

**102 Alastair Brown**

Please note that any items that were difficult to transcribe are marked with an **[indiscernible]** tag. Also, the respondent spoke really quickly at times, so piecing together the dialogue was a bit challenging. Finally, the interview seems to have ended abruptly.

**[0:00:00]**

**Interviewer:** The date today is April the 3rd. This is Eleanor Levine, and I'm meeting with Alistair Brown, who is living at 68 Robert Street, and you've been here since approximately 1973.

**Respondent:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** So first, I just want to say thank you for giving me some of your time.

**Respondent:** You're welcome.

**Interviewer:** Would you tell me what first brought you to Robert Street?

**Respondent:** **[0:00:30]** I came to Canada – I was a new immigrant, which means I had no external reason to come here. I wasn't poor. I had a wonderful job at the BBC. I had a wonderful job. I was one of those select – sort of the director's course, which I think the London Times said it was the most select group. They had taken over the foreign office. I got it by accident. I had worked in commercial television and then before that in America, which I loved living in **[0:01:00]** America. I was young and in love, and loved America. I didn't like England, came to the BBC, so it was wonderful. I worked on a news project as an editor. My craft is editing. Worked for news programming. I just didn't – I never got on with England. I didn't want to – my father's very paternal, I think I said. He ran the biggest state in Ireland, which I got on very well with him, but I had enough of paternalism. The BBC was paternal. I had no real reason. **[0:01:30]** I'd done an edition on asbestos in the CBC and got involved a bit, and they said, "Oh, come over here. We've got a job." I just – I didn't know one Canadian, never been here. No, actually when I was eighteen I'd come to Montreal from the States. I

had one of those bus things that would drive you everywhere. The Greyhound. I come here. I just came – it was a sort of adventure, or I didn't want to be at the BBC for a bit. No intention of really staying here. So I [0:02:00] was here and not knowing anybody, and when I got here, the CBC said, "Oh, I'm so sorry we can't hire you. We're having an austerity squeeze." So I think I had sixty dollars and not a connection. Not a connection. And couldn't get any work. Well I did. I edited a few commercials. I'd done when I was very young and I really despised editing commercials, so I stopped doing that and I taught at Central Tech, though I had no teaching training, but I have a good – I had a famous university education. [0:02:30] I also worked in a liquor store. At the same time. And then I became rich because I did the first films at Ontario Place.

**Interviewer:** Oh.

**Respondent:** And I'd only lived in actually Walmer Road, I'd lived, and then I had rented – sublet an apartment in New York. I was in the northern part of Toronto. As I didn't know anyone I'd never been anywhere really. It took me a long time to remember there was a lake here. And I had a girlfriend [0:03:00] who's very knowledgeable of the city. Long way of telling a really simple story, and she said, "Suddenly you've got all this money in your pocket," because I suddenly got paid a lot of money, and I'd had nothing for nine months. Not to mention I was unbelievably lonely. This is not a friendly city. I always annoyed people by saying this is the least friendly city I've lived in, and I've lived in New York, and London, and Rome, and Paris, and it is. New York – Canadians don't see themselves and how unfriendly they are, but they are.

**Interviewer:** Toronto especially?

**Respondent:** Toronto. [0:03:30] Yes. And so – and she said, "You should buy a house." Now because I had done what I wanted to – I knew what I wanted to do, which was not really money-making, I really wanted to do sort of leftish-wing documentaries, so I knew I was never going to live in a house in London, and I knew I wasn't going to live in Manhattan, which is the two places, and then I suddenly saw this house was so inexpensive and I bought it. Almost with cash out of my pocket. And so the real secret is what did this house cost?

Which was [0:04:00] nothing. It cost – I paid twenty-eight thousand and five hundred dollars for this house. So I could have bought it all from just wages. One of my poor children, who is now trying to live here, [laughs] very different matter. So it wasn't a very big thing to do, and I had this girlfriend who says, "You should buy a house." And she knew the – kind of – of Toronto – she's [0:04:30] – if you lived in the city there, there were three very beautiful sisters. I won't mention names, but anyhow, she did – very sort of worldly and they knew Toronto, very Toronto. They're Society Girls women. And so they knew the place, and they knew this little neighbourhood, and I'd never been here, and I think I saw three houses and one in Cabbagetown. I mean I bought one.

**Interviewer:** But she directed you.

**Respondent:** She directed me.

**Interviewer:** This is one of the areas she directed you to.

**Respondent:** Absolutely. Absolutely. So I bought this house. It was [0:05:00] a horrible rooming house. But it was – you know, I could see that it was a huge deal because I'd lived elsewhere. I mean I should have bought, you know, four houses on the street. As everybody who bides their time says. [Laughs] So that's why.

**Interviewer:** So it was a rooming house, and what was the condition of it at the time?

**Respondent:** Actually, I was twenty-eight. I started working at it. She helped me, my girlfriend, which we broke up over this. We broke up for lots of reasons.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Respondent:** [0:05:30] But it didn't last. And we worked at it, and then I sublet half it with a filmmaker called Gail Singer.

**Interviewer:** I know Gail.

**Respondent:** Yes. And Gail Singer and I lived in this house for five or six years. [Laughter] We still know each other. We still know each other. She came to supper here yesterday. No, two days ago. Which she was saying, "I wouldn't be staying for supper," but you do. She lived her very lightly. It was – you know, we were sort of surrogate family [0:06:00] in a way as Rosine was. We're not quite as close as we were then, but I had children and she didn't. And like that. I said I saw her two days ago. So when she and I lived here, and then Bob Rogers who was her guy lived here, and I lived upstairs for a number of years, so.

**Interviewer:** And you never looked back.

**Respondent:** Well no, I always look – I had no intention of being Canadian. As my mother said, she was snobbish, "Dear, are there any exceptional Canadians?" which says two things. She thought I was. [0:06:30] And afraid she was a snob. And I expect I passed all that. And still have to. Half me thinks coming here was, you know, a huge compromise, which is another thing about the ambition of being an artist. I'd rather have, you know, lived in New York.

**Interviewer:** A small fish in a big sea?

**Respondent:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** As opposed to a big city...

**Respondent:** I would rather live in New York.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Respondent:** I have lived in Hollywood. I have lots of films in New York. I lived in Hollywood. I didn't like it at all, and I didn't have the character. I could tell I wasn't strong [0:07:00] enough willed to be a director in Hollywood, which is a huge ego and a huge wish to push your ambition. I was lucky I could see that. I had friends who did and I could live with them, and I saw it before. You know, I gave up everything and went, but I always wished I lived in Manhattan, but I did – when I was eighteen I fell in love, and you don't get that with your system, I think. Yeah. It was lovely. And I did live somewhere

else, and I did work somewhere else, but I always had this house, and I bought it on the idea of **[0:07:30]** that this would allow me to live anywhere I want in the world. I always saw – as I told you, I immigrated at eighteen to New York. I always saw myself in an immigrant life, and so when I'm famous I'm going to have houses in lots of cities. Haven't had that, but that's what I saw sort of as the image of myself, so this was just one house, the first one.

**Interviewer:** Did you work in other places and always come back here?

**Respondent:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** Or did you...

**Respondent:** No, I worked in other places and always come back. Yes.

**Interviewer:** So you went and travelled, worked there...

**Respondent:** Yes, I worked. Not travelled. You know, worked. Travelled, yes, and worked. Because the nice thing I got from directing, you can work lots of places, and I always had a house. So I **[0:08:00]** didn't work quite the same, but if one thing, the house was in bad shape so I spent all my energies keeping it up and I was never well off, so it was never easy, so in a way it was like an anchor in both ways, you know? It held me back and it held me to a place. I love those words that have two meanings. [Laughter] Entitlement being another one. You know that expression? Entitlement used to be a wonderful thing; now it's seen as an insult.

**Interviewer:** Yes, yes. Yeah, yeah. I agree.

**Respondent:** **[0:08:30]** I should be at a lecture. My professorial side comes out. [Laughter] So yeah, so there I was. It always stuck me to this country. I still know very little about this country compared to the States. I'd been to so many places in the States more than here. It was the third place I'd immigrated, so somewhere I wasn't going to lose my heart to it, and it doesn't ask you to lose your heart, Canada, unlike the States. Or Ireland, which is where I'm from. Or **[0:09:00]** Italy, where I love Rome, which I love. It doesn't ask you, which is nice but equally not.

**Interviewer:** Are you talking about a passion or a soul? What is it that you...

**Respondent:** No. It doesn't ask you to be Canadian because it doesn't go around saying – unlike America, which is a nauseously – how they do that. They just ask you to belong to us, love us or leave it, you know? All these American clichés. So you can be like me and hardly, you know, be here, living happily in a wonderful [0:09:30] life and not know the place at all. Now – and I still don't really know it very well. It's sort of embarrassing in a way.

**Interviewer:** But you raised your four children here.

**Respondent:** Two.

**Interviewer:** Two.

**Respondent:** Two children. Yes, two children.

**Interviewer:** Uh-huh.

**Respondent:** Yes. They love Canada. They are really worldly. They've both worldly jobs, and they – it's nice to see how pro-Canadian they are, particularly pro- the city. My daughter's at the moment teaching in London. My son's...

**Interviewer:** London, England?

**Respondent:** Yes. My son is rather [0:10:00] a hip, young writer, or a grand writer, actually. The youngest. The best really in this country at the moment at that age. Everywhere at the moment because he's the first page in the Walrus and the first article in Toronto Life, and a big article in the Globe and Mail this week, so he's a successful writer. And they're all very worldly and they love the city.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hm.

**Respondent:** So it's actually taught their dad don't put – I'm always putting this country down and my son who wrote [0:10:30] musicals, the first musical which won all these festivals, eh, he's a super-talented kid,

my son – starts off with this kid in a basement writing, and the mother saying, "Have you filled out your graduate applications?" Because my wife always wants my son to go on to graduate school. And so that's one insult, the one. Attack on my wife. And the other one was attack on the father who kept on saying, "You should go to New York. You want to be famous. You should [0:11:00] go to" – and that's me.

**Interviewer:** So he got both of you.

**Respondent:** Both of us, yes.

**Interviewer:** Equal opportunity.

**Respondent:** Yeah. Equal opportunity. And somebody else – Toronto – nicely. I still think just the same. If he wants to be a writer, he has to go to New York because he's writing for everybody now. What's he going to do when he's thirty? You know, it's just downhill. [Laughs]

**Interviewer:** So he's a writer. Is your daughter also?

**Respondent:** No, she's a schoolteacher.

**Interviewer:** Uh-huh.

**Respondent:** She teaches kindergarten in Brixton in London.

**Interviewer:** Uh-huh. But you taught at Central Tech for a while.

**Respondent:** [0:11:30] For just two terms.

**Interviewer:** Just to get some money.

**Respondent:** No. Just because they offered me a job. I couldn't believe. I haven't got any teaching training, and I didn't need to. They threw me in with ninth grade, and ninth grade then was you could fail a grade and keep going, and it was really toughish kids. And they were tough kids, and I had no teachers' training, so it was like war, except it was nice war because I was very – I just spent so much energy on this, and I can see that I was in a way a [0:12:00]

wonderful teacher to them because I had nothing else going for me. I was an immigrant. And so yeah, and I still, for a long time, new a number of the adults who would say, "I remember you, Mr. Brown. You're the one that tried to teach us." I had this thing that everybody should write. If you couldn't write, you couldn't know what you're thinking. That sounds really old-fashioned, doesn't it? Try teaching this to tough, hip, Jamaican kids in Central Tech. It's like whoa. [Laughs]

**Interviewer:** But you remember [0:12:30] them, and they remember you.

**Respondent:** Yes. And now they're adults, of course, and a couple of them own the Global Cheese Store in the Market, and you know, they still remember. It used to be embarrassing. If you lie to people, then they're just saying, "What do you want, Mr. Brown?" And just ignore everyone else. And then I saw it – I refused to go to that store because I was – it's like, "Why are they serving him and not anyone else?" [Laughs]

**Interviewer:** So are you saying some of your students were working at the cheese store?

**Respondent:** They own it. They owned it.

**Interviewer:** They owned it.

**Respondent:** Who knew. The Portuguese young men, and [0:13:00] now they are fifty-year-olds. [Laughs] So a number of them have died at Global, which is – my students have died from heart attacks. I don't know if you know the Global Cheese Store.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, yeah.

**Respondent:** Well you notice this new body of people because a couple of young men, young for my age, died of heart attack from eating too much cheese or something.

**Interviewer:** I'm wondering if it's the fat. Yeah, yeah.



**Respondent:** It probably could be by accident. No real reason. No job. No Canadian connections.

**Interviewer:** But just somebody had recommended – those three sisters, one of them had said...

**Respondent:** [0:13:30] It's Elaine. Elaine, this neighbourhood. Elaine – this one Cabbagetown, and so those are two places I lived in. And then this house was for sale, and it was right on the edge at that price, and one thing it was at that price – I really wasn't ready to even get a house, and it was owned by a business manager who retired to Florida. A Jewish old man. And it was his son was selling the – they sold [0:14:00] it to me for a bit less than the going price. I don't know why, because a few months later, this couple – a couple, and I was just single. I didn't come with my girlfriend, right, so we always intended to move in. They'd come in and said, "What did you pay?" And they offered more, and I often think I might have reminded this old man as being an immigrant. I can't think why would you sell it to me? I mean...

**Interviewer:** So they sold it to you for less than the other family would have paid for it.

**Respondent:** Than they offered. Yes. Which is always strange, because all the other houses weren't [0:14:30] twenty-eight, but it wasn't much. But still. But then within six months, the neighbourhood changed a lot.

**Interviewer:** Really? So that was around 1970.

**Respondent:** '73. Yes.

**Interviewer:** '73. And in what way did it begin to change by 1974?

**Respondent:** Well I in a way was the first yuppie on this part of the street from Bloor downwards. I didn't know where you lived. I did never go that far.

**Interviewer:** I live south of Harbord. Yeah.

**Respondent:** Yes, I know. I didn't go south. Well very lucky from now, I was the first yuppie. The – [0:15:00] it was all immigrant, and I was an immigrant, but you know what I mean. I wasn't really an economic immigrant. I spoke to all the people who are still on the street who are immigrant, but they weren't middle-class and I was, although financially I wasn't. And then straight afterwards a young professor at U of T, who's gay, came and lived here. Then a number of people who have – Sam who had the door store, still does have the door store, moved in.

**Interviewer:** The door store?

**Respondent:** Yeah. Sam – he's from [0:15:30] Lebanon.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hm.

**Respondent:** And he has a door store which he sells antique stuff. He moved in, and so slowly – this was not slowly while I was renovating. I should have had the time. The street had slowly changed. A slow, dramatic change, and the prices dramatically changed. I remember the next house I saw for sale was sixty and I paid twenty-eight, and it really was months. Then it quickly went up to two hundred within years.

**Interviewer:** So you date that to about [0:16:00] 1974.

**Respondent:** Yes. I would think that, and I would stop being an – it stopped being – we're famous, aren't we, in sociological things for having downtown areas where immigrants could move into and easily – you know, I've read a lot about it, and the people have written about it. Easily be part of the downtown – the lack of having all these houses. The Major Street, the Cabbagetown to make the city sort of lucky. [0:16:30] And this was almost the end of it. When I lived here, the Jewish part of the street – there still was people who had been born here and gone to Lord Lansdowne and who was poor, but more and more it was Italians and Portuguese. Nearly eighty percent, I would say. And that slowly changed. Very slowly. You know, because people would hang in there. And people are still hanging in there. Some of the people I know from the Portuguese and the Greek couple who [0:17:00] lived down there, and I saw their children grow up and become elegant young women.

- Interviewer:** Were there – at times I would have been interviewing people, they talk about two families, three families, or a family and lots – every single room had boarders. What was it like when you moved in? Were they still doing that? Or was that also changing?
- Respondent:** Absolutely. In fact, I was talking – we had a cleaning lady just come in today. She's quite the house – very good. I was talking just about that. She bought a house, and I said exactly – and she's renting it to [0:17:30] two students and also her sister, and I said, "Everybody on the street was like you." She's from the Philippines, and it's a North York area. But I said, "Everyone on this street." And I said I could go through – there was three families. Well, there was extended family living next door. That means there was Portuguese – well the Azores. Not really Portuguese.
- Interviewer:** Yeah.
- Respondent:** Azorean. And her daughter was married with a child, and her son. They all had three kitchens, separate kitchens in that house. They were from [0:18:00] Sicily. Sicily. And they had son-in-law and daughter, and daughter. So they had two big – it was more extended family mixed, but that was kind of separate. So all the houses were like that.
- Interviewer:** So they would have three or four times the number of people in those homes that we...
- Respondent:** Yes. The street was full of children. Actually full of children, and what you notice now is how quiet it is. It was full of children. Kind of a shame.
- Interviewer:** And were these children [0:18:30] allowed to play on the street?
- Respondent:** Oh, absolutely. My children did.
- Interviewer:** So they just...
- Respondent:** That's when really a lot of yuppies were so scared that their children were going to be something that they'd drive them to

school, even though they live where you are. They drive them to school.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Respondent:** Don't they? And I actually know someone who does this. Drives the child to school. Literally the block.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Respondent:** [Laughs] I mean, ah.

**Interviewer:** So there were a lot of children and they played outside.

**Respondent:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** And now the question – my question is are there still [0:19:00] some children, no children, who are or aren't playing outside? Do you have some young families here?

**Respondent:** Yes. There's a couple I know who live on Willcocks. At U of T. She has twins. You perhaps have interviewed her. She says more children were coming here again, and they're going to Lord Lansdowne. For a chunk, acquaintances who lived – and bought the houses – when the houses got really [0:19:30] expensive, you either were a doctor or something or U of T helped you with the rent, and so the numbers of people – I don't know if you – you wouldn't interview – you could interview someone my age, but they've moved who are professors here and they have children, and they tended to go to Huron. Interesting sort of racial reasons, snobbery reasons, and we did a bit. We – when my son first came, we went to Huron. And then I can't think why. [0:20:00] Again, the same reasons. Perhaps the snobbery reason, class reason. Anything ludicrous, then we didn't, and I'm really glad we didn't. I always said one of the things that was wonderful is you could just walk across, those children could walk, so the house was full of children because if, you know, if you walked at lunch they'd come here. [Laughs] Eh?

**Interviewer:** But your son started Huron and then you transferred him?

**Respondent:** No. He started at Huron. Yes. The first, whatever it is, pre-kindergarten or whatever it was. I can't remember. Four years old. My wife would have to say. And he spent a year there, and then he [0:20:30] went to Huron.

**Interviewer:** Oh. Uh-huh. I see. Yeah.

**Respondent:** And then he went to UTS.

**Interviewer:** Uh-huh.

**Respondent:** He was young and clever even at that age.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, yeah.

**Respondent:** So that was good for Lord Lansdowne. That scholarship to UTS. And it was full of children then. Much more organic. I mean it's an interest – that's really one of the changes is everybody, like middle-class Americas, stays in their world, goes off to Costco to buy their food, all the things I disapprove of.

**Interviewer:** [0:21:00] What are you referring to?

**Respondent:** Well, it's what middle-class North Americans do. Seem to – you know, they don't go to the market, they didn't go to the local store. The real loss of this street was when I came it was dying the small stores. There was a small shoe mender on Major Street. There was – people – have you heard of the name Anna and Louie?

**Interviewer:** No.

**Respondent:** They ran the store [0:21:30] that is a young legal couple just up the road. They were very important to this street. To this city.

**Interviewer:** They ran a store?

**Respondent:** They ran a – yes, a local store. Very important, very centre of this part of the street. It sold bread, it sold meats, it sold bacon.

**Interviewer:** Oh, I remember that store.

**Respondent:** Anna and Louie's. Yes, Anna and Louie's. Very important. To me, I was a bachelor, so I didn't really belong to the street. I was sort of – lots of social life was a sort of thing of curiosity and entertainment, I can see – **[0:22:00]** for the middle class neighbourhood. [Laughs]. But otherwise, I didn't know that many people, but I knew Anna and she would gossip gently without nasty gossip to tell me what was happening. And then we had children, and I would go and buy – and Anna was a big deal to me. I'm not sure I would have stayed in the neighbourhood without her. I would have come back from filming and there would be Anna. I would walk from being editing all day and night and she'd be in the store. It was lots of things that **[0:22:30]** she was...

**Interviewer:** So that was the positive side. An anchor.

**Respondent:** Yes. Lots of – yes. Definitely. Definitely. That's nicely put. Definitely she was the nice anchor part.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Respondent:** And Anna and Louie's. Anna and Louie. Louie. They were there, so that was important, and when they went, that was a difference in the neighbourhood because you'd meet people there. They would buy things there. She would tell you, you know, so and so's just died, or such and such like this. **[0:23:00]** So on that level, she was important for me at least, but they loved everybody. When people mention her name, and that's why you could remember, I'm sure if you asked people they'd all say how important she and Louie were.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. I know. When I was living on Robert south of Harbord, there was Mario who used to sit outside on his front porch. As long as it wasn't freezing out, he was there. And he watched everything, and he knew what was happening, and he would help if you needed help, but it's nice to have those people.

**Respondent:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** They're kind of a focal **[0:23:30]** point of the neighbourhood.

**Respondent:** Well sure, because of her job...

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Respondent:** ...she did it professionally, as it were. She was in the window being – you know? So yes, it was very...

**Interviewer:** It's interesting how that person had a very positive effect on your life because you were single, moving around, and you came back and there she was.

**Respondent:** Yes. I remember clearly, and I think I wrote about it once, which was just – whatever it was. Walking by and she was – how a pleasure it was. There she was in the window working away. How a pleasure it was – someone that could really – I told you I'd had no real loyalties to this [0:24:00] country.

**Interviewer:** But she was there.

**Respondent:** Yes. I even to this city much – I mean I think I had loyalty to the house and even that I didn't act loyal. I'd come from a very beautiful, grand house to the city, this street – didn't really impress me with its handsomeness just because of my spoiled childhood. You know, I knew what beauty – we lived in the sort of Addams house. [Laughs] You know, it's – this was okay, but it was where people who worked for my father would live, and not even the rich ones. [0:24:30] So now I can say it's very beautiful and I'm not so snobbish and not so...

**Interviewer:** Well...

**Respondent:** But I mean I didn't come back and say, "Wow, what a wonderful street." Unlike sort of North Americans who did and rightly so, because it's lovely to have this. I didn't.

**Interviewer:** Well if people would have described the street in '73, '83, '93, how would you describe it then and now in 2013 about who lived here at that time, who lives here now?

**Respondent:** [0:25:00] Well then it was very clearly an enclave of new immigrants and poorish immigrants. The old-fashioned immigrant. The immigrants of circumstance.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hm.

[00:25:10]

[End of recording]