

VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY
JAMES BRANCH CABELL LIBRARY, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT: TWENTIETH CENTURY RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

NARRATOR: DR. J. MAURICE DUKE

INTERVIEWER: KATHRYN COLWELL HILL

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Counter Index Topic of Discussion

[CD 1 of 1, Second Interview 6/8//05)

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0:00:00 Introductions

Kathryn Colwell Hill: Today is June 8, 2005 this is an interview with Dr. Maurice Duke, and we are at his home in Mechanicsville, Virginia for the second of what will be two interviews. This will be the final interview. (A third interview was conducted June 13, 2005.) I am Kathryn Colwell Hill, and I am the interviewer. Dr. Duke, do you want to say hello and then we will get started.

Maurice Duke: Hello. I am ready to go.

KCH: That is also a good way to also test the mike.

0:00:29 Three personally significant books

To begin, one of the things—I am going to go back to the last interview and pick up on a couple of things that were important to follow up on—you mentioned that you had and that you thought everyone had significant books that they liked. We were talking at the time about Cabell.

MD: Yes.

KCH: There were three books in particular that you felt had impacted your life. Would you tell us what those are and how—

MD: Yes. The first one was *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoyevsky. I was in the Navy at the time and I read a tremendous amount while I was in the Navy. At the time, I was down in the Philippines on a movie job, and we had to wait for about a week for some reason. I don't know what the logistics were now. I found a copy of Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* in the PX, or something. I don't remember now. I started to read it and it deals with the nature of belief and organized religion. There is a young man there whose name is Alyosha—I don't know how to spell it—he has all sorts of questions about his faith. I guess it was Russian Orthodox since it was a nineteenth century novel. I felt as I read Alyosha—through Alyosha's mind

through Dostoyevsky—that he had the same questions as I had had for a number of years. I felt that no one else ever thought such things. It was sort of an epiphany for me to read the book, and it was very important. I was raised, myself, as a Roman Catholic and questioned that, a great deal of it. So, that was one of the books, the most important books, in my life.

The other book—

KCH: At that time, you were about twenty.

MD: About twenty or twenty-one. The other one was Melville's *Moby Dick*. Later I came to teach graduate seminars on Melville, but when I was first introduced to Melville, I guess that I was in the Navy. I don't remember now when I first read the novel. But, I read a great deal of sea literature, and I was interested, and still am interested, in maritime history. The other thing is that it is a very important religious work. Some people don't see that. There is a great deal of discussion about the nature of belief and the nature of comprehension in a chaotic universe. I found Melville's point of view fascinating. Well, I still do for that matter. I was particularly interested in what we in academia call the "Melvillian dilemma" and that is that God gives us enough information to look for him but not enough information to find him. That kind of, in a sense it is a religious, ecclesiastical betrayal on the part of God, I guess, that Melville is dealing with. Melville, when he finished the novel said, "I have written a very wicked book but I feel good about it." That was an interesting statement, I thought.

KCH: Does one have any feel for Melville's personal beliefs? Was he just being some kind of a devil's advocate?

MD: I think Melville pretty much believed what he wrote in *Moby Dick*. I know him pretty well. I've read everything that he has written, even the terribly long poem "Clarel," and I've taught Melville's works and I know his biography, too. I think for Melville it was a confession of his frustration. Hawthorne said about Melville, "He can neither believe nor be comfortable in his disbelief." That was a good statement. I think Hawthorne was right in that statement. So, that was the second one, the second book.

And the third one, for a totally different reason, was a novel called *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison. I read that very late in life. When I went to graduate school, I specialized in my PhD exams in nineteenth century American fiction primarily. I had never read nor had I ever been assigned a work by an African American writer. I read *Invisible Man*, and the gist of the novel is that no matter what a black person does in our society it is invisible. He is not even the invisible man; he is just invisible without the quality of being singled out as the invisible man. I didn't believe it. I didn't believe that it existed. I went to the standard bibliographies in American literature—because I was really up on that stuff in those days just finishing up a PhD—and I thought I'd test Ellison's thesis. I went to the bibliographies and looked up the criticism that had been written on black American writers. This was, mind you, in the mid-'60s. I found nothing. Nobody was writing about these people. Then I got interested and that led to my teaching myself the whole outline practically of black American writers. I ended up doing one, two, two books, I guess, on black American writers. I think that is what it was. Anyway, I know there were two, and that led me into studies of black history and culture. I've always been sort of chauvinistically interested in Richmond, Virginia, and I got interested in researching the history of African Americans in Richmond. I am working on a book right now dealing with that. It all started with Ellison.

0:06:29 African American architecture in Richmond

KCH: The time period that you are researching for your book—or that you are covering in your new book—approximately what years? Is there a particular period?

MD: Seventeenth century to twentieth century in Richmond.

KCH: Pretty broad! (Laugh)

MD: Yes. What we are doing with it—I'm a co-author—what we are dealing with is African American architects and architecture in Richmond, Virginia.

KCH: Wonderful topic and it has not been—

MD: It's not been done. When I was approached about possibly getting involved in a project, my reaction was, "There's nothing there." Then I started to look and found out that there is a very rich history. We have got about a hundred and ten, fifty, pages done now. We've got about another hundred to go. I'm doing all of the photography for the book, which is leading me around Richmond to photograph what little bit is left. But there are some, quite a few, things done by black architects here in Richmond: Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church, for example, and Virginia Union University buildings, and others such as that.

KCH: When you said that you were doing the photography, the first thing I thought of was, "Have those buildings survived?" I guess some of the higher architecture, or the more developed architecture—like you say the church and Virginia Union—survives but vernacular architecture? Are you finding any?

MD: There is some. Like the invisible man, most African American architecture in Richmond exists and did exist in anonymity. So much of it has been destroyed. All of Fulton, for example, is gone and it was a very vibrant community of Germans, Irish, and later African Americans. Jackson Ward has been decimated by the toll road, Interstate 95, coming through; those kinds of things. The city has been cleared, a great deal has been cleared, of African American architecture. What we have to do is go back and find what was where and who lived there. That is the way we are approaching it.

KCH: It would sound as if you are approaching this to include black American architects and also buildings that continue to be occupied by African Americans.

MD: Yes, they are reported too. The architectural history of Richmond is very interesting, all of it is. It is not quite as interesting to me as Charleston or San Francisco but it is quite interesting. We have got all the periods of American architecture covered from the Federalists right on through to the present time in this city. A great deal of that does not apply to African Americans, but some of it does.

KCH: I think that [many of] the crafts people building our city were African Americans and that there was often a design feature to their craft.

MD: Well, that is correct. Of course, in a sense all architecture, well I shouldn't say that, I was going to say that all architecture is derivative, but it is not. The great architects are the ones who are breaking new ground. But pretty much the African American architecture is within the mainstream of the architectural movements in the country, with a couple of exceptions. One is, and one that is very interesting to me, is the slave quarters. That's right, I did three books on African America because I did one on slavery in Virginia and went about the state photographing standing slave quarters. I got to recognize characteristics of them in the way that they were built, why they were built that way, and et cetera, et cetera. Then, I started looking for slave quarters here in the City of Richmond. Surprisingly enough, there are a fair number of them still standing. I photographed all of those, too.

KCH: Have those photographs been published, or will they be in this book?

MD: Some will. Some of them will be but not all.

KCH: I am familiar with your book *Slave Narratives*, which does not contain photographs.

MD: Yes, it does.

KCH: (Laugh) It does? I'll have to get my copy and look again.

MD: Yes. *Don't Carry Me Back* you mean.

KCH: Yes.

MD: Yes, it has a number of photos in it that I shot.

KCH: Okay. Like I said, I will go back and look again. For once, I was reading a book for the text. (Laughter)

MD: And not for the pictures. (Laughter)

KCH: But, that is the other book you were referring to when you said there were three. Do you have any plans to publish your photographs as a document to support other's research?

MD: No, not really. If someone were to come to me and ask me to do something like that, I probably would do it because I enjoy doing that kind of work. But no, I have no particular plans for it. There are some lovely slave quarters here in Richmond.

KCH: Do you have a favorite so that I can drive by it?

MD: Yes. 205 North 19th Street. It is the Pace/King house. It was one of the last of what was called the urban plantations built here in the city, I believe about 1860. There is a series of slave quarters built behind it, which were built by, of course, the owner, the person who built the house, to hold six families. It really is nicely done and is restored, also. There are some others up on Church Hill, too.

KCH: Um hum, that would be the logical place for the time period.

MD: Yes. That is right.

0:12:27 Observations regarding English students today

KCH: Backtracking just a little bit, you were talking about your epiphany or, at least, affirmation by the two books *The Brothers...* and *Moby Dick*, do you think—you teach Melville—do students reveal that they have very similar questions today?

MD: The best ones. The best ones do. I have taught students, who thought *Moby Dick* was the most miserable thing they had ever seen in their lives, just could not stand it, could not read it, and could not get through it. It is a formidable text, especially since it is filled with maritime imagery. Being interested in that myself, I didn't have any trouble with that. In fact, I enjoyed it. The best students are very interested in such things as the Melvillian dilemma and Melville's personal crises, which he did have. Yes, it splits from the best to the worst of students; the strongest to the weakest I guess I should say.

KCH: If you were to teach another class, is there a class that you didn't get to teach?

MD: I would like to have taught African American literature and I never did. To be very candid and very blunt about it, I was the wrong color. There were many black kids who

would not have accepted a white instructor talking about the black experience. And I understand that. I disagree with it, but I understand.

KCH: Do you think there might be an opportunity to co-teach a class or would—I'm thinking co-teach with an African American professor?

MD: Well, I doubt that I will ever go back in the classroom. If someone were to ask me to come talk to a class about something like the Richmond book that we are doing, I'd be willing to do that. But I don't want to grade papers any more. (Laughter)

KCH: No, I can understand that.

MD: Thirty-five years was enough.

KCH: Exactly. No matter how we tweak the educational system, improve it with better methods of conveying information, it usually still comes down to a level of grading.

MD: That is right. I've done that in creative writing, too.

0:15:12 The Oregon Hill neighborhood

KCH: You broached earlier the other topic that is a major one for today and that is the Richmond history dealing with the period of time when they were putting in Interstate 95 to Petersburg and a section of the Downtown Expressway. There has been a lot written in the newspapers, or there was fairly good coverage—I think that is a stretch—there was coverage in the '50s and the '60s as to the African American's feelings about that. It was strongly perceived as being racially motivated.

MD: Yes.

KCH: You were a poor white growing up in the Oregon Hill area and Interstate 95, or rather the Downtown Expressway, cut right through Oregon Hill. [It] cut it in half, did it not?

MD: No. It didn't go through there. It went through Jackson Ward.

KCH: Okay, I am thinking of the Downtown Expressway.

MD: Oh. Yes, of course it did.

KCH: I am flipping between highways.

MD: That's okay. You are right, exactly right.

KCH: When you visualize the City of Richmond and those expressways, they just drew a circle around downtown and took out—. I am thinking now just of the Downtown Expressway, which cut through Oregon Hill. Was there discussion among the Oregon Hill residents? I believe that there were not African Americans living right in that area.

MD: That is right. Most of them lived in the old area called Sydney, which was up around Lombardy and Cary and that area. But no, I do not recall any discussion about it. The city just did it, as far as I remember. I remember when it was done. I remember when Oregon Hill was a cohesive unit and, for the most part, it still is. It took—. I don't know how many streets they took, two streets or something, on the northern side of Oregon Hill.

KCH: I think that today most of us think of Oregon Hill as beginning on the south side of the Downtown Expressway.

MD: That is right. It began at Main Street.

KCH: I have a [*Richmond*] *News Leader* photograph from March 1958. It shows the Belvidere Extension, which in this photograph is north of Broad. One is struck by the number of homes that were demolished.

MD: Oh yes.

KCH: So there was no organization of the Oregon Hill neighborhood in particular at that time.

MD: I think that came about after this time, if I am not mistaken. But, I was in the Navy for four years of the 1950s so I do not know what was happening here. When I got home in 1958, came back to Richmond in 1958, the toll road—it was then called a toll road—was open. So, I don't know what went on before. It is only since I have been doing this African American architecture thing that I found out how much was done and how much was destroyed.

KCH: The organization then in Oregon Hill in opposition to VCU taking over so much [of the neighborhood], that came much later then. Oregon Hill had not historically banded together to try to—.

MD: Not that I know of. When I was a kid on The Hill, back in the late-forties, mid-to late-forties I guess, it was just an isolated part of the city. I don't know of any group that was organized in Oregon Hill, except for the bootlegger that was down at China and Pine. (Laughter) He was well organized, and he ruled that whole area. Dugan Wood, I think his name was.

KCH: Say that again please. Duke?

MD: Dugan Wood. I think that was his name. He ran that intersection, if you are familiar with it, China and Pine. Dugan Wood was his name and he was known to everyone in town.

KCH: I am trying to think. Is China and Pine where the, well now it is the Hollywood Grill, I believe.

MD: That's right. Dugan Wood owned those buildings. I think he owned all the buildings there in that cluster, but I am not sure really what he owned. But, I know everyone knew Dugan Wood.

KCH: Tell me what life was like in Oregon Hill. You were living right outside, as you were growing up. You talked the last time about it being insular, that it was very racist, that African Americans did not come into the area, but what was a typical day, a typical week?

MD: It was a tough neighborhood but it was also filled with very honest, hard working, blue collar people. And there were many people who lived on The Hill—we always called it The Hill—who lived on The Hill since they were children, and that is where they wanted to live, and they didn't want to live anywhere else. My friends that I had there were from those kinds of families. There was no, absolutely no, gentrification of Oregon Hill in those days. It was a neighborhood of families. Good bit of—. Well, there were some families there whose fathers were heavy drinkers. The cops were down there some times at nighttime; things like that.

There was a group of people—I'm not going to include myself in that—that would do some things that were not always within the law. I was involved with some of that as a matter of fact, but that's really how the neighborhood was.

KCH: When we talk to African Americans growing up in equally economically poor neighborhoods, they say a lot about the neighborhood feel and that the door is unlocked; your neighbors are your second mothers and they are watching you—

MD: That was pretty much the case in Oregon Hill as I remember it. That's going back sixty years, fifty-five, to remember that. But that was pretty much the case. That was it really.

0:22:08 Effects of toll road construction on Richmond neighborhoods

KCH: Is there anything that you would like to share about the turnpike and the toll roads, which you observed upon coming back? How you perceived it affected the city or the university?

MD: For me the effect was in the African American community of Jackson Ward. Jackson Ward was a very tightly knit community with its own traditions and its own memory. The toll road came right in the center of that; came through the old neighborhood called Navy Hill of Richmond, also. By that time, it was almost completely black, maybe completely black. It destroyed an African American community, cut it in half, and displaced many people. I remember that. The other thing was what we now call, the catch phrase, urban sprawl. When I was growing up in Richmond, Richmond went from Fulton Hill to roughly somewhere out on Broad Street at Gaskins. Everything was contained in that. At one time, I knew almost every single street in Richmond, and I still do in the central section: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, Jackson, those streets. People started moving out into the suburbs. That happened in the 1890s when the streetcar was first invented and people moved out to Highland Park, Ginter Park, places like that. But, it happened markedly in the '50s. Of course, expressways came about as a result of Eisenhower. Eisenhower's pet project was the interstate highways, which in a way was a good idea, I suppose.

But, I don't think anyone ever thought that people were going to be living in Goochland or western Powhatan and driving to Richmond to work. But, that is what happened.

KCH: —making us dependent on the automobile.

MD: Completely. We have given our lives. I've always liked automobiles. I've owned a lot of them. I drove a racecar for a while. I loved cars, still do. But we have given our country to the automobile; maybe the rest of the world, the whole world. That is a problematical thing, no doubt about that.

KCH: I sense sensitivity to the blacks' feelings as their neighborhoods were being cut-up and destroyed. Have you come to an opinion as to a better way that the city could have improved the transportation into the city and out of the city?

MD: Not really. I'm not an expert on that kind of thing, so I don't know. I think at the present time our sensibilities have changed so much that I don't think that we would cut a swath through a neighborhood any more; build an inter-state highway. It is possible, I suppose, but I think not. I don't know what else could have been done, really. When I was a kid growing up in Richmond, all traffic from the northeast corridor: New England, New York, New Jersey, and so on, all traffic from there to Florida and back came right through the City of Richmond. It came down Chamberlayne Avenue, across Lombardy Street, then down Broad to Belvidere Street, crossed Belvidere and the Lee Bridge, and on down Petersburg Pike and south. I have stood on the corner of the street at Belvidere and Franklin—that was on a paper route that I delivered for a long time—we'd see these cars come buy with New York and Connecticut plates. You don't see that anymore. So that has been a big change.

KCH: And what you are saying is that it probably added a great deal of congestion.

MD: Oh dear yes. It did.

KCH: It probably brought money to the downtown.

MD: Oh sure, you are right about that. There was a tremendous loss of small business revenue along Washington highway when Interstate 95 was cut through. I worked for several

years at a gas station at Adams and Grace Streets—it was a Sunco station, which was only five or six blocks off of Belvidere—and we’d get people come through there often, day and night. “How do I get to Route 1?” I’d say the standard thing, “Go to the first traffic light and turn left, that puts you on the Lee Bridge and down across south Richmond.

0:27:14 Expansion of VCU campuses

KCH: VCU’s expansion is another thing that has dramatically changed the look of your old neighborhood.

MD: Oh yes, certainly.

KCH: Any feelings about it? There are those who say that when VCU expanded across Main Street and expanded across Broad Street— and now they will be expanding across Belvidere—in a sense the University put itself in the path of the most widely used transportation routes in and out of the city.

MD: When I was growing up, living here for a while, my family lived at 914 Park Avenue, which is now right next to the Hibbs building. At that time, this was in the forties, we knew that there was a school around the corner that people went to because we’d see them walk by, but we didn’t know what it was. We didn’t pay any attention to it. RPI was confined, as far as I remember, to Founder’s Hall and the Hibbs building. That was all. It was just a tiny little spot. Down around the corner from us all of the houses were still standing. Houses were still standing on Shaffer Street, which is where the Hibbs building is now. So it was totally contained in that area. Yes, I’ve seen that. It spread a tremendous amount in those ten years. It just changed the face of that neighborhood. Where the Cabell library is now was all houses; all the way around the block on four sides were private residences. It is now a major University. My only concern is not so much about what has happened but what may happen, the loss of valuable architecture on both campuses. There are a couple of houses on the other campus, the VCU-MCV campus, that are very important to the city. Down there in what is called Court End, in that section. The house of the lawyer who defended Aron Burr in his trial for treason is still standing

down there. VCU has done a good job on the Monroe Park campus, all of those buildings along Franklin Street being converted for use. I think that is a wonderful thing. I'd really hate to see us lose, if indeed we do, the West Hospital. It is one of the best examples of Art Deco architecture in the city, that and Central National Bank. President Trani says that it needs to come down. It can't be rehabilitated. I don't know but I would hate to see it go, I really would, and it may.

I wish we could use Shockoe Bottom. There are vacant lots down there, and it is just up the hill. It would seem to me, I know nothing about this and shouldn't be talking, but it seems to me that it would not be hard to run a shuttle bus from Shockoe Bottom up to the top of the hill for people. That is an extremely important historical area down there, too.

KCH: Our public institutions do not have necessarily the same constraints as private institutions [who use Federal funds], and it makes us even more mindful that they be good stewards.

MD: That is right. I think it is incumbent upon us to do that and not to destroy what the architects call "our built environment." That is why I worry a great deal about putting a baseball stadium in the middle of Shockoe Bottom. I don't think it belongs there.

0:31:40 Thoughts on teaching literature

KCH: Is there a tie? In your teaching literature did you also bring in, incorporate, issues such as these, which actually deal with what for some people are moral issues?

MD: Well, when you are dealing with literature you are dealing with moral issues. The way I taught was the way William Faulkner wrote a novel. Someone asked him one time, "How do you write a novel?" He said, "It is like building a chicken coop in a high wind. Anything that sails by you grab it, and nail it on." (Laughter) So, I did that kind of thing.

KCH: Wonderful. I am glad we got to that quote! (Laughter)

MD: It is a good quotation. I talked about the moral implications in works of literature, certainly. And every piece of really good literature, profound literature, whatever you want to call it, deals with these kinds of problems. This is an oblique statement but it is what

Nathaniel Hawthorne called, “the human heart in conflict with itself.” That is a good quotation, too. That is what happens in literature.

KCH: Literature. It seems that when you are dealing with something that has moral implications—deals with our morality—those can be emotionally tiring subjects to teach.

MD: Absolutely, absolutely. It drains you. In a way, I always looked at my job as a teacher of literature sort of as a priest job where you deal with things like, “What should Billy Bud have done?” “What should Alyosha have done?” “Should he go confess to the priest or go his own way?” These are extremely important problems. Unless those kinds of problems exist in literature, unless you see and examine those problems, there is no reason to even bother with literature. You may as well take the day off and go swimming.

KCH: It is a wonderful stimulator of our growth, both intellectually and emotionally.

MD: Oh yes. I found, and still find, a good deal of satisfaction in the study of literature. Now that I’m really not studying it anymore, I’ve got a reservoir of it in my head and I think about it all of the time. You can see that from the quotations I use. They are very important to me.

0:34:18 Early interests in photography and literature

KCH: Just now, when you said you had so much of it in your head—your memory, your recall—the breadth of your knowledge is wonderful but as a youngster school was so distasteful.

MD: Yes, it was.

KCH: Did you discover something about maybe a learning style or was it really just that literature was the key that opened the door?

MD: Literature. Art actually was the key that opened the door for me, and I went into literature from that. When I first got interested in photography I was about fifteen or sixteen years old. I began to look at paintings in magazines, illustrations. I’d think, “Okay, how did this guy use light, and how did this one use form?” and stuff like that. I would take—. On Sunday

afternoons, I would go by myself up to the Virginia Museum and just stand in front of the works of art there. See a Rembrandt. Rembrandt is wonderful in how to deal with light. I would look at Rembrandt. I would wonder what happened to poor Van Gogh, why did he do this kind of stuff. Things like that; they were very important to me. Then when I got—. Not too long after that, I went into the Navy and, as I told you before, spent a great deal of time reading. I got interested in the biographies of the people. I'd be reading something about whomever—it didn't make any difference—and I'd see a reference to a writer and I'd think, "Well, maybe I'll look and see what this guy did." So, I'd go find one of his books or plays or whatever and read that. That kind of gradually moved me from photography as a profession into literature as an all consuming part of my profession. I got to the point where I simply could not get enough of it. I read every day, all day. I got to the point when also, when I got out of the Navy, I knew that I had gone about as far as I could on my own with a high school diploma only—and I really didn't do much in high school either, just barely went through there—that is when I went to college to do a professional study of literature.

KCH: You mentioned that when you first entered the Navy you were on the aircraft carrier—you were a pusher up on the flight deck—and that you went down to talk to the photographer—

MD: Chief. Chief photographer.

KCH: —and that you already knew how to use a Speed Graphic camera.

MD: I did.

KCH: Okay. How did you get into photography? You must have had to earn your own money for equipment.

MD: Oh yes, I did. I did. I was about fifteen or sixteen and I had a friend in high school who had a press camera. I got interested in how the thing operated, and then I got interested in photography. My family at the time was living in Lakeside in a small bungalow with a dirt floor cellar in it. I decided to try a little bit to see if I could learn how to develop these

pictures. I didn't have running water down there and so I took a washtub full of water down to wash my camera reels. (Laughter) I was able to buy an enlarger; I don't remember how I got it or where I got it or anything. I started doing a little bit of this work and it looked fairly interesting, and then I went on from there. I went through a series of two or three different cameras, and I wanted a press camera. In those days, the Kodak Speed Graphic was the standard press camera. I went down to Adams' Camera Shop at Fifth and Broad and found a used Speed Graphic that I had no money to buy. Bill Fisher, the fellow who was the owner or manager down there told me that he would put it on lay-away for me, and I could pay a couple of dollars on it a week until I got it out. I was carrying papers at the time. I used the money from my paper route and bought the Speed Graphic and then started into it. I went to a small high school and was fortunate enough to be able to use it, people wanted pictures. I would go to games and make pictures, and I'd make pictures of the teams and all sorts of things like this. It was a small Catholic high school and very closely allied to a newspaper called *The Catholic Virginian*, which was a weekly newspaper. The editor of that paper, one of his sons was a classmate of mine. I got to—Jack Daly was the editor's name—and he started taking some of my pictures and publishing them. I was hooked by then. I used the Speed Graphic for, I guess, a couple of years before I went into the Navy. I was still in high school when I just walked into a studio in downtown Richmond, Wray Selden Studio on Grace Street—it is not there anymore—and met Mr. Selden. He didn't know me from anybody and I just walked in and told him what I had been doing and asked him if there was anything I could do, was there a job. A Horatio Alger type story. (Laughter) He hired me, and for about two years, I developed all of the film for the studio. I would come in afternoons after school and stay dark, in complete darkness, until about five or six o'clock. Then come in all day Saturday and I'd stay dark all day Saturday developing film. Then I left and went into the Navy. That was the experience that I brought to the Chief Petty Officer on the Hancock—that was the ship, the U. S. S. Hancock—that was the experience that I brought to him, and so I could use a Speed Graphic pretty well by then. That is what happened.

0:40:17 Thoughts on self determination and living an interesting life

KCH: That is a terrific story of determination and making things happen for your self.

MD: That is what you do. You just go and find out. Walking in off of the street, who would think of doing that today? Maybe kids do, I don't know, but I wanted to be a photographer, and I went where I could get a job.

KCH: I think that it is a little bit like you said when I asked you if students today approach literature the same way, with the moral dilemmas and all, and you said, "The good ones do." I'd hope that the good students today go in and show—

MD: Oh yes. I think you are right about that. I've always been a workaholic and still am. I'm supposed to be retired, and I can't stand just sitting around.

KCH: (Laugh) I'm glad I came to fill your afternoon, although I am sure you would have been fine!

MD: (Laugh) If I you weren't here I'd be taking pictures. I still want to work, and I did the work for ACORN, which is all gratis work, and I'm going Saturday to photograph a car show over there. My brother is the president of the local chapter of the Antique Automobile Club of America. I will go shoot some pictures for him for his newsletter, just keep busy. My father retired, moved into a chair in the living room, sat there for about three years, and died. That was about it. I don't want that.

KCH: You mentioned the Catholic high school, at the last interview you talked about TJ, Thomas Jefferson High School, and how that was not a good experience for you.

MD: No, I didn't go to TJ. John Marshall [High School].

KCH: John Marshall. After your short career at John Marshall, did you go to the Catholic high school in town?

MD: I went to about five or six different schools in Richmond. I went to John Marshall and was essentially kicked out after the freshman year, which was fine with me because I didn't want to be there anyway. Then I stayed out for a year. I took the job at a shop out on

Lombardy Street rebuilding carburetors and fuel pumps for automobiles. Then I met a girl who was at Cathedral, and I started to date her some. I don't know if she ever told me to go back to high school, but she did influence me, and I went back to high school. I was two years behind when I went back because I had flunked everything the first year and stayed out a year, so that put me two years behind. I went back and I went to summer school at John Marshall to make-up. I did make-up a year.

0:43:20 Experiences at Cathedral High School

I went into Cathedral and stayed there two years—I think it was—and then graduated. I was no stellar student either at that time. My books were worn out, but they were worn out from banging around in the back of my car. I never took them out of there. (Laughter)

KCH: I went on the internet to find out a little bit about Cathedral [High School], and I couldn't even bring it up.

MD: I'm not surprised.

KCH: Where was it located? Is it no longer a school or was it absorbed into another?

MD: The structure is still there. It is at the corner of Brunswick and Floyd Avenue, just one block off from Harrison. The two old school buildings, as you drive past one is on your right, and that was a grade school, and one is on the left, and that was the high school. It was run by the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth of Kentucky, when I was there. I think VCU owns both of them now. It is sort of ironic but when I came back to teach at what was then RPI, my office was in one of the two convents there. My office was in one of the nun's bedrooms, and I taught in the same grade school that I had attended for several months. All the Catholic high schools I think are now gone from the city, I'm not certain of that, well Benedictine and St. Gertrude's, those two.

KCH: It sounds as though when you talk about the structures of the Catholic diocese; it was a very Catholic area right in there.

MD: It was.

KCH: You have the Cathedral, you had Little Sisters of the Poor, you had—

MD: The Trinitarian nuns were there too. That was a different order. They were, at the time, right next to where the high school was. I knew a number of them very well, and we used to do volunteer stuff over there, with some of the kids. The other nuns, the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, were more cloistered, not completely cloistered but more cloistered. The Trinitarian nuns were more friendly with us. At that time, at the end of my high school/secondary education, my whole circle of friends was Catholic. St. Joseph's Villa was a Catholic institution and then St. Patrick's on Church Hill at 25th Street, and Cathedral. I don't know what else was around, of course Benedictine and St. Gertrude. Yes, it was a strong Catholic community, a closely-knit community, too.

KCH: I do not perceive the area as having those Catholic ties today.

MD: They don't.

KCH: The Cathedral. The demographics seem to have changed.

MD: That is right. The whole fan has changed so much. It was the primary residential area in Richmond when I was growing up; it and Church Hill. That is no longer the case.

KCH: Fortunately, it is making a comeback.

MD: That is right.

0:46: 56 VCU's response to the Civil Rights movement

KCH: This isn't a built environment question; it is academic. [We were] talking about African American history in Richmond. The Civil Rights movement, how did the Civil Rights movement—you were on staff at VCU just really after—

MD: I went in '66.

KCH: In '66 and the schools were desegregated in the '70s, the Civil Rights Act was passed in '64—. How did the Civil Rights movement affect VCU and do you think the school responded adequately?

MD: As I saw it as a young faculty member at the time, it was a fairly smooth transition. When I went there to teach in '66, there were no black students at RPI and the administration was sort of in a quandary as to "what are we going to do?" What they did was start admitting people, black people, and it went from there. There was a fairly strong, and to some degree vociferous but not violent, movement by some of the black kids, maybe late '60s, maybe early '70s. It was right about that time that they had demonstrations, and we were all called racists, blocking the streets and those kinds of things. But, it was not as severe as in many other places around the country; I know that.

KCH: So the university, or RPI, did not reflect the attitudes of the city schools at that time. I mean they were resisting integration.

MD: No, there was no resistance that I can recall at RPI. I don't remember any. I remember the black kids coming into the classes, and I had never—of course I had black colleagues in the Navy all of the time from the time I went in—but I had never had black students before. I don't remember any particular problems, although there may have been. I just don't know. By that time, I was interested in books and literature and nothing else, and I didn't care what happened in the community.

0:49:23 Book Editor for the *Richmond Times Dispatch*

KCH: So, if I'm going to ask you about your observations, I had better ask you about the books that were published at that time. As a teacher, assistant professor, at RPI, you were also—I don't know how many jobs you had on the side—one of them though was the book editor for the *Times Dispatch*. Tell me about that job. It sounds as though it must have been fascinating.

MD: I left the newspaper in 1963 and went to graduate school. I was a full time photographer, at the time, for the *News Leader* and *Times Dispatch* together. When I came back, I used to go down and visit my friends in the photo lab on occasion because I knew them all. I was there one night and I saw—I guess he was the managing editor then, I think, I'm not

certain—Alf Goodykoonz. I knew Goody very well. He was tragically killed in a car crash a year and a half ago. But anyway, Lewis Ball—Dr. Lewis Ball, who was an English professor at the University of Richmond—had been the book editor for some time and he was quitting. Woody just asked me one night if I would like to do it. I thought, “Yeah, I’ll do it.” I needed to learn to write better—I was interested in being a good stylist—and so, I took the job. This was in 1969 and I stayed on as book editor, I think, between 1969 and 1981. It was a push and a rush; I’ll say that. You had a weekly column to write, I was teaching twelve hours, and I was also editing a literary journal on the side. But, it just interested me, and I wanted to do it. I wanted to succeed at it. I took it and did it.

KCH: Do you have certain columns that are particular favorites; ones that just stand out or that you just really liked both the subject matter and how you were able to convey it to the public?

MD: I think the answer to that is no. (Laugh) I don’t remember them now. I wrote about five hundred columns for them. It was a weekly kind of thing and I don’t particularly remember any. No, I don’t.

KCH: The one that I happen to have—that is in your file at the Richmond Public Library, the clippings file—it is “Questioning Readers are given Replies.” You are just responding in general, like “to the person who wants—.”

MD: Oh, yes. I do remember that.

KCH: “To the person who told me of his friend who had written a book.” I thought this was just a delightful one. “To the person who told me of his friend who had written a book,” I was getting ready to hear you say, kindly, that this really isn’t something that I can address and instead you say the exact opposite.

MD: I remember.

KCH: You say, “Thank you for forwarding the name of your neighbor who has just published a book. If it were not for readers such as you, I would have no way of knowing of local

literary events.” To me that ties right in to your helping to build the collection of Virginia literary works.

MD: Yes. I was trying to do that at the time. For some reason I do remember that column and I remember somebody wrote me afterwards and was angry about it. He said, “I know you had me in mind.” I didn’t know who he was.

KCH: You have another one here that is just absolutely wonderful about the student who is asking for help with their homework.

MD: Yes, I used to get that, too. I remember that.

KCH: Go ahead and give your own response.

MD: To the students? You couldn’t—. I did get that. They would want something; want me to read their paper or something like that. Of course, it couldn’t be done. The situation—. When I was writing this column and editing the page, I felt that these people wrote to me sincerely, and I wasn’t going to slap them down. I was not, never was and never could I be a confrontational journalist. I could not be an investigative reporter. It just is not in my personality to just go looking for trouble. That is the way I see it anyway. So I tried to make friends for the newspaper.

KCH: Yes. And your response to the student, as I recall, was that you would not want to deny them the opportunity to learn to research in a library

MD: That’s a good way to get out of it. (Laughter) In that position, I did not have any secretarial help—I guess working for a newspaper you don’t have a secretary unless you are managing editor or something like that—I could not deal with all of it. I tried to let them down easy when they would call. The worst problem that I had—I don’t know that it was the worst—one problem that I had was when I would get just a trashy, self-published book—Vanity Press book kind of thing—filled with grammatical errors and misspelling and stuff like that. What do you do with a piece of something like this that should have never gone to print in any way? That always posed a problem. What were you going to say about it? I didn’t mind trouncing a

national book from a national publisher, but I didn't want to do somebody who in the circulation area was not going to be circulated very widely anyway, and so it really didn't make much difference. I also didn't want to make a fool of myself saying, "This is a wonderful book. Mr. So-and-so has tremendous talent," when he shouldn't really have gotten to a typewriter.

KCH: Were the majority of the books you reviewed fiction? Non-fiction? What was the percentage?

MD: I don't know. Usually they were non-fiction and I just—. I'd get about twenty-five books a week, I suppose.

KCH: Twenty-five. That is a tremendous number to have come across your desk.

MD: I would go down once a week and get everything opened and sacked up and then come back on another day and assign them for review and mail them out. I did all of that myself.

KCH: So others were reading the books and providing you feedback.

MD: That is right. All that you have is the column there but I was in charge of the whole page and so I signed all reviews—edited reviews when they came in.

KCH: Okay. That was a misconception that I had because I had not seen the full newspaper page.

MD: Full page every week.

KCH: I assume that you were also trying to read books yourself on a regular basis.

MD: I was teaching, preparing lectures and stuff like that, and also doing the editing of the *Resources for American Literary Study*, which was a scholarly thing. But I can do—the term now is multi-tasking, I'd never heard of it before—but I've always been able to do three or four things at one time. Put something down, pick something else up and work on it for a while. I still do. I still do that.

KCH: Could you give some examples of doors that, because of being the book editor, were opened to you.

MD: I was called upon to speak all of the time, and I did a fair amount of that. People would call from other cities around the state and I'd go talk to them about books or about the *Times Dispatch* book page, or something such as that. Of course, I made a lot of acquaintances through the page also. Some of the stuff that came into VCU's James Branch Cabell Library came as a result of my contacts through the book page. The worst problem I think I had was when I would go out to talk to certain groups they were very concerned about what they considered to be salacious literature or pornography or things such as that. And, for some reason in my personality, I've never worried about pornography or salacious literature. It was sort of a dilemma. I'd be before a group that wanted everything "Christian Right," or whatever you want to call it, I don't know. I just don't believe in that kind of censorship and never did. When I was in the Navy in Japan, I ran across the name Marquis de Sade. I thought, "I've got to read some of this stuff." (Laugh) I went to Tokyo one weekend and bought a whole bunch of Marquis de Sade's books because you couldn't buy them in this country at that time. It was all right; I don't mind. Those kinds of perversions don't bother me much. But I wanted to keep them and couldn't bring them through customs, so I made a false bottom for a trunk and put them underneath that and shipped it all home. (Laughter)

0:59:09 Attitude toward owning books

KCH: I assume that you had an extensive library yourself.

MD: I did. It is all gone now.

KCH: May I ask how you disposed of it?

MD: I gave a great number of them to students, almost everything. I saved one collection that I had that I now regret having gotten rid of, but all of the literary books and things like that I gave to students. I'd just put piles of them out in front of my office and put a sign that said "Free Books." They would be gone in no time. I did that just shortly, in the months, before I retired. There was just no point; they were tools. They had gotten to the point that to me they were tools. I had been so influenced by literature all of my life, my adult life anyway, that what I

want is very precious to me but it is all in my head. On occasion—I have a couple of anthologies—I'll go back and read some poetry, Andrew Marvell, something like that; writers that I was particularly enamored of, and still am, poets in particular in this case. But, they are all gone. I had a collection—. For years I had made it a point to collect on Richmond, old Richmond, and I had a pretty good collection. When I retired, I figured that I would never use those again and I gave them all to the Edgar Allan Poe Foundation downtown. Now that I am back working and doing some writing for ACORN, I wish I had those books as resource books. But they are gone and that is the way it goes.

KCH: I am constantly picking up another book on Richmond because it is just wonderful to have that at your fingertips.

MD: Yes. I wish I had those books because I would be using them now.

KCH: It would appear as though you lived out your love for literature by being a teacher in so many different areas. As a book editor, you were still teaching.

MD: It was a teaching job. Yes, it was.

KCH: As the editor of the literary magazine, as if I recall that was the journal that had the guides to archival collections.

MD: Close enough, yes.

KCH: So all aspects of your, at least professional career, seem to revolve around education.

MD: That is true. I do the same thing now with photography. I won't take a picture unless I think someone is going to use it somewhere. I've always been that way.

1:01:46 Non-academic pursuits

KCH: There is another side to your personality that you have told me a little bit about, just personal fun kinds of things. You were an avid sailor. What other kinds of things did you do that took you totally away?

MD: It did.

KCH: Sailing is physical and cerebral.

MD: That it is. I raced automobiles for five years, which was quite different from teaching. That is probably about it, the sailing and the racing, and I rode motorcycles for a long time. I guess it goes back to childhood. Back before I was driving in high school, I liked cars. I had friends who had cars, motorcycles, and things like that. We were together and did those kinds of things. I always wanted to race cars, but was reluctant to do it because the consequences of a crash are severe. I kept the application to get my racing license. I kept it on my desk at school for five or six months or so. I kept thinking to myself, "If you do it you might get hurt. You might get killed." But, I did not want to be in the situation of having wanted to do it at this age and that did it. I went ahead and did it, and I am glad that I did, very glad that I did.

KCH: I believe that I have covered the things that I wanted to today. Can you think of anything that you would like to get on tape or a topic that you would like to talk about? We all have our script that we would like to share with others, things that are important to us.

MD: Not off hand. The only thing is this business of the study of literature and art. If you go into it with a closed mind, it is worthless. Go into it with an open mind and it opens horizons for you that you never dreamed were there, no matter what your background is. I have seen people in the Navy who were not leaders at all but when there was nothing else to do, they would sit around and read. It does expand your sensibilities in a way that nothing else does; it seems to me. It takes you out of yourself and to another realm and a world of ideas and perceptions that you had never seen before. That is primarily it.

KCH: Thank you.

MD: Thank you.

End of Interview

1:04:41

Dr. Maurice Duke

Note: A brief period of casual conversation follows that was recorded but not transcribed. The main topics during this conversation revolve around Dr. Duke's admiration for Dr. Edgar MacDonald. (1:05:00 to 1:09:01)