

Interviewee: Joseph Sassoon (JS)	Interviewer: Tania Gardner (TG)
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TG: This is an interview conducted by Tania Gardner in Kirkcudbright on the 7<sup>th</sup> of October 2012, interviewing Joseph Sassoon.

Can you tell me your name, age and place of birth please, and any other places you may have lived?

JS: My name is Joseph Sassoon, my date of birth was 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1927, which makes me eighty-five, and I have really lived all my life here.

TG: Can you give me just a very brief history of where you were – well, you’ve said you were brought up here – schooling and occupation perhaps?

JS: Well, I went to school here, and then I went off to a training ship for two years before I went to sea, which I did for a few years, and then I came home and had various occupations before I went to university as a mature student, and then I taught for nineteen years in Dumfries and Galloway.

TG: That’s super. What brought your parents here to Kirkcudbright?

JS: My father came here as an artist. He was friendly – made friends with, in fact, a war artist called Joe Simpson, who was an etcher, and he recommended him to come here, which he did, and when he married my mother, they came here and settled here.

TG: So... he came here on his own...

JS: Yes. And then... and then he ...

TG: Did he buy a place to stay at that point?

JS: When they came here, he had a studio in Castle Street, and because the house at 3 High Street wasn’t ready, they had to stay in that studio before they settled in 3 High Street. And then they bought number 5, with a view for using that for family and visitors when they came.

TG: Can you describe your house?

JS: Well, when I was a child, and until we ... we really lived in number 3 High Street. And I never thought of it very much, but it was a tall, fairly narrow house with three, four floors, and what... when I thought about it later what was the drawing room in fact, when I was a child, is what was called the nursery, and that was the room that I slept in, and then I slept in, I shared that room with my brother, and so our living rooms were downstairs.

TG: Did you have attics that you used?

JS: There were three attic rooms, and when I was small we had, I suppose, a housemaid and a cook, and they lived in two of the rooms. The third room was so small it was a storeroom.

TG: Okay. What kind of garden did you have there?

JS: Well, as I recall we always had the garden for number 3 and 5, and there was no barrier between them, I used to always think it was shaped a bit like South America, and it was plenty of garden for us to play in, because they kept most of it as lawn, which we played on.

TG: Were there many children living in the high street?

JS: No, there were not. Not many. I can't think of any, actually, off hand. In my childhood.

TG: So where did you play?

04.19

JS: Well, we played either in our garden or in the garden of my friends, we sometimes went up in the Barrhill Wood, and when we got a bit older we roller-skated on High Street.

TG: Well, there weren't many cars then!

JS: No, there were not!

TG: What do you remember of primary school, and where was primary school in relation to where you stayed?

JS: Well, the primary school was part of the academy, and I can still remember the rooms that were used for us as primary children, there were one, two, three, maybe four rooms that were used, so that we were almost two years in one room. So there were three or four primary teachers. I remember the infant room with Miss Murdoch, and it was a very sunny room. I don't think it was chosen for that purpose. And then we moved our way up.

TG: And Miss Murdoch was there for a long time?

JS: Oh yes. A long time. She was Montessori trained, and I think she sometimes disagreed with the Rector, Rector Ramsay, about what would be done. I only found out about that later on!

TG: Absolutely! Did you play games in the playground with your friends?

JS: I suppose we did. I can't think what we did in particular. We must have done, I suppose.

TG: So the children didn't live in the High Street, where did they live? The ones who came to school.

JS: Well, the children that came to school mostly came from the town, I can't think particularly where. Cause remember there was two other primary schools then, there was Johnson School and the Catholic school. And I guess they came from the countryside too. I'm just trying to think of the children I knew. Because I guess in a way we were favoured, because the primary school attached to the academy was fee-paying, I think to the extent that we paid five shillings a term, and there was no need for the people in the town to be paying that if they didn't want to, so most of the children, I guess, when I think about it, went to Johnson School or the Catholic school, and ours was a smaller part of the school, part of the education...

TG: But everybody came to the Academy senior school?

JS: Yes. And from the countryside round about too. I mean, they came from everywhere in the Stewartry, even... I'm not sure if they came from Minigaff or Maxwellton, even when I was small, but they certainly came from the north of the Stewartry, and there was a hostel for the girls. Maybe there were fewer boys that came, I can't imagine why, but some of the boys lodged so they didn't have to go home every night. But some of them, I guess, went home on the bus.

TG: Were you aware that your father was an artist and was in a different occupation from your friends' parents?

JS: Not particularly, no. I mean, when I think about it now, we were very favoured, because my parents were at home all the time, but I didn't think there was anything special about that.

TG: Did you have a car?

08.42

JS: Well, we didn't have a car when I was very small. We did have a car later on, I suppose. Before I was ten years old we certainly would have a car. My father didn't like driving, so we didn't gad about, and when we had the hut at Carrick we used the car to get back and forward to Carrick.

TG: So having the hut at Carrick must have been quite a special thing...

JS: Oh yes, we thought it was great, and I can remember now, my parents saying that we were going to go somewhere... I don't know whether they said interesting or special, but I didn't know about the hut until we arrived there. We thought this was great, I think.

TG: Did you spend lots of time there?

JS: Summer holidays, certainly, and weekends too. I suppose we did. The only time that I can think of us going away for a holiday is we went to Donegal with the Lamonts. Jack Lamont was an artist, and we went there for two weeks. But the rest of the time I think our summers were spent at Carrick.

TG: And were there lots of other families who had huts there at Carrick?

JS: Yes, there were lots of us. By lots I don't mean dozens, but most of the other people that had huts, there were children in the families, and we played with them at Carrick.

TG: Did you have a boat? Did you go fishing?

JS: Well, my parents bought a canoe, and then we had a little rowing boat and we didn't do much serious fishing but the [10.31] boys put out stake lines and caught flounders. But we didn't particularly fish, I think we... kind of Swallows and Amazons stuff!

TG: Do you think that made you slightly different as well, that you were away a lot from the town, or did that not feature?

JS: I don't think that made us different, because... I'm just trying to think if I ever took friends down to stay with us. Must have done. But, no, I don't think so because... I don't think so, no.

TG: Coming back to High Street, and you said that number 5 had been bought to probably accommodate visitors or family, who used to come to stay?

JS: Well, not all that many as it happens. My uncles and aunts used to come and stay, but not on a regular basis, and you've got to remember that I was twelve years old in 1939, so that all this pattern that my parents were thinking about stopped in 1939 anyway.

TG: There were some people that I remember coming to stay when I was a child, but that wasn't people like Bertha Waddell?

JS: I don't know who...

TG: And the Troop, who used to come, the children's theatre, do you remember them?

JS: Yes, they stayed with us. But there was always room, you see, for the people to come. I hadn't thought about that. And I remember my great aunt, [Anuta? 12.21], she came once, and she lived in

the South of France. I never thought very much about that. But she came even after we were married, I think. Who else came... Can't think of others off hand.

TG: But you had room to accommodate people, basically?

12.41

JS: Yes, we did. Sometimes it was empty for a long time.

TG: Did ye spend lots of time around the harbour?

JS: Yes. I used to hang about round the harbour!

TG: [laughing] What's the attraction of a harbour?

JS: Boats! [laughs]

TG: So did your love of boats come from the harbour and the men ye met there rather than from your dad?

JS: Oh, the interest in the sea, in a small way, was not through my father, it was not through my parents, it was just because we lived near the harbour, and the... I was desperate to get on board some of these boats... A lot that were pleasure boats. I didn't have lots to do with the fishermen themselves.

TG: So what sort of pleasure boats were there? Were they moored in the harbour, or...?

JS: Yes. Jock Mitchell had a little yawl called the Sea Mew, and the Montgomeries had a motor boat, I can't remember what it was called. And there were, George Davidson and another guy had what I think really was an [?14.09] smack, a sailing boat, McGlashen had a sailing boat... So there were always day sails. They used to have a regatta.

TG: In the harbour?

JS: In the harbour, yes.

TG: So where were the boats, were they moored off the harbour?

JS: Yes. The boats that had to stay afloat were moored where the marina is now, cause they could lie afloat there, and they would come alongside when they had to.

TG: Was it a busy fishing port when you were a child?

JS: Not busy like it is now. The [?Polands], and nobody else, I think, fished lobsters. I used to think in a kind of desultory way, but the weather wasn't all that favourable. But they fished lobsters and one of the brothers had a contract using a boat to service the [Ross?] Island, so I guess that gave him some income as well. So it wasn't knee deep in lobster fishermen.

TG: So the quayside would not really be as busy as one might imagine?

JS: Not really, no. The harbour was used by boats coming in, bringing grain and feedstuffs for the mills there, and there was several warehouses, including a tall one that was built by Carsewell's, and they had a suction device that could suck the grain out. And people objected to this cause they wanted to run this all night, but it made a pumping noise and the folk in the town objected to it!

TG: There was a mill just round the corner from where you lived.

JS: That's right, yes. There was several milling companies when I think about it. Carsewell's came from Dalbeattie, there was another one, Charlton's, and there might have been... there was a mill where, just upriver of the bridge, although it was not associated, it wasn't tied to the harbour. But there were warehouses in the harbour, I don't know who they belonged to.

16.41

TG: Did that make that corner of the High Street quite busy at times?

JS: To an extent, yes, but the activity was limited to the harbour, like Carsewell's with their suction device, which was instead of having filling grain into bags and lifting them ashore and then they went into the various stores there, what happened after that I can't remember. But Charlton's mixed feed, at their mill, which is now where Riverside Court is, and they had a jetty, but even when I was a child it was very rarely used because only the small schooners could tie up there, not the steamboats.

TG: So if you think about the activity on the High Street, no children, a bit at the mill, bit at the harbour, what other activity was happening in the street? Apart from roller skating!

JS: Nothing! Well, I suppose people must have... I need to think seriously about this, but there was ... what was good about it was there was a mixture of people, so some people had labouring jobs, some people were quite well off, when you think about the sizes of the houses and the people who lived down the closes, some of them in near squalor, indeed... They must have had jobs in the town, I suppose, not many people commuted to work.

TG: The big house opposite you, Blair House...

JS: Blair House, well, when I was a child it was occupied by Miss Blair, and then I guess when she died it was bought by Dr MacNiven, and he ran a surgery... every day, I think. Yes, he had his surgery in Blair House, and then his son, David MacNiven, he came eventually, and he did the same thing.

TG: Broughton House nearby, too...

JS: Broughton House was occupied by [?Honow 18.58] and he lived in that house with one sister who kept house to him.

TG: Do you remember him?

JS: No, he died in 1933.

TG: Sorry, yes.

JS: If I remember him it's only by chance, really. I think he wasn't very keen on kids, I don't think!

TG: And then you had the Geoffs, of course.

JS: Yes, well, they came later on, before Geoffs came the house was occupied by different people. At one time, a Colonel [on the range?] lived in that house, and then Geoffs came and lived there. And there were people living down that close, so the house was on the High Street, facing it was occupied by one family, and then there were one or two families and Helen Johnstone, the artist, she lived and had a studio down that close. And we had access to 5, down the close, not always very successfully.

TG: And just thinking maybe beyond that, can you think of anybody else who featured in your life who lived down... or did you feel that you lived in your own little area of the street?

JS: Well, more or less, as it happens... after we no longer had staff in the house we had a lady who cleaned for us, and she lived down one of the closes, and her husband I think worked for the council. And the lady who washed our clothes, she lived further over, further down, not on the high street I don't think.

20.48

TG: Apart from running along to school or running to the harbour, do remember shopping in the town? Did you have to go for messages?

JS: I didn't have to go for messages very much. We bought all our requirements in the town, and if I remember rightly the message boy would come round and take a note of what we... what was required, and then I guess that was delivered and the bills were paid, maybe monthly or quarterly. And I guess there's certain competition among the grocers. And we went to the grocer's, I mean, I can remember the lovely smell in grocer's shops, from then, and there was a tailor in the town, and he made our clothes... We bought our shoes in the town, household goods could be bought for the town, and within the town.

TG: So there wasn't really any need to go further afield to buy daily necessities?

JS: No, daily necessities were all there, nobody will have thought of going even as far as Castle Douglas. How would we do that, except by bus I suppose. But there were no fridge, so we had a little larder that was built into the wall, and in that we kept stuff that had to be kept cool. But nothing kept for long. Milk didn't keep for long. Can't remember what else lived in that larder, not much else I suppose.

TG: So the message boys were coming in the street, probably on a bicycle?

JS: Yes, on a bicycle. Quite clever bicycles, they had a small front wheel with a big area where a basket lived, and some of them had a basket behind the seat as well. And some of them had a panel on the bicycle with the name of the grocer from whom they came, or the butcher, I suppose, as well.

TG: Were there any other people came around the town, around the street, or knocked your door?

JS: Yes. We had ... I suppose what we might call tinkers now, they came and... mostly clothes pegs, I think. And for some reason we bought rattan garden furniture from somebody who came, and I remember they seemed to come with these things tied on top of their car. And they... We had a fruiterer came in a van, I suppose he was trying to get an edge on our trade, but there weren't many other people came. We didn't have pack men that came, to the extent that they came round at [23.37] My parents bought stuff from Harrod's, I suppose.

TG: Mail order?

JS: I suppose, well, it had to be mail order! And my father got his cigarettes in bulk from, direct from Rothman's. And the coffee came from Wood's of Walton, because that was where [Mrs ? 24.04] shopped, and jam came from Woolton's, which still exists, company still exists, but it used to come in cases. But I can't think of other things like that. That was us shopping away. But most of that stuff could be bought in the town too.

TG: But that was historical, or family-related. Mmmhmm. Did you ever use the train, or the bus, to go anywhere when you were a child?

JS: I don't remember using the bus, I remember using the train, not very much though. In fact, I can hardly think of, when I was very young, using the train at all, we just didn't go anywhere, I suppose.

TG: Life was lived quite close by?

25.23

JS: Yes. When we went to Ireland I can't remember... I can't even remember... We caught the boat in Glasgow and went from Glasgow to Derry, Londonderry, and then we took the train to Burton Port. So we must have got to Glasgow on the train, but I don't remember that part of my journey.

TG: That must have been quite a thing to do, really.

JS: It was a big adventure. And we went to London once or twice too, we went on the train.

TG: Was that to see family?

JS: Yes. We stayed with Freddy [Menma] I think. I remember going to pantomime when I was a child, I mean, I must have been about two or three years old, and that was part of the adventure, if you like, of going to London.

TG: So there's entertainment in London. What entertainment, if you like, was there in Kirkcudbright?

JS: Not much! What did we do? We didn't think about entertainment, really, I mean, I think people had to work fairly hard and they didn't ... I can remember having a radio in the house but it was built for us, it wasn't a ... and then eventually we had a bought radio, with a battery, we had to get the battery charged at Low's. We... what else happened? We might have had touring theatre companies come, not very often I don't think. And when I was a teenager there were dances, I suppose. Not much else.

TG: Was the cinema here then?

JS: Cinema, yeah, we used to go to the cinema. Not that often though. What else, I can't think what else...

TG: So perhaps in secondary school did they do shows, or...

JS: Don't think so. They put on performances, we were... Can't remember ever being part of any, I suppose they must have done... I mean, we didn't feel deprived, that was just the way everybody lived.

TG: You weren't any different from anybody else?

JS: Not in that sense, no. I mean, we read a lot, we belonged to a book club, [Arnott's?] book club, and we could order books up, and they came, and we sent them back and got more books. So we always read a lot.

TG: That's interesting that you were having books bought in from a book club. Was there a library?

JS: Yes, there was, I'm just trying to think... But there maybe wasn't really a children's section, maybe that was why. I think my parents encouraged us to read.

TG: What about secondary school, perhaps? What sports, what activities were there organised?

JS: Well, we had sports days at school, I mean, I wasn't all that sporty... But as a, I can't remember ... I suppose we had PE, there were PE teachers, I remember that. But I don't remember much in the

way of team... I did play rugby in secondary school, I can only remember once going to Newton Stewart to play rugby, what else we did I can't think off hand. Nothing very much.

TG: Did you enjoy secondary school?

29.10

JS: Yes, I did. I was only... I left halfway through my fourth year to go to the Conway, so I guess I had the best of the first three years, though I didn't know it was important, because there was no examination. There used to be a Lower Leaving Certificate but I think that lapsed during the War.

TG: So how did you know about, or find out about the Conway, as 'this is what I would like to do'?

JS: I don't know how I found out about it. I got a brochure eventually, and I had an entrance exam which I remember sitting in a little room upstairs, which was Room 6, while I sat that entrance exam, but how we heard about it I don't know. They were, as it happened, I found out later, there were people who'd sent children to the Conway in the area, I can think of two, the oldest [Amissy?] boy went to the Conway, and one of the Wardlochs from Castle Douglas went to the Conway.

TG: Did you feel homesick when you left the very close environment of living within a community...?

JS: Not particularly, no. No, I didn't. There was too much going on, I think, to have time to feel homesick. Certainly I wasn't crying for home!

TG: No! So how long were you away?

JS: I was in the Conway for two years before I went to sea, but all the time I was there it was aimed at getting to sea, so we were all desperate to get away to sea. But I didn't stay all that long at sea, a year. Your mum was teaching and her headmistress said, if you're going to get married, get him to leave the sea, so I did what I was told, and I swallowed the anchor!

TG: So when you were raising your family here, how... Very different, or similar, was it, to your way of being brought up?

JS: Maybe not all that different. I mean, there was two backgrounds, there was mine and your mum's, and I guess they were quite different when I think about it, so it was an amalgam of these two... We didn't feel particularly deprived, I mean, there were times when your mum and I thought about money seriously.

TG: But the things that the children did were very similar?

JS: I guess they were, they had their friends... They never told us they were deprived! And we didn't deliberately deprive them.

TG: Your love of the sea continued with your involvement with the lifeboat...

JS: Yes, we had a boat too, that we went to sail in. I felt really... that it was something I could do, like, if you like, contribute to the community.

TG: And was the High Street, when you came back and settled there to raise a family, was the High Street different, do you think, at all?

JS: No, most of the people that were there when I was a child were still living there. There's changes about the standard of the housing, for example, didn't really start on til even, we got March 1948, I

think a lot of the housing was much as it had been long before the war. Gradually there were changes, I suppose.

TG: Now, what about some of... Do you remember any characters of the town, neighbours who were characters?

33.25

JS: No, we didn't think of them as characters, really, they were just people. I mean, the artists that we knew... Jessie M King, I think she thought of herself as a character, I must admit, when I saw her on her bicycle coming along I used to go and hide because I found her whimsy a bit embarrassing. And the artists were my parents' friends too, my father used to go to Robson's a lot, I guess it was a Sunday night, where an eclectic mix of people used to go there... My parents used to have an annual party with a theme, and I'm thinking of this now, they had one, I think it was a Treasure Island party, and Sheriff Foulkes, who was a wee stout man, came as a skeleton in a cupboard, and Mary Murdoch came, I remember her in knee britches, and very smart she was, but she was supposed to be a powder monkey, and we had to dress as pirates and stand on the landing and chase them up to the room where the party was held.

TG: No children at this party?

JS: No, this was an adults' party! We had children's parties though, and we ... I remember once my parents took the Keithly Camp hut at the Doune, and we had a big party there, but what the entertainments were at the party I can't remember.

TG: Any of the fishermen who were particular characters? Or the people who hung out...

JS: I didn't think so until much later. Some of the characters weren't all that good perhaps.

TG: No.

JS: And who else? I suppose Mrs McMinn across the road, that was the doctor's wife and widow, in a way she was a character.

TG: In what way?

JS: Well, I thought of it more as I... Your mum used to go across and see her, and she went across one day... She used to smoke, and her hair was tinged yellow with the smoke, but she was up a tree picking fruit, in her eighties! Your mum thought that was quite odd. And who else? I can't think of other people... Miss Crystal, I suppose, who lived along the street. She dressed like an Edwardian lady.

TG: Whereabouts did she live?

JS: She lived in the house that Lindsay Forbes now lives in, can't remember what number it was.

TG: Oh, of course, you lived at number 3, I think we've forgotten to mention that.

JS: Yes. But I can't remember what number it was.

TG: And did she live in that big house on her own?

JS: Yes, she did. I don't know what the provenance of her father was, but he must have been a kind of merchant of this town, and I believe he was made a Freeman of the Burgh a long time ago. Before,

you know, this spanned a big time from his time to hers. I can't remember any of the other people who were particular characters.

TG: You talked about the eclectic mix of, because of the housing you can tell that the High Street must have been different. Do you think it was a different street from other streets in the town?

37.19

JS: I doubt it. Maybe I didn't know enough about it, people who couldn't afford to own their own houses lived in council houses, nobody thought much about that. And most of these people, I guess that's what most of their children came from too. But some of the houses that the people lived in might have been owned by them, some of them might have been rented. [?Horrell] was a great acquirer of property which he let out on High Street. But we didn't distinguish among people who lived in the street, they lived their lives. And when they overlapped, they overlapped.

TG: So you left the High Street aged...

JS: I didn't leave the High Street til about 1970.

TG: Did you feel sad to leave it?

JS: Not particularly, I think everybody else did. I think your mum was glad to leave High Street. When she came to live there she was used to living in the country so she felt the neighbours were watching her all the time. She came to realise that some of that was benevolent, it wasn't just nosiness, but we felt that we were going to have to move away anyway, and we were looking for somewhere to live, to have a foothold, in the area, and we looked at various places, even a cottage away up at the [Collandoch?] above Gatehouse. And eventually we bought Sandside, which I think it suited us better... I don't think the children were very keen to leave the town, but they had no choice! But your mum came to love Sandside cause of the garden, and there was less of Sassoons in it.

TG: Well, that's really been very interesting from my point of view, Dad.

JS: You made me think.

TG: Is there anything else that you've thought about while you've been.... Thinking about this interview, perhaps something that's come into your mind that you would like to tell me about that we haven't touched on?

JS: Not particularly. There's no social conscience involved in the mix of society, really. I mean, the children played with... I mean, I'm just trying to think, my particular friend, Tommy Ramsay, was the writer's son, but the children that went home to farms... Some of them, because in primary school they were paying their five shillings, were farmer's sons rather than farm worker's sons, but because they lived on farms and we lived in the town, that was it, and some of them I guess would have to work on a farm too. I can't think of who else. Davie Crosby, I think his father was the court reporter, as it happens. Off hand I can't think of others. But I wasn't short of friends.

TG: And you've obviously enjoyed living in Kirkcudbright all these years!

JS: Well, it was where we lived.

TG: Has it changed, now, as a town?

JS: Oh yes, I mean, a lot of houses are holiday homes, and there are smaller families, and I mean... you'd have to ask the children what they thought about where their friends came from and where they lived, but ... we've lots of acquaintances still whom we've known, I guess, all my life. Or maybe not even lots...

TG: People who were born and brought up and are still living here?

JS: I mean, there were maybe not that many of us.

41.21

TG: But there are a few.

JS: They get less as they get older.

TG: Thank you very much indeed.

41.29