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Interview

Ngaire Thomas Interview

Read the edited transcript of Quentin McDermott's interview with former Exclusive Brethren member, Ngaire Thomas, on the Church as a cult.

Reporter: **Quentin McDermott**

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Q. Ngaire what was it like growing up in the Church?

A. Well at the time we didn't think it was any different to any other way of growing up, it wasn't really until we started school that I realised I was different and even then way back over 60 years ago, it wasn't probably so much different to basic fundamentalist Christian family.

Q. Did you think of the Church in those days as being warm and inclusive and happy and loving?

A. In a way it was because we had nothing to compare it with and I believe it was because it was an extended part of the family it was our life, so yes, I would say it was.

Q. Were you parents were strict?

A. Very, very strict. My Mother had been a convert to the Brethren and often converts are more strict than those born into it, but my Father was very strict, yeah.

Q. Now it was also a life of constant ritual and repetition wasn't it?

A. Yes, the same thing every day. Like every morning before breakfast we'd have morning reading and we'd watch the breakfast getting cold while we were listening to Dad read the Bible and then we would have to have our turn to read as well. All the time we could smell the porridge but it was going cold.

Q. What did you do for entertainment in the home?

A. We weren't allowed to read broadly like most children do. We had to read only books that were sanctioned by the Church. We played outside, New Zealand has long twilights so we had great times in the evenings but we weren't allowed to go to the movies or read comics, we always wanted to read comics. We used to try and borrow them from the kids at school but we daren't take them home ... We usually had quite big families and I came from a family of four children so we had our own entertainment.

Q. Now you were quite a rebellious child in a sense weren't you?

A. Yes and I drew on that for my writing and because I was a rebellious child, I had become a

very stable, surviving adult. Had I not been so rebellious, it might be a different story.

Q. Were you encouraged to be creative and to think creatively and independently?

A. No, not at all, not at all. Except I think my Grandmother understood, you know if she was alive now I'd like to talk to her about that because she was a really creative person and she used to encourage me to make things and she encouraged me to write things down.

Q. But it was really the opposite to that wasn't it?

A. Yes. Everything was decided for us. I probably didn't notice it so much when I was growing up as a child but I noticed it later on when I had my own children.

Q. OK, now you always wanted to be a school teacher didn't you?

A. Yeah. I'd loved the idea of imparting information and seeing people grow and flourish and learn to do things and yeah I would have loved to have been a school teacher.

Q. What happened, how did you feel when that dream slipped away from you?

A. Well it was very disappointing. I realised it of course later on when I was in my fifties I did become a teacher but it was a big disappointment to me because I knew I could do it. I really wanted to excel at school and I knew I had the ability to do it but it was just out of reach.

Q. Is that common?

A. Yes but prior to about the late fifties, we were allowed to go to university. I have a friend in New Zealand who was one of the last people to go to university and he's just a few years older than me but by the time it was my turn, it was it wasn't possible.

Q. Well why not?

A. Well they don't believe in higher education, they don't like anything that encourages people to think for themselves. I think that's what it really boils down to.

Q. Now was there such a thing as sex education in your day?

A. No, it was a rude awakening. There might have been in some families but there certainly wasn't any in my family and it wasn't encouraged by the Church.

Q. There was one very traumatic incident for you wasn't there?

A. Yes.

Q. Tell me about that.

A. Yes. The Brethren had a time when they went through a lot of confessions when young people confessed to things and they came to me because they'd heard that there was something between me and my cousin and when they asked me if I had committed fornication, I said oh yes, I suppose so, because I knew I had kissed and cuddled my cousin down in the bushes down behind his house and nobody had explained to me what they were talking about. And I could tell by their very concerned faces that this just wasn't a good answer. And of course I was put in my room on my own for several days and just sort fed through the door until it was my turn to go up in front of the of the Church of about probably 500 or 600 people. And nobody bothered to come and ask me if I knew what they were talking about. Well I can laugh about it now but it wasn't very funny at the time.

Q. How old were you then?

A. I was 15 going on 16.

Q. So what was it like for a 15 year old girl being hauled in front of a meeting of several hundred older men and women?

A. Very very very frightening, very frightening and it's something that I will never forget even though I can laugh about I'll never forget it. And I do worry about what happens to young people because knowing what I went through.

Q. How are girls and women viewed and treated in the Church?

A. Well they are not of particular importance. They come a little bit down the chain like the men and the boys in the family are actually more important even than the mother and the girls, but women have their place and they should know what that place is and stay there and that was definitely in the background.

Q. Being seen but not heard?

A. I'll never forget the time when I was a young married woman the Brethren coming to me suggesting that I should only speak one-tenth of what my husband did.

Q. Do men in the Church enjoy the power and control they have over women?

A. I don't know if they enjoy it, I thought so while I was in there but it's now I don't think they do. I think it's rather a burden for some of them, I know that when we left the Brethren, my husband changed completely and we became more of a working team so I think there's probably a lot that don't really like it.

Q. So he relished the opportunity to have an equal relationship?

A. Yes well we became companions and friends and partners and did things together and it was marvellous.

Q. Tell me about the changes that took place in the Church in the 1960s.

A. Well around about 1959, a new leader came on the scene. Actually the son of the of the previous leader but even though the Brethren would not admit this, he was an alcoholic and when you've got an alcoholic leader who wants to be allowed to drink, of course he bought in free use of alcohol. During the 1960s there was a lot of whisky consumed and I think that was the beginning of the end for the Exclusive Brethren because if the leader has to be followed and the leader's an alcoholic, the rest of them haven't got much chance have they?

Q. Well his judgment was obviously seriously impaired.

A. Yes and I can remember being instructed to provide whisky at meal times when we had visitors and we had visitors very often. I can remember being forced to drink whisky because if I didn't I was hiding something. This was when I was in my thirties. And the whole decade between 1960 and 1970 must make the Brethren feel really ashamed of that part of their history because some really silly things happened in that time, some really bad things and it just sort of went downhill from there. That's when I believe that it started to become a cult.

Q. Let me ask you about a couple of the events or doctrines or policies instigated during that period. Tell me first of all about the doctrine of separation?

A. Well the doctrine of separation of course started way back in the beginning and in one of the later chapters of my book I explain about the beginning of a split between the Open Brethren and the Exclusive Brethren. That's when extreme separatism started, way back in 1848. It just gradually got worse and worse. Ah even prior to the sixties, we were able to see grandparents

and uncles and aunts who were on the outside and we used to really cherish those times when we could see those members of the family but after the early sixties when we had what they call the eating issue came along when we weren't allowed to eat or drink or socialise with other people that became very, very hard on our relatives.

Q. How much damage has the doctrine of separation caused?

A. Well I think it's the one core problem with the Exclusive Brethren. I think that if they want to fix the problem, they only need to address that one issue of extreme separatism because it's not natural. I don't think that God intended us to be separate from other human beings. It's really done more damage than anything else I can think of.

Q. It's caused devastation.

A. It has. It's caused absolute devastation in families. Just to say one thing here, when my book came out, I had people writing to me and ringing me saying I think we're related because they recognised some of the Christian names of the older people who'd passed on that I used in the book and recognised some family stories and they were so thrilled. They'd ring up and they'd say I can remember you when you were a little girl and it was just so neat and I still keep in touch with those relatives. And one of the first things I did when I left the Brethren was go and knock on the door of an aunt and uncle of my mother and say hey I can talk to you now, I can come and have a cup of tea. Tremendous feeling, yeah.

Q. Is it justified in the scriptures, the urge to become more prosperous?

A. I don't believe so, I don't think so at all. In fact I think it's more the opposite and I was thinking the other day Jesus told someone to sell all that he had and give it to the poor. You don't see that sort of thing happening in there. I mean we don't need to be materialistic. As a Quaker now I'm probably the least materialist than I've ever been in my life.

Q. OK now just going back to the Man of God who had an alcohol problem, this manifested itself during the famous Aberdeen incident. Tell me about that.

A. Well what I can remember personally about it was receiving letters and copies of tapes of the meetings in Aberdeen, but because my husband was very much a Brethren, he didn't want to know about it and he didn't want to listen to the tapes or read the letters so we destroyed them and he actually went to a meeting where he gave 100 per cent allegiance to the Man of God and he suggested that I should do the same which I grudgingly did but I was always sort of a little bit curious about what was going on. But you see we lived in New Zealand which is a long way from Britain and I think by the time it filtered down there, they had started to come up with the ambush idea that he was doing this as an ambush to just test the members, but I don't believe that. I think that this is one thing that the Exclusive Brethren are going to have to judge but they still say that he was a pure man.

Q. Well what actually happened in the Aberdeen incident?

A. Well I wasn't there but I've heard and read the accounts of it and I believe that he was a sick man and that he wanted somebody in his room with him and possibly in his bed with him and so being the leader he sort of went about organising that but somebody walked in on him.

Q. There was a rather far-fetched Biblical excuse for his behaviour?

A. Yeah. I mean the whole thing was far fetched from beginning to end and I find it so hard to believe that the Brethren in there are so gullible that they can actually believe the story that they were told.

Q. What were they told?

A. Well they were told that nothing happened, that she was in there ministering to him by washing his feet and drying his feet with her hair and I think that's just garbage. Well that's just my opinion. I think we're all worldly-wise, we know exactly what was going on.

Q. What about the tapes of the meeting? Did you ever listen to those?

A. Yes. But when you start listening to them you laugh so much that you miss some of it. I mean it's absolutely gross, absolutely gross. The language is really horrible you know.

Q. Why isn't contraception allowed in the Church?

A. Well back in the sixties the pill was only just coming into fashion and other contraceptive procedures were not allowed either but we were allowed to use what we called Vatican Roulette or the rhythm method. It's still like that and I think that it's abuse of women's rights to interfere with a husband and wife's right to plan their families. Because we had to start so young a lot of the families grew to 10, 12 children, but then there was a leader after 1970 who said that sex was only for producing children therefore that was the only time it should be used. Well that didn't go down very well either, didn't last very long and I think contraceptives were always frowned on and still are.

Q. And you disobeyed the rules?

A. I did, I did, yes. I actually had a stroke when I was 28 and I'd been shifting house when my husband was at work and I just went paralysed all down one side and I'd had my doctor said that he didn't think I should have any more children. I had four children at that stage and they were all very close together, and so with my permission of course he put me on the pill. I had these pills in my sewing box and took them religiously for five years and I mean I suppose my husband wondered why that we weren't having any more children but he was he was a lovely man and very, very guileless and I dare say he went with the flow until he got challenged.

Q. OK. Now I want to move on to the challenge and the excommunication and before you were withdrawn from. You and Dennis were subjected to hours and hours of the most intense and personal interrogation ...

A. Yes. We were shut up, what they call shut up or put into solitary confinement, closed up in our house and not allowed to speak to anybody of the other Brethren. Of course we knew nobody on the outside and during that time which was only a week the first time, it was when they interrogated us about me taking the pill and after I promised to get rid of them, then they contacted the Man of God at the time and he must have given them the OK so we went back in again. But of course, I became pregnant straight away and I was quite sick and during the next few months I didn't always go to all the meetings and that started a little bit of in-family arguments with some of my older children. If Mum can stay home, why can't we. And it was deemed then that Dennis had lost control of his family and we were just interrogated every Monday night. They'd come along after the prayer meeting so they'd arrive at about 8 and sit in the lounge with very long faces and they would talk to us for hours and hours and sometimes after midnight one of them would doze off to sleep and the other one would keep on talking and basically they were trying to wear us down, they were trying to find something in our lives that they could discipline us for.

Q. And they quizzed you about your sex life?

A. Oh yes. Yes definitely and I realise now it was a result of the Man of God's thinking at the time that was only for child bearing, they brought in this rule of no sex while you were shut up and they tested us out for a week and there's no way my husband wanted to obey that that rule, I mean when you're told you can't do something, that's the very things you want to do and so when they came around the following week and asked you have you, have you, he says, no,

but of course as soon as they'd gone I said to him hey you weren't very truthful there, you should have just come out with it and said yes we did because we had every right to. So he rang them up and said look I'm sorry I actually told you a lie and that was on the Monday night, on the Tuesday night we were withdrawn from.

Now we weren't invited along to our trial or our withdrawn from meeting. This is one thing I really have against the Brethren is that in a Court of law if you're accused of something you actually go along to Court and you have somebody that defends you and you have family members there to support you and things are discussed. I'm not saying that every Court case ends up happily but when you get into trouble with the Brethren, you have no opportunity to defend yourself. They just have a meeting and they say we believe that these people are no longer fit to walk with us and to you get the marching orders, yeah.

Q. What do you feel now in retrospect about this enormous interrogation you endured and the fact that a lot of it was about your sex life.

A. I think it's abuse, I think it's psychological abuse. At the time I didn't think that because we were so used to it, it had happened so many other times. When you go along to a meeting, especially on a Tuesday night and they'd say would the dear Brethren please stay behind after the meeting, we have matters to discuss and then the men would start talking about somebody's case or somebody's misdemeanours and looking back it a total abuse of people's privacy and of their rights ... You see they have no social conscience so they don't know this sort of thing is wrong. It's not until you get out that you realise just how bad it is.

Q. How difficult and traumatic was it adjusting to life on the outside?

A. Ah well looking back I say it's like waking up one morning and realising that your migraine headache's gone. I suppose at the time it was traumatic because we didn't know about life on the outside. We didn't know how to make simple decisions. For instance if our children wanted to go to the movies, all we had to say while we were in the Brethren was 'oh no Brethren don't do that, you can't go to the movies'. But once we were out we felt as if we needed to be able to say why they couldn't go, but we didn't know why and so we'd have to get the newspaper out and read what it says but even then we couldn't tell whether it was a good movie or not. I'm just using this as an example. There was a lot of things like that and of course there were various family members who were also in the process of being disciplined for misdemeanours and we couldn't see them.

It was very difficult and it takes about three years on an average that's talking to other people about it as well to realise that life on the outside is OK. Because when you leave the Brethren, you leave with a lot of fear. They would tell us that if we left them something terrible would happen to us. One of our family members would die, somebody would have an accident, somebody would get a terminal illness, and that was sort of drummed into us. This was worldwide not just where I came from. So we feared being on the outside but gradually we started to get used to it and I think one of the best things that we did as a family was we bought a business.

Q. How difficult was it for the children?

A. Well we didn't really realise how difficult it was for the children and I don't know if you've read the chapter in the book that my son wrote and that he was 11 at the time and I think it shows how difficult it was for him and my children are grown up now but when I look back over their lives, I realise that the ones who were between 5 and 12 at the time had the most difficulty. When children are learning the rules of the society they come from or that they're born into and that changes, it's very upsetting for them because mum and dad are reinforcing the rules of the Church and then suddenly mum and dad are doing the opposite and I wished that we had realised what was happening and had more input into the children's' lives and

helping to explain to them why suddenly we were not living the same lives as we were before. I'm not saying that we lived bad lives after we left, we were basically very good people but there was just so much we didn't know and these days any people contemplating leaving the Brethren, have got a tremendous back-up; a group of people that will love them and embrace them and help them to get accustomed to life on the outside. Even if they think they don't need it.

Q. The fellowship outside the fellowship?

A. The fellowship outside, yeah. A marvellous fellowship that you'd have to look hard anywhere to find, yeah.

Q. I was very struck by the description you gave of your daughter, Angela's, terror.

A. Yes she thought she was going to hell. She thought that once we'd stop going to the meetings that we lost our protection and that God wouldn't know us any more and wouldn't protect us and she'd wake up crying at night time because she was going into the lake of fire and get burned up. She was 8 at the time.

Q. And this was a recurring nightmare?

A. Yeah and for a long time afterwards, yeah.

Q. Horrifying. Now as teenagers your children found it hard to adjust didn't they?

A. They did. Yes and in my book I tell of stories of the two older ones going to prison and one of them becoming a father at 15. These were all things that we had to go through and people who don't know how we how we lived amongst the Brethren would probably wonder why we didn't know what to do, why we couldn't make good decisions and that sort of thing but it's because it was just so foreign to us. Amongst the Brethren everybody is so protected and if anybody does anything wrong of course they get booted out so quickly that they don't do wrong anymore and so we didn't hear about how to behave if suddenly you found one of your children was to become a father or a mother. So it was very traumatic but we grew out of it.

Q. What was the best thing about being out of the Church?

A. Oh just being free to be ourselves, to learn about how other people live and to learn about different cultures, to be able to make our own decisions. I just feel as if I started living when I was in my 30s and I know now that life needs to be lived abundantly and I think that I was unable to do that because of the restrictions when I was younger.

Q. Did you feel secretly guilty enjoying life so much?

A. Oh at times I did, but I don't any more. But one of the really nice things about it is my children come to me and they say Mum, we're so glad that you that you went against the tide and got out because they know that life would be really hard for them if they were still in there. In fact if we'd waited much longer, some of the children might have married in there because they marry fairly young. Another ten years would have seen our children married in there and then that's when the heartbreak really starts, yeah.

Q. But you were agonising as well weren't you?

A. Oh yes yes.

Q. You nearly left your husband.

A. Yes because I knew he wanted to go back, I knew it meant so much to him. But then you see the Brethren weren't really very keen on me, I mean I think they recognised me as a rebel way

from way back but they really loved him and he was a lovely person and they never really wanted him to leave. So they visited him every six months for 20 years and always with the same excuse that they were praying for me to get right so that he could go back. He could have gone back without me of course but he knew that if he did that, he never be able to see me again or see the children unless he took the children with him and if he did that, then I would be bereft of the children so there were times when I realised that he really really missed them and that he wanted to go back and at one stage I tried to make it happen for him but thankfully he had enough sense to not to do it.

Q. Could you have survived without him?

A. I could have survived very well without him but I don't think he would have survived very well without me. He was the kind of man who really loved being married and loved having a family.

Q. Now you spoke earlier about threats, the fear that they instil in people about leaving the Church and you actually believed didn't you that you'd been cursed?

A. Yes we did because so many of our children were getting into trouble and we'd read a book, Derek Prince, about curses and blessings where he said that if something happens three times or more then you need to look at it and see if it's a curse and so we talked about this and when the Brethren withdraw from you they sometimes use words that to me sounded like a curse, like they'd say that they deliver your soul to Satan for the destruction of the flesh. In other words, you know something terrible would happen to you and they really believed this and we believed it because we'd been taught it.

Q. OK, now you used the terms sanctimonious and pompous to describe the Brethren ... Is that true in general terms?

A. That's my opinion of them, yes. Especially the leadership in fact now I think the whole thing is quite laughable because you know looking back in hindsight because they think they're God's chosen people, they say they're God's chosen people, they teach that and so much so that they actually believe it. But they're not special, they're no different to anybody else and I feel sorry for those at the bottom of the of the hierarchy who have been fed this garbage for so long that they actually believe it, but when you come out you realise that they're just ordinary people, no different to anyone else.

Q. What really drives them? What motivates them?

A. Well if you asked me this question 40 years ago, I might have said that they wanted to be God's chosen people and they wanted to be spiritually the best but if you're asking me now in 2006, I say money ... Nothing, absolutely nothing happens in the Exclusive Brethren without the authority from the top. It's more than their life's worth to do something independently.

Q. Is it a cult?

A. Yes I believe it is. It has all the hallmarks of a cult. But of course when you're growing up in something like this, you don't recognise it as such because everything happens so gradually. It's only when you can step out of it and take a bird's eye view of it that you realise that something went dreadfully wrong.

Q. What do you see as the characteristics of a cult?

A. One of the main characteristics is people who blindly obey a leader, even if secretly down in the depths of their hearts they question whether it's whether it's right. Another sign of a cult I think is when you get into something that you can't easily get out of and of course when you're born into it, it's even hard to get out of it.

Q. Is it a happy Church?

A. I believe that it is, it's a very safe Church. You feel very safe when you're in there and closeted, well cared for, happiness is a relative term that you use when you can compare it with unhappiness. So I would say yes while you're in there, it's a happy Church. The problem comes if you make a small slip up in your life and you get put into the put outside.

Q. And at it's most extreme, it's a very cruel Church?

A. It is yes. But once again, they don't realise that they're being cruel. Cruelty is another word that's relative in comparison to something.

Q. Do you want to see the Church survive?

A. Yes.

Q. Why?

A. Because when people are brought up in something like that and they feel secure, if that was to be split wide open then there would be a lot of hurting people. There would be a lot of bewildered people. I see no reason why it shouldn't survive, I would just like to see some of the rules changed and the main rule that should be changed is separation because they say it's separation from evil but it isn't. What they don't realise is that there's just as much evil on the inside there as there is on the outside. I don't know if you've seen the New Zealand documentary, but one of the men there said that it's very, very hard to get withdrawn from, that they don't withdraw from people unless it's the last resort and then only for behaviour that is so evil that even the world would call it evil. Well that's bunkem. You know that's just pie in the sky.

Q. Finally just this, you and your family went through hell; have you forgiven them?

A. Oh definitely, definitely yeah. There's nothing I'd like better than to sit down with them over a cup of coffee, not a glass of whisky, but a cup of coffee, and talk about the good things about them. Oh I'd love to go up to them and throw my arms around them and say hey welcome to the real world. Yeah, there's room for them out here yeah but I don't hold anything against them at all.

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