

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Margaret Freeman, AMS Diploma Program 1963

Interviewed by
Kayla Ginsburg, Class of 2013

May 25, 2012

Abstract

In this oral history, Margaret Freeman describes her transition from University of Manchester, England to Smith College as one of the first group of the AMS Diploma Scholars. She describes the social life in Talbot House, the cultural differences, her surprise at the quality of Smith food and the practice of knitting in classes, and the ways Smith affected her life, particularly her intellectual confidence.

Restrictions

None.

Format

Interview recorded on miniDV tapes using a Panasonic DVX-100A camera. One 60-minute tape.

Transcript

Transcribed by Janet Harris with Harris Reporting. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Kayla Ginsburg.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Freeman, Margaret. Interview by Kayla Ginsburg. Video recording, May 25, 2012. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Margaret Freeman, interview by Kayla Ginsburg, transcript of video recording, May 25, 2012, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

Transcript

Bibliography: Freeman, Margaret. Interview by Kayla Ginsburg. Transcript of video recording, May 25, 2012. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Margaret Freeman, interview by Kayla Ginsburg, transcript of video recording, May 25, 2012, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 25, 2012, with:

MARGARET FREEMAN

by: KAYLA GINSBURG
filmed by: REBECCA RIDEOUT

GINSBURG: So my name is Kayla Ginsburg. I'm sitting here with Margaret Freeman, Class of 1963, or AMS Program 1963 for the Alumnae Oral History Project and it is May 25, 2012. So thank you so much for agreeing to be a part of this.

FREEMAN: Thank you for inviting me.

GINSBURG: Oh, our pleasure. So I think first off can you tell me a little bit about how you came to Smith? I know -- did you come directly from England and why did you choose Smith and a little bit about that.

FREEMAN: I was -- I graduated from the University of Massachusetts -- sorry, Manchester, in England in 1962 and this was the first year of the Smith College program. It actually originally was -- I -- subsequently I've discovered that Smith really was behind it all, but at that time they were hoping that it would be a four college program and that the MA would be offered through the University. Somehow that didn't happen and I got a letter from Smith saying sorry we can't give you the MA, but since we were putting you up at Smith, we want to honor the scholarship and would you come anyway we'll give you a diploma. So I said yes, I would and so that's why I'm here.

The reason I came to Smith was that I took in my final year I did philosophy in English at the University and in my final year as a special subject I did American literature and that was my first exposure to anything American. It sounds a bit strange, but it was and I decided toward the end of my last year at Manchester that I had to leave the country. I just was not particularly happy in England and wanted to go somewhere. So I talked -- I walked into my American professor -- literature professor's office and said what do I do, you know, if I want to go to America. So he said, apply to these four places. Well, it took me 30 years to discover that he'd chosen the four quadrants of the country. So there was the northeast, the south, the west and the Midwest, right?

So I did apply and I got good feedback from several universities, but they were mostly teaching assistantships and things like that and I was just literally graduating as an undergraduate and didn't feel comfortable at

all, you know, I'd never been to America or I didn't know what it was about and the diploma program at Smith seemed to be, you know, the best choice, because it was American studies. That's what I wanted to learn about and so that's how I got here.

GINSBURG: Mm-hmm. And was the transition difficult coming from another country? How did you integrate into Smith social life?

FREEMAN: It wasn't -- it wasn't too bad because I had been on exchange, family exchange things to Germany and France and Austria so I had been in other countries. Spent a lot of time actually in Germany and so I wasn't that unfamiliar with going to a foreign country. It was a bit of a shock coming to -- I knew I'd be nervous coming to an all women's college after having been at a university. But I -- they originally were thinking that we would be put up in the graduate -- foreign graduates dorm, you know, and I said no, I'm coming here to learn about America, not to learn about other foreign students. I just discovered that the whole program is supposed to be international in that respect.

So I was given Talbot the undergraduate dorm. So I lived with American students and that was the best thing I could have done because I really did learn fast, very much, a lot about the culture from -- you know, from knowing American students and that was wonderful and they were all very kind and it was just -- it was just an interesting experience. But it was difficult. You're right. It was difficult. I worked for the international student organization at the University of Manchester for awhile and it was so strange coming and discovering that I was an international student having been working with international students and realizing for the first time what it really meant to them to be in a foreign situation. It was -- that was quite remarkable.

GINSBURG: And what do you mean by that? Was it -- was it difficult to be sort of an outsider or --

FREEMAN: Yeah. Well, first of all Smith is a very prestigious college and I come from a very non-prestigious family and one of the reasons I suspected that they put me in Talbot was because I was English and it was known as the social house in those days, and it was the social house. And I felt completely lost at sea because I had -- you know, in a way it was funny because I'd left England to escape the class system and I walked straight into, you know, the social kind of life in a college like Smith. So that was a bit -- that was a bit nerve-wracking for me, but as I said everybody was so nice and so kind and I guess I got over it.

GINSBURG: And can you describe a little bit what Smith was like in '62 and '63 when you were here?

FREEMAN: That's -- I don't know. It was, of course, an all women's college. It didn't have in those days any shared courses with other colleges. It -- you know, the five college -- of course, Hampshire wasn't created at that point, it was the four colleges and it was very much -- I wouldn't say isolated from the other colleges and so on, but it -- but it was integral. It was slightly different in my case because Dan Aaron who started the program, the American studies program at the last minute was given a Fulbright and went to Poland, so I had actually come to study with Dan because I wanted to learn about the sort of things that he was doing in social history. So I didn't have that opportunity to work with him, but -- let me see where was I going with that?

Oh, Leo Marx filled in for him because Dan couldn't obviously teach his courses in the program. Leo Marx came over from Amherst College to fill in for him. So there was that kind of a connection then, but there wasn't much more than that at the time. It's hard for me to answer your question because I don't know what Smith is like in any other place. You know, for me it was just a unique experience. I liked the freedom of being able to sit in on classes that I wasn't actually taking. I -- Larkin was the art professor and it was his final year, and I heard that he was such a wonderful teacher that I sat in on his lectures and slide shows and things like that, so that was an experience. We also had to -- we had to have physical education of some kind and as a graduate, you know, I thought what am I going to do, so I took up sailing. So I sailed on Paradise Pond and the Oxbow. And let's see what else -- oh, and the other strange thing is because I was in an undergraduate house, there were curfews, and Ms. Richardson who was the head of the house --

GINSBURG: House mother?

FREEMAN: -- the house mother. She gave me a key -- or there was some arrangement where I did not have to follow the curfew, you know, because I was a graduate student, but I didn't really take much advantage of that because I was in the society of undergraduates, so when I was out with them, I'd come back with them. So it didn't cause a problem, but that must be very different. I don't know what Smith is like now, but --

GINSBURG: There's no more housemothers.

FREEMAN: There's no more housemothers. Is there still a curfew?

GINSBURG: No. (laughs)

FREEMAN: Ah.

GINSBURG: Things have changed.

FREEMAN: And we had, of course, our meals in the houses, and I think that's changed a bit, hasn't it now?

GINSBURG: Mm-hmm.

FREEMAN: The other thing that amused me was that I discovered that most Smith alumnae tended to marry other -- you know, men who were also from --

GINSBURG: The four colleges?

FREEMAN: -- educated -- the -- the college or university situation. And that moneys that people in America gave to their colleges, it was usually the men that gave the money. The women who had married the men that gave all that money to the men's colleges, gave food.

GINSBURG: To Smith?

FREEMAN: To Smith, yes. Well, they gave money for food. So the food was absolutely wonderful. You know, we'd have roast beef -- on one day it would be roast beef. Another day it would be turkey, another day it would be ice cream. They actually identified, you know, the days and what you had and so we were eating at the benefit of -- you know, as a benefit from alumnae who had donated the money. So that was kind of strange, because after institutional food, you know, at a university it was rather remarkable to be so well fed at Smith.

GINSBURG: So you said that you learned a lot about American culture from the other girls in Talbot. Can you describe a little bit about what you learned about American culture?

FREEMAN: I didn't know anything about America at all. I mean I -- it's amazing. I think there was a certain anti-American feeling in England. Well, certainly literature was looked down on. My American literature professor was the only professor in the whole country teaching American literature. The only American studies program was run by Marcus Cunliffe at the University of Manchester. I was very lucky that I happened to be at Manchester and got exposed to that, because otherwise there wouldn't have been any at all. It's changed somewhat in England now. There are, you know, American literature courses and American studies courses and things like that but there was nothing in my time except for Manchester.

So I knew very little and -- well, nothing really. (laughter) And so I -- and so that was a wonderful experience for me because Smith gave me the opportunity to learn about things and with the students, of course, it made a lot of difference because for example, the Cuban crisis happened in October of that first semester that I was at Smith, and Helen J. McCoy was in Talbot and her husband called her up -- her husband, her father called her up from Geneva. He'd gotten a telegram from Kennedy saying

come home, just two words, "Come home." So he called Helen to find out what was going on.

GINSBURG: And did she know?

FREEMAN: Well, yes, because we knew, you know, there had been the Cuban crisis and that Kennedy was responding to it. And so every morning at 7:30, John J. McCoy would call his daughter and give her an update on the Cuban crisis, and so at 8 o'clock when we all came down for breakfast and I sat at the table with Helen and so on, that we all learned about what was going on in the Cuban crisis. So there was -- you were very connected to the sorts of things that were going on in the country politically, by being in Talbot. I mean I had that kind of an advantage. The -- there were people whose parents were in publishing, in the diplomatic area, so that kind of a cultural background was -- was very good for me because it gave me a sense of what the country was like, but at the same time there were other students who like me were coming from much more ordinary, if you want to say it that way, backgrounds and that helped too, you know, in terms of sort of understanding what it was like to live in America.

GINSBURG: And I think that around '63 Smith was admitting more women of color, or a few women of color and how did sort of race and class, did that create -- did that visibility create kind of divisions at Smith or did you --

FREEMAN: Not that I was aware of at all.

GINSBURG: Hmm. Interesting.

FREEMAN: Yeah.

GINSBURG: And Smith is an institution that is really devoted to women's education. How did that differ from the English system or the English education system or how did in England did they treat women's education at this time?

FREEMAN: Well, I -- let me see what the figures were. I think at Manchester, for example, we were outnumbered by the men students as undergraduates five to one.

GINSBURG: Wow.

FREEMAN: So coming to a women's college that made a big difference in terms of how you were interacting in the classroom, for example. The other striking difference for me was that in our universities we didn't have classes. We had lectures and we had tutors and we had examinations at the end of the first year and then at the end of the -- usually the third year. I actually spent four years at Manchester because I did a double honors major in philosophy and English. So that was different. Being graded in a

class was different. That was -- I wouldn't say hard, but it was puzzling, you know. It was very strange for me to be given a grade for one's work in a class. That's not what I came from, so that was very different in that kind of way. In terms of the actual classes and lectures and things like that, the lectures I found very funny because I'd be sitting in this huge lecture hall and the Smith women would be knitting, and I remember Don Sheehan who is the professor in political history and head of the American studies program sort of saying at the beginning of the lecture semester that it was okay to knit, but you had to use plastic needles.

GINSBURG: So there wasn't the clacking?

FREEMAN: So there wasn't the clacking of the steel needles, (laughter) and I mean it just was absolutely a huge puzzle to me that here are these very intellectual women, you know, here to work and study and everything else, knitting (laughter) in a lecture, you know. As far as the actual classes go, that was more like our tutorials, except there were more students, but the kind of discussions and interchanges I was very familiar with because that's what we had in our tutorial groups.

GINSBURG: So how did you feel like after graduating with the class of '63, how did you feel the expectations for women were, a graduating class of Smithies, what were -- as women what were the expectations?

FREEMAN: Well, most -- most of the women headed to New York, which I did too with them. Thinking mostly at least among my friends and the people I knew, publishing was the place that women should go and it was very interesting because what happened was many -- I shouldn't say many, but some students would think, well, they could start out as secretaries in, you know, the publishing field and then move over into the editorial. Well, that never happened. They became secretaries and they could never move over into the editorial field. I actually took a secretarial course after I graduated over here -- over in Northampton at the commercial school to do typing and shorthand, because I was really nervous that I didn't have those kind of skills, that this is what you did if you were a woman, you know, at that time.

Fortunately I failed -- I got my certificates, but I couldn't say that I ever learned to touch type and my shorthand was crazy because I would listen to the Western Northampton accent of the teacher and transcribe it into British English and then she couldn't read it back, so there was a kind of disconnect. So I never was very successful, which actually saved me when I got to New York because I never could be a secretary. So I -- after fits and starts, you know, of difficulties of finding that first job, I did go into -- finally into editorial whereas there were other -- you know, a lot of friends that I had not just from Smith but from Bennington and other colleges. They could never make that transition and it was very frustrating for them because they would have -- they would have been at say a

publishing house for two or three years, and a young man straight from college with no experience at all would be put straight into the editorial above them.

So that was the reality that I experienced. I don't know how general that was, but it certainly -- well, one of the reasons I left England was because the choices for me there were to go into nursing or to teach high school and I knew that I couldn't do either. I just -- you know, that just wasn't me. So I -- that was going to be my life if I lived in England and I -- I think that was why I was looking to get out.

GINSBURG: So what have you done since graduating from Smith? Have you stayed in America or --

FREEMAN: Yes, I did. I didn't have any money to go back. My American lit professor suggested that I get a green card, and I looked at him -- I was so naïve. I mean I didn't know -- as I said, I knew nothing. So I said to him what do I want a green card -- I asked him what a green card was. And he says, well, it's an immigrant visa. What do I want that for, I'm only going for ten months? I'll never forget the look on his face. He looked at me and you could see the wheels turning in his head, how am I going to respond to this stupid, naïve woman, you know? And then he said, well, he said, it will be easier if you want to go to Canada or Mexico while you're there. So I said, okay. And I trotted off to the Liverpool consulate (laughs) to get my green card.

So I had a green card and when the consul asked me why I was applying for a green card when I was clearly on my files I had a full scholarship at Smith for ten months, right, for the year at Smith. And I told him, I said, well, I had to borrow the money from the bank to come, you know, travel because they didn't cover my travel which my father said that he would help me pay back over -- you know, so that I wouldn't have to pay interest and so on, but how am I going to get home, you know, I need to work. So he said, okay, and handed me the green card.

So there I was with my green card and I actually did try -- because I didn't have the MA and I did plan to go home, in fact I was asked to go back to the University of Manchester and they offered me to do an MA there actually, but it was in philosophy and that was something I was a little bit nervous about doing, so I -- I went over to UMass and I went to the English department and said could I do -- stay another year and do my MA, and they said, "Well, as far as we're concerned, you have your MA." Because it was originally the MA program. "So why don't you do the Ph.D.?"

Well, again, in my naiveté I didn't know that they had just started that Ph.D. program and they were looking desperately for students. So this went backwards and forwards, you know, why don't you stay and do your Ph.D., because as far as we're concerned you've got your MA. And I'd say, well, no, I don't -- I don't want to do a Ph.D. I want an MA and I want to go home, you know. So this went on for quite awhile and finally I

just left and thought, oh, well, what am I going to do? So I went to New York with my friends as I said, and three years later I woke up realizing that had I stayed at UMass with my Ph.D., I would have had my Ph.D. by that time and could have gone home. So then I went back to UMass and did my Ph.D.

GINSBURG: In what --

FREEMAN: And then I went into college teaching. So that's what I've been doing the rest of my life.

GINSBURG: So how do you feel like the -- you know, you've only -- you were only here for a year, but how do you feel like the Smith education affected your life after that?

FREEMAN: Well, I -- as you could tell from what I've said, I really didn't have any real sense of what I wanted to do with my life, what I wanted to do with my future. I didn't have much confidence in my own capabilities. I didn't know I was as good as I was. You know, when they invited me back to Manchester, my philosophy professor and there is only one professor I don't know if you know that, in each university, so she was like the head of the department -- or prestigious chair and she -- she apparently had said something to a colleague that came back to me years later -- not years later, but a year later, that -- that, you know, I could have achieved an awful lot more, you know, if I had worked harder at Manchester. I wish I had been told that at Manchester, you know? If they had given me any sign at all that I was -- that I was competent I think that would have given me the encouragement to really study and work and get a sense of direction.

And I would say that Smith helped me to do that because I -- I started realizing, you know, that this is what I wanted to do, and especially the three years in New York helped, because I realized that I -- I couldn't have a 9 to 5 job and go home and have nothing to do, you know? And I had a -- I worked for an institute for university studies actually while I was in New York and I was interviewing professor -- we were putting professors -- lectures on tape for home study students, this is before the days of video and things like this. It's -- actually we weren't putting them on tape, we were putting them on records, if you can believe that. It was record players. I can't believe I'm that old. (Laughter.)

And so this one professor who was a Barnard college professor in history, he -- I spent a lot of time with him, you know, as sort of recording -- going to his classes, recording his lectures and so on and transcribing -- I didn't do the transcriptions, but the secretary did and then we had to redo them for the record and stuff like that and I happened to mention about the idea that I might go back to graduate school and he looked at me and said, "If you go -- to be a graduate student, you have to burn with a hard, gem-like flame." And he said it in such a way that I thought that he -- he

assumed that I did not burn with a hard gem-like flame, and that just made me so angry, and I think Smith may have helped me, you know, have that kind of response as well. So I promptly went back to graduate school.

GINSBURG: Proved him wrong.

FREEMAN: Yes.

GINSBURG: So -- are we?

RIDEOUT: No, we're good.

GINSBURG: Okay, great. So did you have any -- were you -- did you know of any Smith traditions while you were here and did you have any favorites?

FREEMAN: I found that the tradition of the white dresses in the parade tomorrow and the Ivy was it -- yes --

GINSBURG: Ivy Day.

FREEMAN: That was -- that was -- I found, you know, sort of -- so alien to my life the -- way I grew up. The traditions that still stay with me are my little minor ones, like we -- dining tables at Talbot were round and I when I arrived, I sat -- it was in the afternoon. In the evening I sat for dinner at the house mistresses table, of course, because I had just arrived from England and she sat me this side of her, I guess, and it was the roast beef night and she was carving the roast beef at the table and she put it on a plate and handed it to the student on the other side of her, and what was on the plate was enough to have fed my whole family of five.

So I assumed that people were going to help themselves from the plate. No, the plate went round to me, and it was my plate, and then the next plate went round to the next person and the next to the next person, it was such an efficient way of doing it, you know, of serving, right? So that's something that stayed with me. I always take pepper and salt off the table before dessert. That's another Smith thing that was absolutely -- that's what you did. You had to do it. And that's what I do to this day. (laughter) Pepper and salts come off the table before dessert.

GINSBURG: So were you involved in any clubs or organization while you were here or did you just really focus on student life?

FREEMAN: It was mostly student life. I wasn't that much aware of clubs and organizations. (clears throat) Excuse me. I -- I did work -- I was involved, I should say, with the Anglican chaplaincy at Manchester and so of course I immediately went to St. John's Episcopal Church and did, you know, get involved to a certain extent with them, but apart from that it was mostly adjusting, you know, adjusting to the new work, negotiating my way

around Nielson library. I -- you know, is that the second or the third floor of Nielson library where they have the glass floor?

GINSBURG: Second. I don't think it's glass anymore. I think it's just open.

FREEMAN: Yes, I think that's right. Well, it was glass in my day. I remember standing on that floor when I went up and I needed to get across to the other side. I stood there for over 20 minutes. I just couldn't do it. I could -- I could see other people crossing, so I knew it was safe, but the -- for me it wasn't safe, you know. I couldn't do it, and I never did it. I went down, around, around and up to get to where I had to go. I just couldn't cross that floor, you know. (laughter) That was funny.

RIDEOUT: About three minutes.

GINSBURG: Okay, okay. So I guess last question is you know, is this the first reunion you've come back to and if --

FREEMAN: Yes.

GINSBURG: -- so why did you choose to come back for this reunion?

FREEMAN: It's the 50th anniversary of the founding of the program and I was in the first group, and so I sort of -- and living less than an hour away, I felt obligated in a way to sort of come, so that's really why I did.

GINSBURG: Great. Well, thank you so much.

RIDEOUT: Friends and things?

GINSBURG: Oh yeah.

FREEMAN: You know, no, I haven't. I lost touch with them, which is sad in a way. I've thought about that, and when I listened to the students here in the American studies program join the reunion how many of them have kept in close contact with their friends, but they are the other international students, and of course, I didn't really -- in fact Maria Rosa Pippirelli (phonetic) is the Italian who was in my group, and she's come to the reunion and she said -- she commented yesterday. She said, yes, she said, you'd arrive and then you'd disappear, you know, because of course I was always back in Talbot rather than being with the other graduate students, so I didn't really have that and I didn't -- and I have lost touch with those students.

RIDEOUT: Thank you.

GINSBURG: Great, thank you so much.

FREEMAN: Oh, thank you for having me.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Janet Harris, June 2012.