

NIALL MacKENZIE

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—
Mame Warren,
interviewer

MacKenzie: On the phone, she happened to toss out some passing question as to where was I thinking of going to college, because it was around that time in my life, and I mumbled something about Washington and Lee, whereupon she exploded in enthusiasm. So coincidences like that began to snowball. Therein I thought, "Fortune is attempting to tell me something." There were a few others, but I won't trouble you with them.

Warren: I find them very enchanting.

MacKenzie: There was one man who had died by the time I was applying to colleges, but whom I had known into my teenage years, who was the husband of my mother's best friend. He was an architect, a very prominent architect in New England, and we learned, after I started looking at Washington and Lee, that this gentleman had gone to Washington and Lee as an undergraduate, and the fact that he was remembered by me then, and continues to live in my memory as one of the courtliest, most genial and decent and brave men I've ever known, this strengthened my favorable impression of W&L.

Warren: So you applied, and what was your first impression when you came here? Did you come for a visit before you decided to come here?

MacKenzie: I came here. I visited Lexington, sort of drove around the school and whatnot. It couldn't have been more than a couple of hours before I had registered

my application, I think, or had lodged my application. But sometime in there, within twelve months, let us say, before December 1988, I made an appearance here in Lexington and sort of reconnoitered the place.

Then after I applied, one day in February or March of 1989, I was at a friend's house and the phone rang. I picked up to hear my mother on the other end telling me that she had just received a telephone call from Mimi Elrod at Washington and Lee. Mimi was inviting me for an honor scholarship interview. I think I've got that story wrong. I think when the phone rang at my friend's house that afternoon, it was not my mother but it was Mimi herself. My mother had given her the phone number. So Mimi rang my friend's house in Canada, where I was lying around unsuspectingly, drinking a beer or something.

So it was Mimi exuding all the graciousness and charm which one associates with Mimi. She invited me to an honor scholarship interview. This would involve a free plane ticket and all that. So I came down here and spent two or three days being interviewed and participating in all sorts of, no doubt, intensely scrutinized paneled discussions and whatnot. I liked it very much, and I, in fact, was offered, I dare say, a princely scholarship as a sequel to that weekend of interviews. The school's generosity, scholarship-wise, was a weighty factor in my decision to come here.

Warren: Who participated in the interviews, and what was that process like?

MacKenzie: Well, thrown into the whole weekend was just a straight admissions interview over in the Admissions House with, I guess two—it was a sort of two-on-one thing—two regular admissions officers conducting what purportedly was just the usual admissions interview format. That seemed a bit superfluous, given the school had flown us all down there, so we figured that we at least were in.

The rest of the weekend, on the first night I recall meeting [W.] Lad Sessions, who was my first advisor here, now a dean of the university, I believe, then a very

popular philosophy professor. He and Lou Hodges, an ethics expert and gunsmith, I am told, conducted this sort of large group discussion of a very difficult ethical question that was pressing upon the social conscience of that time, or was promising to impress itself upon the social conscience at that time, and so they seemed to be probing our weaknesses then. Perhaps I am being too cynical about the extent to which we were under observation through all this. I certainly felt very much like a would-be courtier at Versailles who was desperately trying to remember all the lessons of Poly_____ and how to bow and scrape before the king in hopes that he would receive a small court appointment.

I remember that group discussion. There was an interview, a special honor scholarship interview, done in the office in the basement of the C School. Several offices were being used for this purpose that night, in each of which offices there were, I think, three Washington and Lee professors. There were at least twenty of us candidates there that weekend, probably more than that. Each of us was only interviewed by one trio of professors. Among mine was Ed Craun, who went on to become one of my favorite and most influential teachers here. I brushed with them, ^{BUSH TO ADMIT} and I can't recall who the other two were. There was another daytime panel discussion in which a politics professor was involved, and that is as far as the formal tests of our quickness on the draw went that weekend.

Warren: At that point were you asked what your area of interest was going to be, or was it just random, what kind of professors were doing this interviewing?

MacKenzie: I can't recall whether the professors into whose presences we were ushered were professors who necessarily had anything to do with what area of interest that we were indicating a tendency to lean toward, so I'm sorry I can't shed any light on that question. I don't recall being harried about my interests and my projections for my own future, unfortunately enough, because those are questions to which I can still stammer incoherently in response. These interviews were

designed much more to explore our general manner and intelligence, in as far as intelligence can be measured by such superficial encounters.

Warren: How many of you who came that weekend actually came to Washington and Lee?

MacKenzie: I think this was not the only such weekend. I think there were at least two weekends, perhaps two weekends, in a row in which this was done. I think when Mimi rang me, I was sort of offered an opportunity to select a weekend best suited to my schedule.

At that weekend, as I say, there were two dozen, maybe more, of us—well, around there somewhere, at least two of whom, in addition to myself, went on to appear at Washington and Lee my freshman year. One of them became a very good friend of mine, and another I knew quite well. There was a third person, a specific person I have in mind, who was certainly in my class at W&L, and I think he was there that weekend, too, but that could be a trick of memory, I'm not sure.

Warren: It sounds it like you had it very rigorous academically that weekend. What about socially? Did they try to introduce you to what the social life was like here while you were here?

MacKenzie: We were put up in dorm rooms by freshmen or maybe dorm counselors. Anyway, we were put up in the freshman dorm buildings.

Warren: At Gaines?

MacKenzie: No, that is upperclassmen housing. I was in a room in the Graham-Lees complex, where I ended up living my undergraduate year much to my delectation. A wonderful place to live.

And so we had this sort of anchor in the student body that weekend, as anchors were. We had a tie to the student body. I socialized—if that is a correct verb—a little bit with my host, whose name I don't recall and who was a decent guy.

There was a comedian, actually a very high-profile, big-name, sort of MTV-frequenting comedian, who was appearing in the Warner Center building. I went to that. I went to a couple of fraternity parties. It all became quite sociable, really. I mean, a group of us rivals for honor scholarships were able to put aside our stilettos long enough to enjoy each other's company and to sort of go from fraternity party to fraternity party. And indeed, I must say, the W&L students whom I encountered were enormously magnanimous in their show of hospitality and whatnot when we sort of stumbled upon fraternity parties. I suppose it had something to do with wanting to sink their teeth into prospective early rush-type purposes and this competition among fraternity houses. But whatever motive lay behind it, the world is governed by deeds and not motives, and many a good deed was paid us that weekend.

Warren: So you came.

MacKenzie: Yes.

Warren: So tell me about arriving as a freshman.

MacKenzie: Well, being a Canadian, I was designated a foreign student—correctly enough, I suppose, but this sort of got me into all sorts of affiliations with students from various Third World counties and whatnot who were felt to require special treatment to become oriented—I think is the phrase—at Washington and Lee. So I was invited down early. Most freshmen were told to arrive on Day X. I was asked to arrive on Day X Minus 5, or something, to take part in these special orientation programs not solely designed for foreign students. Every foreign student was invited, and then there was a sprinkling of kind of regular Americans who were invited to help in the—some of kind of new-fangled anthropologies words are entering this soliloquy—this sprinkling of real Americans was added to help in the acculturation process. So there were a couple of straight Americans there, some of whom have remained friends of mine for the duration of the W&L thing.

I only went really because after a phone call with one of coordinators of this program, I was let in on the useful knowledge that this would give me the chance to take care of post office boxes and bank accounts and what have you before the rush, so I came and participated in these things. It was useful to get sort of a foretaste of Lexington life. I think they took us down to the mall in Roanoke on one occasion. All good fun.

Do you know, I can't recall how my social life got going. It got going swiftly enough. I mean, I went out to various women's colleges and did sort of social things with some of the young men whom I met through this preliminary orientation-scheme affair. But that became marginalized very quickly.

I guess my memory of my earliest block of friends at Washington and Lee were my fellow pledges in a fraternity I ended up pledging, them and a few people on my hall in Graham-Lees who remain good friends of mine. But what drew me to that fraternity and how I sort of fell into that group of people and not the people at my hall—how I fell in with them is obvious, but the others, is entirely submerged beneath memory's oily slick. I have no idea what happened.

Warren: Well, it's been a while.

I'm really looking forward to when the freshmen arrive in the fall so I can sort of go through this with them and see what it feels like and see what they do. Once upon a time, and I'm not quite sure when it stopped, they did something called Freshman Camp. I presume that was long since over by the time you got here.

MacKenzie: Unless they've revived it, I think that's right. Nothing of the kind occurred during my years here so far as I know. I'm aware of the idea. Other colleges to which I applied had such a thing going on, and I know of other colleges that do this.

Warren: And what year was it you got here? '89?

MacKenzie: Yeah.

Warren: So that was the year the first class of women were graduating. Were you aware of that? Was the sense that women were still new here, was that real by the time you came, or were they taken for granted?

MacKenzie: I arrived in late August of 1989. The first women had graduated the previous June. I met at least one—no, more than one of them; I met a handful of them. That honor scholarship competition weekend I mentioned, one of them drove me from the airport and back to the airport, and I became better acquainted with her and acquainted with others in the course of the weekend in between those two airport drives. They were all interesting women, really, as indeed most of the women I have known at Washington and Lee.

There was a lingering awareness of the fact that women are new here, mostly in the form of it's just sort of rhetorical reflexes that fraternity students would fall into, a kind of misogynous arrogance. Yes, there was, to an extent, a somewhat ghettoized mentality among many of the women I've known at Washington and Lee. It persisted through to the end of my senior year and very likely persists to this day.

Warren: Do you think that's because it is Washington and Lee, or do you think that's the times?

MacKenzie: I think the fact that it is Washington and Lee colors that mentality in a way that renders it unique among communities of ghettoized, harried women across the country. Certainly this is a bad time to be a woman in the United States, a bad time to be anything but more than a usually fortunately-born white straight male in the United States. But at Washington and Lee, the character of one's sort of ^{CONSCIOUS} self-conscience alienation if one is a woman here, I suspect, is my impression, the character of that alienation is shaped by the sort of things peculiar to Washington and Lee social life and Washington and Lee's history.

Warren: And why do you think it's peculiar? Tell me what you think is unique about Washington and Lee's social life.

MacKenzie: Well, few all-male colleges in the land can have had five—the number, I think, is five—I am just reviewing it in my head. Yes, five private women's colleges all within roughly an hour's-drive radius, give or take. The old structure of Washington and Lee social life, which was a continual sort of sloshing back-and-forth of boozy students between these schools, in which Washington and Lee was very obviously and unabashedly the planet, with all the gravity, and the other schools were the kind of satellites that existed to set off the planet handsomely on the map of the heavens, that tradition of women sort of busing themselves in here brought a great deal of arrogance which has not been cleansed from Washington and Lee, the collective mentality of Washington and Lee manhood, a great deal of arrogance indeed, and a certain blasé attitude about matters of date rape and generally a very sort of primitive view of proper relations among the genders.

Warren: Were you this aware while you were in the middle of it?

MacKenzie: I think I was this aware when I was a student. I tiptoed away from the middle, I think, during my student years. Certainly, as a student, I never had a perfectly detached view of these matters. As a very wistful and nostalgic alumnus, I still cannot lay claim to a perfectly detached—the legendary objective view is not mine. But, yes, as a student, especially as a student who was spending a great deal of his time in the company of women at Washington and Lee and women of a more than usually higher grade intellectually and politically at Washington and Lee, spending a lot of time as I did in the company of such women, one cannot escape being made aware of faces of reality here which tended to wear a mask when one was inside a fraternity house consuming beer via a funnel, doing back flips off mantels and other amusements which keep us of the streets.

Warren: Well, those of us who are on the streets are grateful. [Laughter]

MacKenzie: Rightly so.

Warren: I had an interesting conversation with a very thoughtful student last week, and one of the things he said was that it's just extremely stressful to be especially an upperclasswoman here, because her social life is almost nonexistent, at least with Washington and Lee men. Is that the kind of thing you are alluding to?

MacKenzie: I have heard that said. I must say it has not been my experience. Upperclass women at Washington and Lee are at a disadvantage, certainly—if a disadvantage you choose to call it—in terms of the amount of attention which is showered upon them by Washington and Lee men compared with the amount of attention which Washington and Lee men shower upon freshmen women and women from the neighboring women's colleges. There is an imbalance there. Most of the Washington and Lee women I knew well in my years here were by no means isolated and lonely and despairing. They seemed to me to have fulfilling lives.

One hears a lot of this talk, this sort of self-pitying thing, coming from Washington and Lee students who have not quite fit the mold, the archetypical Washington and Lee student—you know, various socialists and people with long hair, people who like poetry and people of unorthodox sexual enthusiasm. There is this sort of ragged fringe of such students at Washington and Lee, a fringe in which I spent a great deal of time, passed a great many high-spirited hours.

Every once in a while, people who are exiled, or exile themselves, to this fringe, will wax self-pity and sort of moan about how homogenous it is here and how lonely it is for them. And after listening to this for a few minutes, when they run out of breath, one will ask them, "How many friends do you have here, just within the student body, people whom you go and have dinner with and slug down a bottle of wine with and have recreational sex with? What is the size, the core, of your social circle?" And without fail, offhandedly they will attempt some figure between seven and fifteen or something.

My question is, what do these people want? I mean, do they think they would have a larger core number of friends at NYU or something? I mean, interpersonal dynamics, such a forbidding phrase, the way people interact with each other has a logic that tends to keep numbers, the size of close circles of friends, at about that number. And so the answer, certainly in my years here, there is enough diversity at Washington and Lee to accommodate practically any social point of view which I am aware of, at the end of a life of keen observation of deviant points of view. This is a many-colored tapestry, no matter how uniform it may look at first glance.

Warren: I wonder if that sense of having a small circle of friends comes from the contrast of the fraternity system, where you look at these houses that seem to be these monstrous units of friends.

MacKenzie: Well, perhaps contemplation of a house full of, these units, these blocks of eighty or sixty "brothers," contemplation from afar may feed a person's sense that they're isolated, if they want to sustain that sense. If they crept any nearer the fraternity system, I think they would find that impression of battalions of good friends unjustified. I, myself, was a member of a fraternity, and from inside the bowels of that system, one is under no illusion about the solidarity of these fraternity houses. I mean, each fraternity house has its pockets of little groups of friends, seven to fifteen people in number each, and there is amicability among these pockets usually, not always. But the fraternity system has not created—fraternities have not invented some new paradigm for human interaction which has widened the spectrum of intimacy in a way that thousands of years of social evolution have been unable to do.

Warren: I'll bet from the outside, though, if you are feeling left out, I'll bet it looks a lot more golden than it probably is.

MacKenzie: Well, that may well be so.

Warren: Especially if you tried to get and didn't.

MacKenzie: I never spent a great deal of time in the company of people who idolized the fraternity system and yet were unable to worm their way inside it. I suspect there are not many such people. There are fraternities here that will take just about any quality of candidate. Some of them are so desperate for survival in the new fraternity regime, they will reach very far down the barrel indeed. I knew very few people who are not in fraternities at Washington and Lee who really rued not being in fraternities. Most of the people I knew who were not in fraternities and who said anything about not being in fraternities, I'm talking about men, were given this sort of rhetorical posture of contempt for the fraternity situation. An attitude of contempt towards fraternities would be very difficult to reconcile with an attitude of self-pity about not having as large a block of friends as the average brother in a fraternity house.

Warren: So were you in a fraternity all four years?

MacKenzie: No, I withdrew at the end of my sophomore year, with no acrimony. I remained very good friends with the brothers in my house, and I continued to carry on a fairly colorful social life under the aegis of that house.

Warren: And so where did you choose to live then?

MacKenzie: Well, I had never lived in a fraternity house, actually. I lived in Graham-Lees dorm in my freshman year, as I have noted. Thereafter, I lived in town, in privately rented accommodations in town. Two different sets of them. In my sophomore year, I lived in one place. My junior and senior years, I lived in a different place, one place for both of those. I spent two years in one place. Loved it. Those were great two years.

Warren: So while we are still on somewhat social things, let's finish that series of questions. Fancy Dress. Was Fancy Dress important to you?

MacKenzie: I never failed to go to Fancy Dress, and I never failed to have a splendid time there.

Warren: Tell me about it. Take me to Fancy Dress. Tell me about it.

MacKenzie: Mame, I may take you up on that, literally. All years but my senior year, or could it have been—yes, that's right, all years but my senior year, I participated in Fancy Dress as a full-fledged fraternity worker-bee participating in all the rituals and enjoying the hell out of them. Although, well, allow me to hedge. My junior year, I was dating a dance major from one of the nearby colleges. She did not quite fit the pigeon-hole of stereotypical fraternity-guy's date. So that Fancy Dress weekend was rather off kilter in a charming way from a mindless fraternity participant's point of view. But in general, those first three Fancy Dresses were weekends full of nonstop, prodigious, Viking-like consumption of alcohol and the wreckage of these poor tuxedos which had never done anything to offend one, and all sorts of exuberantly reckless sexual behavior. Great fun, really.

Being kind of a shirker by nature, I didn't quite get into the unifying force which gathered within each fraternity house as Fancy Dress approached and as elaborate measures had to be taken and hundreds of hours of real sweat-off-the-brow labor had to be—

Warren: Doing what?

MacKenzie: Covering fraternity houses in sawdust to make a plausible desert island setting for a certain party, things like that. I mean, hauling bamboo, lifting kegs, setting up, quite a great deal of work. Generally I contrived to sit in a director's chair such as the one to my right, and sort of give instructions and sip on a minted julep. And so few students at any other college in the United States can say that in their college days they took their ease with a minted julep in hand, but at Washington and Lee, it is not an eyebrow-raising statement.

Warren: I actually went to Fancy Dress this year. My husband kept looking around and saying, "Were they all born in country clubs?" I've never seen so many beautiful people who were so at ease in tuxedos. It was quite a do.

MacKenzie: Yes. However many lamentations one hears from certain sectors of the Washington and Lee student body—shrinking sectors, it would seem—of the Washington and Lee student body and certain ever more indigent sectors of Washington and Lee alumni community, however many lamentations one hears from these people about the decline of Washington and Lee from a really kind of uniquely southern institution into just another face in the crowd of private liberal arts colleges, each trying to attain the cachet of—what school has enviable cachet? I don't know. Middlebury? No. Bowden? We don't feel inferior to any of these places. However many lamentations one hears about how indistinguishable we are coming from these places, there remains a great deal that is durably unique here. These aspects of Washington and Lee life are not just cant that is spewed forth by nostalgic old-timers.

I recall reading a piece by William Styron, in which Styron was reminiscing about a tour of Virginia campuses which his father took him on late in his teenage years. Although William and Mary was very close to where Styron lived, William and Mary was written off at once because of a prevailing air of intellectual fatuousness, in Styron, Sr.'s phrase, which Styron, Sr. said had prevailed at William and Mary since the establishment of Phi Beta Kappa in 1776. Other campuses were visited; each was dismissed with acerbic commentary such as that.

Washington and Lee was instantly bewitching to the young Styron but for the very reasons which caused Styron, Sr. to drag his son away in disgust. He described this sort of ocean of seersucker and mint juleps and this kind of self-consciously aristocratic air of smugness and contentment about the place, which are as endearing to those of us who have some foothold in it as, no doubt, these aspects are

appalling and infuriating to those who remain outside either voluntarily or because they have had the door shut in their face.

Warren: I need to turn the tape over.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

Warren: So, what do you mean “southern?” How do we define this “southern” establishment we find ourselves in? What does it mean in the 1990s to be a “southern” place?

MacKenzie: Mame, what an unfair question.

Warren: Oh, you're up to it.

MacKenzie: A question whose answer is so hopelessly illusive, or has proved so hopelessly illusive, to people better equipped to hunt it down than I, that I will attempt no comprehensive answer.

I will say that the South is a many-layered cultural phenomenon, and most of its layers are mirrored at Washington and Lee. There are red-neckery here, and there is a sort of planter-class, pleasure loving, mint julep slurping, skeet shooting, aristocratic pretension here, and there is very sturdy, insistent, political decency and sort of civil rights mindedness here. There is a great treasury of rags of traditional cultures. You see all we have left of us is rags of traditional culture in the United States. But no place is more decked out in rags of traditional culture than this community. Washington and Lee owes most of that to Rockbridge County and to Lexington, where it has the great good fortune to nestle. But internally, Washington and Lee has an element of the traditional mountain self, not the moss-hung plantation self, but the South of banjos and fiddles and defiant individualism perhaps.

But in any case, there are elements here that are at the end of a long and honorable and rich continuity of traditional folk culture here and that part of the United States which has more vestiges of traditional folk culture about it than any

other luckless stretch of—what are we—the land of the free and the home of the brave, something like that.

Warren: Speaking of tradition, how much of Robert E. Lee was instilled into the students here? And how was the Honor System portrayed to you, and how was it acted out in your time?

MacKenzie: I was made to take the Honor System very seriously indeed as a freshman. I say that with some awe at what an achievement that was, because it would be very difficult, I think, to sucker me into taking a thing like that seriously. I don't mean that it is not something that is admirable and therefore to be taken seriously on that level. I believe it is. But to actually get me to volunteer, to sacrifice my self-interest, to an ideal like this, is something that I think no one could do ~~know~~ and which I like to think probably it must have taken some doing seven years ago.

So, yeah, I was very serious about it, and I would be plunged into serious internal moral dialogues when I saw even a kind of a harmless honor violation committed before me. I, myself, for a long time never even sort of lied on the phone to the extent of saying, "No, your boyfriend's not here; he just left," because the guy sitting across from me in the room didn't want to talk to her. I couldn't do this. Yeah, I guess I was a bit of a sucker.

My impression overall at Washington and Lee was that in private matters, matters of lying to the guy's girlfriend about his having left the room, that kind of thing, matters of picking up a quarter from the sidewalk even though you are pretty sure you are not the one who dropped it there, the Honor System has virtually no impact on anyone's life here. People say to the guy's girlfriend that he has left the room without a nanosecond's hesitation. But it is pretty strictly adhered to. At least when I was a student here it was very strictly adhered to, I must say, as far as I know in matters that really counted. I mean this is a cynical distinction between what

doesn't count and what really counts. The ghost of General Lee, no doubt, scowls when we suggest that honor is not an absolute all-or-nothing affair. Nevertheless, in what are commonly thought to be areas that really count—cheating on a take-home exam, lying to your professor about the reason for an absence—I think the Honor Code worked pretty well in those respects when I was a student here.

After graduating, I stayed around for about a year, and in that year, and maybe in my senior year—I had my mind on other matters then, really—but laterally there may have been some sort of ominous rumblings in the foundations of the whole thing. A professor once told me in confidence that he was strongly suspicious, having just marked a set of exams, about the similarity of answers that were being churned out—you know exams that you could take them on any day of the week you want. So a person who took the exam on Friday seemed extremely well prepared for an exam written by his fraternity brother on Thursday. That is something I don't think went on, I don't think things like that occurred with any statistical significance when I was a freshman. I may have been totally in the dark. I may have been a contemptible dupe, but that was my impression. Hearsay whispers in my ear that things are darkening now and all is not well with the Honor System.

The only sort of sentimental tradition around Washington and Lee whose death, I mean, whose real sort of disillusion, whose transformation from flesh into dust I witnessed here was the speaking tradition. As a freshman, the speaking tradition was flourishing. I once had to fly to Canada on kind of an emergency midway through my fall term as a freshman. So I disembarked at a major international airport in Canada, and within minutes had sort of cleared, this was at a busy time of day so the airport was athrong with irascible and harried and busy people, who within minutes made way for me to the tune of a sort of a twenty-foot-wide corridor just because I was going around making eye contact and smiling and saluting people, saluting informally, I mean, what the French say, g_____ people—

in a way that led members of day-to-day society to think that I was some kind of sociopath.

Yes the Honor System was extremely vibrant here as a freshman. By the time of my senior year, it was so moribund that those of us who were at all emotional about it just thought it had best be sort of shot like a horse racked with cancer. I mean, really it was really sort of pathetic the extent the distances one could walk back and forth on this campus or the hours one could spend walking back and forth without eliciting so much of a nod from any of the sort of surly sophomores and freshmen.

Warren: You're talking about the speaking tradition?

MacKenzie: Yeah.

Warren: You said the Honor System.

MacKenzie: Oh, I'm sorry. No, I've been meaning the speaking tradition all along.

Warren: Well, that's interesting, because I think it is revived again, because I've been very aware since I've been on campus, and back in the seventies and early eighties, when I was here before, I was not aware that there was such a tradition because I was not aware that anyone spoke here more than anywhere else. But now it's rare that I don't have a brief exchange with virtually everyone.

MacKenzie: Well, that's heartening news, I suppose. Perhaps it is the speaking tradition is cyclical, like locusts or something.

Warren: I don't know. But I, too, I was in New York last month, and I said hello. I couldn't help myself. I was saying hello to everyone, and indeed they were moving away from me on the sidewalk. [Laughter]

Well, let's move into the real reason, presumably, you came here. Let's talk about the classroom and academia. What was your experience in the classroom? Who was important to you and why?

MacKenzie: The classroom side of my experience here was superb. I do not think I could have achieved a better education at any university in the world. I don't think there is any university in the world at which a much better education, unless in some highly specialized discipline for which Washington and Lee is not technically equipped, I don't think there is any university in the world at which a much better education can be had by a student interested in acquiring it. Certainly there are a great many of my fellow Washington and Lee graduates who are utter dross intellectually and aren't well educated enough to stand favorable comparison with a waste bin. But this is a problem which Washington and Lee shares with practically every other university in the world. Until I hardened into a sort of degree of cynicism which is my current condition, I was given to amazement at what sort of dolts I met in making my way through the world who had Harvard degrees dangling behind them or who were about to graduate from the University of Oxford or something.

Ours is not a culture that tends to cough up interesting or rigorous minds. To the extent that this culture is capable of producing such minds, I think Washington and Lee is as effective a mechanism for the honing of the human mind as exists, but each mind's owner must be prepared to exert himself and to collaborate in a honing process, because, as is the case of every other university, it is very easy to graduate here without receiving anything that a serious person could call an education.

My favorite professors were D. Hughes and Taylor Sanders and Ed Craun. In confining things to those three, I know I am doing a grave injustice to a great many other wonderful teachers I had here. Those were the ones, however, with whom I spent the most time and with whom, by luck or chemistry or whatever, my time was the most fruitful. I remember taking an Introduction to Political Philosophy with Professor Hughes and a survey of the first six centuries or so of English literature with Professor Craun. Both of those classes I took in the same term,

namely my fall term of my freshman year, and they sort of resonated with each other in a way that was enormously exciting, frankly. I was a very heady sort of moment of discovery for me. Great teachers, both of them.

Warren: What department did you wind up majoring in?

MacKenzie: The history department. I spent close to as much time, I think, in the English department. And in both those departments and in three or four others, I took full advantage of one of my favorite aspects of the Washington and Lee educational scene, which were these supervised independent study-type things. You know, you invent your own course and get however many credits for it you choose, given the imprimatur of a professor and the promise of supervision and the obligation to have some work to show for it at the end. I think I took at least one such course every term of my college career from winter term freshman year onward. Loved it. And to do myself justice, I didn't waste all of that time. Wasted a good deal of it, as any red-blooded Washington and Lee student could be relied upon to do, but I did achieve intellectual profit from many of those independent study affairs.

Warren: Take me into the classroom with, say, Taylor Sanders. Why was he an extraordinary teacher?

MacKenzie: He's an extraordinary man. He is a personality who is colorful and entertaining in a way that maybe Homer could describe justly, but I certainly cannot. And his boisterousness and good humor shines through in the classroom and makes it pretty difficult for anyone with a quarter of their cortex functioning not to become excited about the subjects, which he illuminated, I must say, brilliantly. As historians go, his way of analyzing situations and explaining them commands a respect of anyone who understands what real thoughtfulness about history ought to be.

Warren: One of the things that impresses me about this place is the size, the classes, how few students are in each class. Was that important to you?

MacKenzie: Yeah, that was a consideration that was important in drawing me here, and it remains one of those features of Washington and Lee educational life which I find most worthy of celebration. I never had a class, I don't think, with more than thirty people in it, and one was always disgruntled to have as many people as that, because conversation and interplay and all that was something one expected in classes at Washington and Lee, and it worked better when there were only ten of you. Other universities, for a class to be as small as thirty, indicated either a real obnoxiousness on the professor's part or something unpleasantly recondite about the subject matter being studied. Certainly to have as few people in the class seemed many to me at Washington and Lee, to have such few people in a class at any other university would be an occasion for wonder.

Warren: I think you're right about that. It's interesting that they can convey here that it is a success rather than a failure to have such small classes.

MacKenzie: Well, I don't think it is particularly difficult to spin-job to suggest it's a failure. I mean, at other universities it would appear a failure just by contrast with a norm which has been determined by the demographics of the university, the cold statistics of student-to-teacher ratio. But Washington and Lee professes a commitment to keeping its classes small as a requirement of its educational philosophy. And it would be a pretty sorry excuse for a school of fewer than 2,000 undergraduates, or whatever it is, if it didn't maintain such small classes and trumpet the fact. I mean, all schools of this size thump the table about the importance of small classes and sort of embarrass their larger competitors with this data, and rightly so. I shudder to think what passes for an education in institutions where students routinely sit in lecture halls with 500 others or 1,000 others, never

get invited to dinner at a professor's house and all that other sort of sentimental rhetoric that makes so sickly the air around here and yet is so true and so important.

Warren: Tell me about those dinners.

MacKenzie: Oh, they were great dinners. John Evans was a particularly masterly thrower of parties in mixtures of people, in his selection of his refreshment and indeed in his role as a conversational catalyst and whatnot. He threw good parties, John Evans.

Warren: I don't know him. What department is he?

MacKenzie: English. But to single one person out is to behave shabbily towards many others in whose debt I am for a great many good parties and kingly meals. Ed Craun had me over to his house for supper. Taylor Sanders did the same. Many others did, in fact. The Elrods, then Vice President Elrod, now, happily, President Elrod, he and his better half, Mimi, were particularly dedicated and open-handed and capable hosts. I must have eaten a hundred meals there at Washington and Lee with other students, and none of them fail to gleam in memory with sort of a golden hue of good food and good conversation and human comradeship.

Warren: Sally tells me you have a special relationship with John Wilson.

MacKenzie: I think John Wilson was a great president of Washington and Lee, and I think he is a great and a humane scholar. He is a very good friend of mine, I dare say. I am pleased to boast his friendship. Let me be quoted as saying that. I think very highly of him personally and professionally, a great man. Did great service to this university.

Warren: Tell me what you mean by that.

MacKenzie: I observed him under attack, fairly sustained attack, by various sort of congenitally mischief-making students with the flimsiest of rationale given for these attacks. He disported himself through all this turmoil with jaw-dropping graciousness and deftness, and none of it ever caused him to waiver in the course

he was determined to put this university on in terms of who was getting scholarships and what departments would be receiving monies and what kinds of hiring decisions for the faculty were being made. I see John Wilson's presence behind a vast array of very healthy developments which occurred at this university during his reign.

Warren: I had a really stimulating interview with him. His passion for the place was just contagious. I don't know how I had the audacity, but he was the first interview I did, and, boy, what a standard to set. It was really exciting, and it was wonderful because he really brought me up to snuff on what's been going on here. He was an extraordinary person. When I walked out of his house, there was no question why he had been president.

MacKenzie: Yes, that comes as no surprise. An elegant and brilliant man.

Warren: And passionate. I was very struck by how firm his resolve was in things that he cared about. One of the things that we talked about in great depth was the whole Fraternity Renaissance program, which I realized you were here during the midst of that.

MacKenzie: I was. Indeed.

Warren: And the houses were being torn apart while you were here, is that right?

MacKenzie: Yeah.

Warren: I haven't talked to anybody who was a student at that time. What was the take of the students on the program?

MacKenzie: Well, the fraternity people moved from a sort of wary gratitude, rather like survivors of the sack of Troy looking at another pile of treasure sent them by some Greeks. They moved from that sort of position when they were offered these opulent houses for free, and all that, to a real kind of reactionary guerrilla mentality. The Fraternity Renaissance was swiftly transformed in the minds of fraternity people from an offering that they were unsure of how they were to receive, the

motivation behind which puzzled them, to an outright threat. I mean, it seemed to fraternity people a ploy by the university to extend its control over fraternity life in a way that could be accomplished in no other way to strip fraternities of their independence and to impose on them a kind of fascistic order, which horrified—perhaps I'm using overblown language—but it quickly became fashionable among fraternity students to grumble that they had been had by the university in all this. They had just traded their independence for opulent houses, which didn't turn out to be so opulent after all and certainly which tended to have things in them fall apart with disconcerting ease.

The Fraternity Renaissance scheme involved the fraternities surrendering the leases on these properties, the property rights to these houses, to the university. Fair enough, one might think, given what the university was doing with this property, but this placed before the university on a silver platter the right to dictate to fraternities what they could and could not drink, how much they could and could not drink, what their admissions policies to parties must be, and all of that, to dictate terms of this kind, with much more enforceability than had been the case previously. And this, I must say, really did interfere with fraternity social life. No doubt some sort of accommodation between the two warring parties has been reached. And I will never, having come through a fraternity, I will never think of the university and fraternities, I mean, the university administration and the fraternities as anything other than, at best, uneasy, mutually suspicious allies who have signed a pact for cynical reasons of self-interest and more frequently as two factions which are permanently at war.

I understand the motives behind the Fraternity Renaissance program. I cannot be as eloquent about them as John Wilson, no doubt, has been. Certainly some of the destructive forms of fraternity behavior, which I suspect the Renaissance Program was designed to curtail, have been successfully curbed. But I

can't say I'm not given to occasional moments of indulgence in this kind of wistfulness for the old days of real fraternity raunchiness, uncorralled by the university, the kind of wistfulness in which the reservation Indian thinks about Geronimo still on the mountains on the horizon.

Warren: I actually got invited to a fraternity party, in fact, the shipwreck party.

MacKenzie: Oh, at Sigma Nu.

Warren: I went last week. I've rarely been to such a staid, controlled, almost boring party.

MacKenzie: You break my heart.

Warren: I'm sorry. You were Sigma Nu?

MacKenzie: Yeah.

Warren: Yeah, I figured by talking about the sawdust coming in.

MacKenzie: Yeah, they are not the only ones who do that, I don't think.

Warren: The students, the people there, were having a grand time and were saying what a wild party it was, but maybe I go to better parties than they do. [Laughter]

MacKenzie: Of that I have no doubt, Mame.

Warren: I look forward to inviting my host at that party to one of my parties and let him see what a real party is. I'm really glad you were here during that time. That's a perspective that I've only gotten the other side, the administration side, on Fraternity Renaissance. I think your perspective is a really important perspective.

MacKenzie: Yes. Certainly in those months, these underground fraternity meetings, you know, the closed meetings in which the brotherhood meets after many Latin tags are uttered and whatnot. The fraternity meetings at my house and at many another, I have good reason to believe, had about them a sort of persecuted, conspiratorial air of, you know, when the Palestinians were being overrun by the Roman Empire. Picture these cells of Palestinian resistance fighters, Jewish resistance fights, trying to concoct plots to subvert the invader. Whether to retreat

to Masada or attempt to make a last stand somewhere else or just to devote oneself to sabotage. I mean, there was sort of hushed, kind of desperate militant tone among these fraternity guys who saw their rights to behave as they thought fraternity guys ought to behave being revoked.

Warren: Literally, where did those meetings take place when the houses were being torn apart? Where did fraternity life happen while Renaissance was going on?

MacKenzie: There was a small sort of infrastructure in town that could absorb the fraternity activity that was displaced by the Renaissance Program because the Renaissance Program worked incrementally. Not all houses were at the same stage of reconstruction at the same moment. I mean, they dealt with a few houses and then moved to a few others, and that kind of thing. So because it was sort of an episodic process, Lexington was not overwhelmed by displaced or dispossessed fraternity brothers. It would have been a terrible fate for a genteel place like Lexington to suffer.

My fraternity rented the space that is now, before and since, had been sort of a site of luckless restaurants, formerly the Raven and Crown and now something else. No doubt before very long, yet again something different will be there. That sort of underground thing.

We held meetings there, and we did parties there. Other fraternity houses displaced their activities on to big houses in town with which, at least in some cases, a fraternity had some kind of historical association with. Most fraternities have at least one house in town which is always filled by brothers of that fraternity and which is always used as an alternative space for parties when the university is cracking down on their fraternity house. So I think few fraternities, if any, were without recourse when they were turfed out of their main house by the Renaissance.

Warren: I'm going to let you be the Washington and Lee University Student—with capital S. What's the relationship with Lexington?

MacKenzie: I regret to say I am not, on that subject, the Washington and Lee Student, with a capital S. I had the good fortune to establish a much more dense web of connections with Lexington and Rockbridge County than most students at Washington and Lee. The more interesting students and Washington and Lee tend to know a good thing when they see one and to do what they can to achieve footholds in the community there. Some of us do a little too much in that respect and never leave, or if we do leave, leave only for lives of embitterment of drooping hopes and melancholia.

Warren: We do allow people back, you know.

MacKenzie: But those are the more interesting students. Most others sort of pass. I think the capital S student you are looking for, for whom I cannot speak, but if faced with a firing squad and required to hazard some conjecture on the capital S Washington and Lee Student perspective towards Lexington, it is pretty much of a cliché, town-gown thing, that Washington and Lee students sort of pass unseeing through Aladdin's cave here, never really get in touch with the wonders that are available to them living here, and sort of move on after four years, oblivious of what they have missed. Pathetic sight, but one which I suspect is going on all around us.

Warren: My little light is beeping here. Are you willing to talk for a few minutes more?

[Begin Tape 2, Side 1]

Warren: This is Mame Warren. It's May 20, 1996, and I'm still with Niall MacKenzie. We're talking about Washington and Rockbridge County. So what does Niall think? Forget the Washington and Lee Student. What does Niall think about your experiences in Washington?

MacKenzie: My favorite line about Rockbridge County, minted by—I never heard of whom, I don't think, is that half the people here have written a book and other half can't read one, which, while being a generalization, does sort of capture this juxtaposition of the kind of moonshine-swilling, marijuana-growing, shotgun-toting, redneck lair of the community, if such colorful and largely decent people can be labeled with such a dismissive term as "redneck," and among whom, unfortunately, are members of what we in the fraternity dining hall would jocularly refer to as the Tri Cap Fraternity. The juxtaposition of that whole world with a strata of the population here, more vibrant culturally and more packed with interesting and sophisticated people than is any stratum of the population of any demographically comparable, any part of the country that has a population along the lines of this, a social organization sort of along the lines of Rockbridge County's.

Rockbridge County is unique in the critical mass of sophisticated and interesting people that persist here, very little of which people have anything to do, I'm pleased to say, with any of the universities in Rockbridge County. At least very few of these people are mixed up in the faculty of any of these universities. A good many of them are Washington and Lee graduates of the confused years of the Vietnam War, don't seem to have found it necessary to leave.

I had the good fortune to have my eyes opened to this most interesting dimension, possible dimension of the Washington and Lee experience, and it became the dimension in which I chose to make the primary one. I moved in. That's what I think about Rockbridge County. Topographically, climatically, geologically, geographically, in all those regards, it is the most beautiful and compelling patch of ground in the United States, I'm convinced, and in human terms it is probably the most compelling area in the United States as well, I strongly suspect.

Warren: That's why I'm here. Why do you think that is?

MacKenzie: Perhaps an Indian medicine man long ago cast a spell on the place and endowed it with an eternal charm and eternal appeal to interesting people. That's as good a guess as I can hazard. I mean, scientists in various disciplines can explain to us why it happens to be as beautiful. Scientists in various disciplines can explain to us the reasons behind the physical characteristics of the place, and specialists in esthetics and semiotics can explain to us why we as humans find these physical conditions so very appealing, but the beauty of the landscape doesn't go the distance in terms of explaining what is so compelling about this place. I can't say.

I would draw attention to something about the landscapes that slide by one's window when one is getting lost in these sort of spider's web of roads that lose themselves among the hills here, these pictures that slide past one's window. In this respect, this area is not unique, but this is certainly an assertive, one of the defining features of this locality.

There is this sort of easy-going negotiation between history and nature going on all around—the woodpiles that are kind of slumping just into overgrown mounds; and ancient haystacks and old barns that are sort of half-collapsed; moldering fences that are beginning to merge into the hillsides which they were built upon; telephone poles which are now hung with moss. The things that man has done to this setting and which man has done to himself in this setting have been absorbed by the setting in very intriguing ways visually. A point which brings us within spyglass range of the historical dimension, the history here, which is fascinating, and even if one is not saturated consciously with information about the stream of history which one is standing in when one is standing on Main Street, in subtle ways one cannot escape the qualities that this place has been endowed with by its history.

I was once writing a piece in which I came up, I dare say, with a very good line about the embarrassment of Civil War heroes that this county and a few adjacent

counties can lay claim to. Selfishly, I will not share my line with you, because I intend to use it one day. I don't want to let loose in the culture before—

Warren: You did sign away on this. [Laughter]

MacKenzie: I know that. Before I open fire in my own good time. I'm sorry. I could tell you off the record.

Warren: I wait with bated breath 'til we turn off the machine.

You mentioned a sense of history. The reason we're sitting here is that Washington and Lee is looking its 250th anniversary in the eye. What can we do to properly celebrate this place in such a moment in history?

MacKenzie: We can raise our hats to it as—no pun—honorable example of civilization struggling to assert itself in midst of poverty and defeat and materialism, war, and many other unpleasant things bound up in the frontier experience of the United States and, indeed, many unpleasant things implicated at the heart of the American experience.

Washington and Lee, at its best, is an outpost of civilization on this pretty barren shore, and what we can do to pay homage to it, other than recognize it as being that and dipping it an admiring bow, is to steel ourselves in the defense of civilization in the United States in our lifetime, a cause for which the prospects are not good, I'm sorry to say.

Warren: I think this is an extraordinary place, in an extraordinary place, and I want to make sure we do it right. Two hundred years doesn't happen but once every two hundred and fifty years. As I have said to my friends from whence I came, this is the job of a lifetime. I'm not going to get to do this again. Nobody's going to get to do this again in my lifetime. I really appreciate your point of view. I've really enjoyed spending the time with you.

So I want to turn it over to you. Is there anything more you'd like to say, and is there anything you'd like to see us do, and in particular in this book I'm putting together, that I, as an outsider, might not think about?

MacKenzie: Outsider, no. I have perfect confidence that this acknowledgeably formidable task has been set in a correct pair of hands.

Warren: Thank you.

MacKenzie: And that your hands will manage it gracefully. So no advice from me.

Warren: Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you'd like to?

MacKenzie: I think you've drawn me out pretty fully, Mame.

Warren: It's been a pleasure and an honor to do so.

MacKenzie: The pleasure's been mine. Thank you.

Warren: Thank you.

[End of interview]