

**INTERVIEW WITH DAVID DUNCAN-KEMP**

**30 August 2000**

**Timecode refers to tape 63\_BC\_SP**

TF = Trish    DD = David    JH = Julie Hornsey    DDK = Dawn

TF    63. **This is Betacam Tape 63. It's still DAT Tape 22 and the DAT's on 35 51. Um time code 15 and this is the second um, the second Betacam of an interview with David Duncan-Kemp.    63\_BC\_SP**

OK. You're right?

JH    Yeah.

TF    Did your, did your mother – so your mother in adult life, there wasn't Aboriginal people around her. In her books she's writing about them lots, particularly in the later books. What do you think was fuelling that kind of interest?

DD    15:01:18:02    I don't know. I think it was just that um I suppose you could put it down that she had a one-track mind and, and, and um and she wanted people to, to find out you know, about the Aboriginal families I think. I think this might be um she was very very involved I know in the Anthropology Society and I think this is why. Um –

TF    What did she do with the Anthropology Society? What was her involvement there?

DD    15:01:54:20    Oh I think she supplied them with quite a lot of material. Um – I – in 19 – in the early '50s I took quite a bit of material that she had in the way of message sticks and woomeras and spears and things like this, down to give to the Anthropology Society.

TF    Was this to Elkin or the Anthropology Society in, in Brisbane?

DD    15:02:19:18    In Brisbane. In Brisbane. Actually I gave them to ah Dr Winterbottom. Took them to his house. He was living at Toowong at the time. At it'd be 19 – there's your clock again. Um but, but I think that, that her idea there with the Anthropology Society was to ah try and pass on what information she had about them and, and, and their life style I think. Ah as she knew it.

TF    And was she involved at all, things like – I can't think of the – not fic – it's too early for Facatsi, but kind of Aboriginal political organisations –

DD    No. No. No.

TF Were starting up. Did she ever express an opinion on that kind of –

DD No. No. I don't think – not to my knowledge anyway. Not to my knowledge.

TF It's interesting that for a certain kind of, I mean not, not terribly many people have known about your mother's books, although I think you know, they knew and then they'd forgotten and I think they're being rediscovered.

DD Mmm.

TF Out in the Channel Country it's not your mother that's remembered. It's, it's your Aunty Laura, is much more –

DD Yes. Yes. Yes.

TF Yes. That's an interesting – almost like a contradiction, isn't it?

DD Yes. Yes.

TF Between the way different people have known.

DD 15:03:50:04 Yes. Yes. Ah I think the fact – the reason my Aunt Laura is so well known was that she managed the property and um made a success of it, which I think, in those days was something er you know, rather out of the, out of the blue if you like, because women were, were not really tolerated and the fact that ah she did so well out of it. I think this is what upset more people than anything.

TF You'd be aware, your aunt, you know, in, in some term – in some stories, your aunt was running the property on her own. In other, the way other people tell it, it was really your aunt and, and Arthur. Um, how do you view that? And, and you can talk as much or as little about that as you want to.

DD No. I, I, I have this to say about that. They were a very good pair. Ah (phone interruption)

TF We were just talking about your Aunt Laura.

DD And Arthur.

TF And Arthur.

DD 15:04:54:21 They were a very good pair in, in this respect. Um Arthur was an excellent stockman. He um a very, very good cattleman but the way I, I worked there for quite some time and Arthur unfortunately was not a leader. That if um the ah, how would you put it? Aunt Laura sort of ah moulded the bullets and Arthur fired them if you like. But ah no, I think that between the two, it, it was, a a joint effort, that Aunt Laura could tell Arthur what to do and Arthur could carry it out. And I think this is why it was a very, very

successful operation. Ah well it must have been because they, they made a wonderful job of it.

TF But so you wouldn't see that your aunt was, was running the property on her own. Really she – it was –

DD 15:05:55:06 No, it was a joint effort. Joint effort. For years she did run it on her own and then she gradually let Arthur take over, because she always went into the mustering camp for years. It was only in the ohhh, I suppose late '40s that she didn't go in to the mustering camp. And it was only when we ever got really short-handed that she came in to the mustering camp from then on. Um, I suppose the main reason I suppose was, age was starting to catch her. She was getting well into the mid-forties and ah I suppose you've got to look at the fact that the horses weren't quite as ah cooperative to her as what they were when she, when she could take them – busters and things like that.

TF People describe your aunt as being elegant. You know, seeing a woman in a silk shirt whizzing past in a Mercedes and thinking 'Who's that?'.

DD **Laura Duncan II**

15:06:52:20 Yes, I suppose she was. Um, I know she was a – one thing that I can remember well is, is old Mr ah Pop Richards, Harold Richards from Mt Leonard just said once. He said that when he was cooking, he said he was flour from head to foot. But he said that Miss Duncan, he said, she can go into the kitchen and knock up a feed and cook anything. He said she comes out as clean as when she went in. But ah, ah no, I think that ah she um she seemed to have a knack of, of being like that.

TF And would you have an opinion on why your aunt and Arthur never married for instance?

DD 15:07:43:02 Oh yes, I do. Because my aunt was a great believer in tradition. By that I say that, that ah never when I was out there did you go to, to your meal at night time in your ordinary working clothes. You dressed every night ah and things like this. And she always kept that sort of standard, if you like, and ah I think it's – the old saying is you know, the, the ah ne'er ere the twain shall meet and I think this is something that was ingrained into her and this is what, what happened.

TF So there was a class difference?

- DD 15:08:24:00 Oh yes. Oh yes. Definitely. Definitely. Ah I think Aunt Laura towards the finish, accepted Arthur. She always did, but ah there, there would be um there was always that sort of barrier if you like, between them. And it was only in the last I suppose 15 years, or it wouldn't have been that – 10 years – that they, they started to talk on personal names. Before that it was always Miss Duncan you see, and, and things like this. But Arthur never ever called Aunt Laura 'Laura' and it was only until the last – well to my knowledge – in the last five or six years that the barrier was broken there.
- TF Your cousin Robyn described your Aunt Laura in late life, later life, you know, when she was getting frail –
- DD Yeah.
- TF Saying whites shouldn't live in that land. It's too tough. Or, you know, words to that effect, which really interested me because I know that's how Patricia Hodgkinson's mother felt.
- DD Mmm.
- TF But, but I suppose I had had this image of your aunt kind of you know, um – does that ring true to you –
- DD 15:09:36:00 No. No. Well Aunt Laura left um died of, from what I remember of when she was about 84, wasn't she? Somewhere that, anyway – and it was only in the last two or three years that she never lived out there. So I, I disagree with that and ah as she said, it was her home and ah ah what she used to try and do, was to come down at least once every two years and have a break down on the Coast. Down in Brisbane. But no, I, I, I don't see that at all.
- TF I think Robyn was saying that, you know, I guess it was when she'd be staying in Brisbane and – because she would come down to Brisbane not when in the hot but in the winter or something?
- DD 15:10:22:10 Oh no. No. No. Quite - most times she went down, used to come down um in December and stay through 'til oh generally about March.
- TF So she'd miss the worst of the heat?
- DD Oh yes, worst of the heat. Not always. Sometimes she'd stay down longer and not come back 'til say June. Sometimes she'd drive down. Nine times out of ten she used to drive down.
- TF And when she came to Brisbane, Arthur would stay?

DD 15:10:47:16 Oh yes. Yes. Yes. There'd always be someone there. Ah if Arthur was away, well, well when I was there, I'd be there you see? And, and there'd be always someone there to ah operate the radio and just keep things under control – under, you know, check on things. That's all. Because there's very very little stockwork done ah from oh end of November through 'til end of February because it was too hot.

TF And how did the inheritance play out in the end? Like you said when your grandfather died, it was in trust for the three girls.

DD 15:11:23:08 Well all I know is, that it finished up at between – it finished up that um my grandmother got half – I think this is what it was – and Aunt Laura finished up with half. But I think that Aunt Laura got her half by buying out the other two – her two sisters. I'm not too sure on that.

TF I guess I'm talking about when Aunt Laura died. Like how – you know, Mooraberrie is no longer in your family's hands –

DD That's right.

TF So there's that story of –

DD 15:11:00:00 Well when Aunt Laura died, she left it to Arthur Churches on a, on a the understanding, or what she told me that upon his death, that it would return to the Duncan family. Well unfortunately it didn't. Three quarters of it did, but a quarter didn't. And that is what caused the sale of the property.

TF And it was – didn't she leave it to the unmarried –

DD 15:12:25:18 Unmarried girls. And which Robyn unfortunately was very, very lucky that she was unmarried when Aunt Laura died. Because I have no doubt whatsoever that Aunt Laura would have cut her out of the will.

TF So it's interesting, because in a straight – I mean part of what started me making this whole film before I was going to the Channel Country, was interested in the way that inheritance works and you'd be aware that mostly it's the sons.

DD Yes.

TF That inherit.

DD Yes. That's true.

TF So how do you understand that kind of clause of your Aunt's will?

DD **Inheritance**

15:13:01:12 Well she was a feminist and I think this is – her idea was that

anyone who married, had a husband or a wife in which to help them. Whereas the unmarried girls had nothing and this was to give them something to live on. I honestly feel that's what it was. Um and, and, and um, I think that was her attitude all her life, that ah spinsters were sort of um well, not exactly frowned upon but sort of ah never got the same opportunities as a married person.

TF So she would have seen herself –

DD Oh yes.

TF In that light?

DD 15:13:41:06 Mmm. I think so. I do. Whether she ever looked like getting married at any stage, that's something I do not know. But to my knowledge, no.

TF So, just explain then, as if I didn't know it, what happened to Mooraberrie. Like how it, how it came to be owned in its current way.

DD 15:14:02:14 Well when Arthur Churches died, he left his, left the property to four people. To a grand-nephew and to three of the Duncan family, namely ah Judith and Robyn and my sister. Now what happened then, I don't know, but the – Arthur's grand-nephew wanted out and the others were no ways capable of buying him out so the property had to be sold. Which to me was a great, great pity. But um that's how it goes. And, and, and this is what happened. And ah now of course it's, it's, it's gone. It'll never come back into the family again, because none of us on either sides will ever have the money to be able to buy it.

TF And can you go to Mooraberrie? Like what, what now is your relationship to Mooraberrie actually and, and psychically I guess – psychologically?

DD **Women/Land**

15:15:12:12 Well there was a, a, a clause in the sale that gives us access to Mooraberrie, mainly to inspect the graves, so we can go back there. I would like to go back. I, I, I think it's fantastic country. I do. I think that ah – and anyone who lives out there, I take my hat off to. Because it's a hard country. And if you get droughts er droughts will, will tell people – will sort the, the, the ah people out in that country very very quickly.

TF In later life, how did you mother relate to her sister and, and to her? Um well, I don't know when your grandmother died but –

DD 15:16:04:04 1955 my grandmother died. Um oh no. She got on reasonably well. She corresponded with, with – well particularly Aunt Laura. She, she, she seemed to ah get on with well and I think ah Aunt Trixie – she, she, she got on reasonably well with too. But um I think Mum would've liked to have gone out to Mooraberrie again but ah um she never did. I think that was our fault. But ah that's –

TF Your fault?

DD 15:16:44:00 Well, the – her children's fault. We should have taken her out. But um, but then again you've got to look at the fact that, that ah age was starting to go against her and ah we were still young and, and where we'd do say a thousand mile in a day, unfortunately she couldn't stand that, you see? And, and these are the things that I think that ah we overlooked.

TF Was there a way that your mother was always living in the past? I mean it's interesting that, that she was writing and writing about a period of her life, rather than you know, writing about her life as it developed. But – is that a, is that a, a true picture of your Mum or not?

DD 15:17:26:12 I suppose it would be. I've never ever thought of it that way, you know? I know ah when my elder brother got killed, it, it, it ah – um, she took it very very badly or very hard.

TF As anyone would.

DD **Alice Duncan-Kemp**

15:17:52:02 Oh yes. I can – I understand that too, but I, I think that she never ever sort of ah um she sort of went back more into her shell, shall I say, after that than what she was before. And I think that ah um she was a very strange person in that way. She could sort of cut the world off without any effort whatsoever and, and she had a – she was oblivious to what was going on around her. And I think the Aboriginals taught her that.

TF That's interesting um Pam Watson's book talks about how your mother's writing, what she describes as spatial rather than temporal. You know, it's about travelling through a place rather than travelling through time.

DD Yeah. Yeah.

TF And suggests that perhaps that came from kind of the amount of time your mother spent with Aboriginal people.

DD 15:18:51:10 Oh I do. I think, as I say, that I, I do. I think that they, they taught her a lot. A lot. And ah I think this is why that she, as I say, that she could close herself off and this is something I think that Aborigines could do. And, and, and ah they taught her this.

TF Was that difficult for you as a child?