the climb of Everest by Hillary and Tenzing.) After her BA she took a Master’s degree and then a PhD (’57), for which she wrote a thesis on City Poets 1685 – 1708. As she remembers it, she was the only person doing a PhD in her subject—English Literature and Drama—at the college at that time.

Since then, Sheila has worked in several different higher education institutions, for the most part polytechnics, helping to build them into what they are today – universities, most of them. As a lecturer/teacher she taught at different levels, explaining further, “and so far as what I

taught, it has been quite a spread as well.” For four years, she says, it was expected of her that she would “never move outside the seventeenth century,” and this she managed to do. She also explored in other ways such as writing articles, devising language courses, and “taking charge of drama.”

Her last job in higher education was at the Northern Ireland Polytechnic, now the University of Ulster. She took the job in the seventies, by which time she and her husband had had three children – all girls, ages eight, ten, and twelve. She had separated from her husband some time before, so was effectively a single parent, raising her children while working full time. After about nine years, and a bout of illness at the end of it, Sheila retired from her position in Northern Ireland—her last job in higher education—and returned to England. Her children were leaving, one by one, to attend university, and at 53, she was ready to return to England.

For practically all her working life Sheila had worked in various branches of higher education. Ready for a change, she decided to try for a different kind of job. She applied for and took a job in community education, in the East Midlands, working with ethnic minority women. Part of the job entailed facilitating events for people not unlike herself in many ways. She recalls assisting groups of women—Indian, Pakistani, Ukrainian, and Polish—interested in doing their national cooking for a multicultural festival. The job put her in touch with many people, some of whom were not just professional contacts but were indeed, friends. Nevertheless, she questioned the wisdom of her place there as a retiree. She knew a lot of people but all within a “professional ambience,” and she did not know if the transition to retirement after six years there would work, “whether it would be sensible to stay as an entirely private person.”



Dr. Sheila Williams  
No date. Photog. unknown.

She was 60 and, although she had enjoyed her job very much, was happy to retire. Her daughters were living in England, having finished university while she was working in England, and by now had “husbands and children and houses and jobs.” She was still separated from her husband, and was to remain so. Rather than return to Lancashire, to her hometown, she decided to retire to London. About herself, sixteen years after retiring, she says, “I have had a lot of illness, and it has been emotional illness – what you call mental illness . . . I have recovered, except I get very tense sometimes. . . My health is pretty good. I’m very lucky. But I haven’t got the strength I had. I have a siesta most days. I don’t walk the speed or the distance I did when I retired.”

I asked Sheila about retirement in general and she says,

We are getting more and more old people all the time. It will come to an end, of course. It’s just the baby boom. The birth rate has fallen again. They’re getting panic-stricken about it. I don’t know if they need to or not. The other thing of course is that people are living longer and are scheduled to live longer still. Already, they divide post-retirement age into the third age and the fourth age, and after 75 they think your health isn’t up to much – you’re a weakling. One man told me the deterioration started on his actual 75<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Thinking about mandatory retirement, Sheila remembers the 1960s,

before computers were properly developed, but there were robots, and there was an idea that there'd be lots of robots to do the work . . . It would be quite possible, by the 70s or 80s, for there to be a three or four-day work week for everybody. . . because there were so many machines and robots. Computers added to the very considerable force of the argument. . . there would be no need for everybody to work like mad. But it didn't happen! This idea that we had in the sixties required a transformation in society. . . and it takes a group with enthusiasm and vision even to start such a ball rolling. As to pensions, the factors are: the cake (i.e. the national income); whether you want to bake a larger or smaller cake; and how you divide up the cake. Clearly, modern technology can be used in a more, or less, welfare state kind of way.

Life story of Sheila Williams written by Sue McPherson following interview in 2004.

Diversity in Retirement website: <http://DiversityinRetirement.homestead.com> 2004-05.

*The Dilemma of Mandatory Retirement.* Sue McPherson writer, website design