

INTERVIEW WITH SYLVIE DUNCAN-KEMP

30 August 2000

Timecode refers to tape 65_BC_SP

Topics in Bold

TF = Trish SD = Sylvie JH = Julie

TF Was your Mum - like in, in the '30s and '40s there would have been the beginning of kind of political organisation by Aboriginal people for rights and so on. Did –

SD No.

TF Your Mother ever comment about the

SD 17:19:19:00 No. No. No. Um, I think she was always very sympathetic towards them but I think she was of the opinion, um, for as long as I could remember, she said the, the real Aborigines are no more. They've died out. And she said she doesn't, you know, the rest that – the ones that are left, she didn't really know what was going to happen to them.

TF And what's your understanding of, of what happened? Like your Mother's books writing about Mooraberrie up to the end of the first World War, there are Aboriginal people everywhere –

SD Mmm. Well, what happen, what happened to them?

TF What happened to them?

SD **Race Relations**

17:20:03:20 Influenza. Measles. The influenza epidemic wiped out um thousands of them. Thousands and thousands, and um, the children also caught measles. My Mother had a daughter, Bunty Alice Burnett. She's buried in Richmond. She's, she came in between Bill and the next boy, Duncan, whose name really is Frederick but my father was also Frederick so he was called Duncan. And he's not Duncan Duncan-Kemp. Ah yeah. And she was in hospital with whooping cough and they put a child into the same ward as Bunty. This, this other kid had ah chicken pox. And it killed her. Mmm. So it's as easy as that.

TF There's also um Dawn May has done a lot of history of the pastoral industry. She indicates that certainly disease is important –

SD Mmm.

TF But there is also – and I'm not talking about Mooraberrie specifically here, but on pastoral properties it had to do with wages and that, that when wages were to be paid – um – that the properties no longer wanted to employ Aboriginal people. But do you know how that played out?

SD No.

TF It would've been after your Mother left Mooraberrie.

SD 17:21:33:18 No. I don't, I don't know. I don't think that ever – that – I don't think that sort of thing would've gone on. Um – especially if grandfather was still alive. Because he was a great friend of the Aboriginal people.

TF I'm talking after your grandfather had died actually –

SD Mmm hmm. Mmm.

TF I think – as I understand it, it was like over the '20s and '30s this, this happened.

SD 17:21:58:02 Well Grannie, Grannie kept Mooraberrie going and she certainly kept employing the Aboriginal, the, the, the gins in, in the house, and I know she had um some of their husbands I suppose they were – um – also working on the, on the property. But as, you know, just after the war I think, they had this dreadful influenza epidemic and a lot of them were wiped out.

TF So when you went there say in '39 –

SD Mmm.

TF Were there Aboriginal people working on Mooraberrie?

SD **Race Relations**

17:22:32:10 Yeah – um – no. I think there may have been one. He was a sort of a horse boy and he lived down in the – he had his own little room there near the saddle room I think but – um – and I think he was, somebody was still there in 1943 but apart from that, no there were no Aborigines. They were still coming to the camping on the other side of Mooraberrie Creek in '39 but they'd gone by 1943. Mmm. Yes, it's very sad. Yeah. They'd either moved away or they'd just died out because they had no – um – no um – they just couldn't cope with all the diseases that the white man brought.

TF It's been – um, one person that I interviewed for this project put forward the notion that, that your Mother was, was only partially the writer of her books. That she was writing up kind of Aboriginal law that Moses would have written her letters. That she would have – they're not quite transcribing but – what do you, what do you make of that kind of assertion?

SD 17:23:58:14 I don't think it's true. I have never seen anything written by anybody else that Mum would have copied.

TF And the letters? Would – yeah.

SD 17:24:18:02 I think they may have been the figment of someone's imagination. Um – they would have spoken to her because they taught her all – and made sure she knew what was right. What she could do when she went out on the trips with them and what she couldn't do and why. And they used to chastise her very severely, I know that. If she did anything wrong. I don't –

TF Yes.

SD 17:24:48:12 I don't know that they actually whacked her or anything like that but yeah. I think enough – the tone of voice was enough.

TF There's that story when she interrupts –

SD Mmm.

TF She feels attacked by a young black man but then Moses says, you know, no, you did the wrong thing.

SD Mmm.

TF Yeah.

SD 17:25:05:04 Mmm. Mmm. But – um, no I don't – I know of no letters or anything like that. And I don't think she would have been as – um, not stupid but um, I think had there been, she would have acknowledged them. And she was very fair. Extremely fair. And I mean she wouldn't have done that and they wouldn't have related the way they did to her if she had. I'm quite sure of it.

TF Do you remember – were there like Aboriginal people when, when your Mother's books were published. Do you remember Aboriginal people around Brisbane or wherever you were living, responding? I mean they –

SD No.

TF May not have known of the books but –

SD No. No.

TF So it was all really going back to these intense relationships –

SD Mmm.

TF She'd had in her childhood?

SD 17:26:03:16 Yeah. Because – um, she was an initiated member of the tribe and um she behaved as such.

TF Did she ever talk about the Yamacoon ? stuff? I, I know little of this but as I understand it Yamacoon was a – like an Aboriginal goddess, for want of a better word. But when your Mother got hit on the head – um, she was said to have come under Yamacoon's protection. And, and there's, there's some –

SD 17:26:42:00 I've – yeah – I don't know. I don't remember the, the word Yamacoona but um she used to tell me about all the different – um, the names they had for the various, various – um for want of a better word Gods and things like that. Yeah. And – um whether they were good people or bad people, bad spirits or good spirits. Mmm.

TF And so she took all of that absolutely seriously and respectfully?

SD 17:27:08:12 Oh I think so. I think so. Because I don't think she would have had the – would have been able to heal herself. Because quite often, when she, when she was sick – when she even had a cold or, or a touch of the flu, she would just quietly go to sleep and you couldn't wake her up. Mmm.

TF And do you want to tell me the story of, of how Mooraberrie came to, to pass out of the hands of the Duncan family?

SD **Inheritance/ Laura Duncan II**

17:27:41:20 Oh, it was simple. When Aunt Laura died – um, she left it to Arthur. On the proviso that when he died, he left it to the three – at the time, unmarried nieces – Judith and Robyn and myself. It was Arthur who added the fourth person, his nephew Tom, and – um, Robyn since married but ah there was no change made in the, in the provisions of the will. I don't – well nobody could change them. Mmm.

TF And why do you think your Aunt had made that provision, like around the unmarried daughters. Because typically country properties go to the men don't they?

SD 17:28:30:00 Yeah. But I think – um, please God. Save my soul if I say the right – the wrong thing. Um – I don't think she had much faith in either Bill or Charlie Gallagher. Charlie Gallagher would have been the only one who – who would've been in a position to take over Mooraberrie at the time, and I know Aunt Trixie was hoping that this would be the case. But – um – I think she was really derogatory about Aunt Laura's – um wording of the Will. And – mmm.

TF So Laura did it the way she wanted it.

SD Yes. Very much so. Typically. Mmm hmm.

TF And do you want to tell me the story of – you, you had a provision written in. Do you want to tell me what, what led to the sale of Mooraberrie and what terms of that sale did you negotiate?

SD 17:29:38:16 I didn't. Um – when Arthur died, it was up to the three, four of us to decide what should be done with it. Um – I think – um, I was of the opinion that it should be sold because I couldn't see any way that any of us could keep it going. Um – I didn't have much faith in Tom Churches. Um – he was always, I think – I got the distinct impression that it was his wife who wore the pants and Tom did as he was told and she was very much a – um, a Mrs would be if she could be. Yeah. So the other two – Judith and Robyn didn't want to sell first off. And Tom and I did. And the more I think of it now, I'm glad we did but I'm sorry that it went to Kidman. Grannie – as David – David was extremely disappointed and ah, he was furious. But there was nothing much we could do about it.

TF And what did you have written into the terms of the sale – or was it you – about being able to visit? Do you want to describe –

SD Oh to have – to be able to visit the graves whenever we wanted to. Yes. Yes.

TF Do you want to tell me that story? How did, how did that –

SD Well –

TF Part of the Will arise? Not the Will. The terms of the, the sale.

SD 17:31:35:10 We wondered. We wondered whether, because of the animosity between Sydney Kidman and my grandmother – and there was a lot. He was always – um, doing things and she would end up having to take him to you know, say she would threaten to take him to Court and she was a Solicitor's daughter and she knew exactly how and what, how, how, how to do things and what to do. And he invariably backed down – at the last minute.

Which annoyed her no end, I think. And um – yes, so we decided amongst our – well I, I suggested to Judith and, and Robyn that we – if it were possible, we could have this proviso put in the, in the sale document that we, we could visit the graves at any time and um yeah. And, and I think ah we, well we would do it anyway but all we had to do is to notify the people that we're coming. Give them notice. But David just told me today that the fellow who's the manager now, is extremely interested in the graves and he's keeping them free of sand. Because the sand hill at one stage they – grandfather's grave – where the graves are, was just obliterated because the sand hill – as you know, the sand hill moves. 17:33:05:34

TF It was – we stayed with Jeannie and Peter Reynolds –

SD Mmm.

TF And Peter said we must dig out the graves or something – yeah.

SD Mmm. Yes. Yeah. Which is nice. Yeah.

TF So it's interesting Sylvie – being in – I know you've been here just a short time but being in Robyn and Maurice's house and being in David and Dawn's house. They're both kind of festooned with images of Mooraberrie.

SD Oh yeah. Well I've got some but they're in the garage. Yes. I've got one of Margaret um Stephenson's pictures. It's only a tiny little one. But it's perfect, because it's got the colour of the sand hills. Yeah.

TF So what does Mooraberrie mean to you then?

SD **Women/Land**

17:33:50:02 Um – I suppose it means – well it was my Mother's home but it was, was um – where we had good times. Good holidays. Um – I love the country. And – um – yeah, I think if I were ever given the opportunity, I would live out there. It's so quiet you can hear it. It roars sometimes – the quietness. Yeah. But it's just the colours. The colours I love. That burnt orange and the, and the sagey greens and yeah. Just lovely.

TF 'Tis.

SD Mmm.

TF So is there anything I haven't asked you about Sylvie, that you think's important to understand kind of –

SD About my Mother?

TF About your Mother and through your Mother, and about women of the Channel Country.

SD 17:34:48:20 I think my Mother was born about – 40 years too early. Had she been writing now, I think she would have been a great success. How she would have taken that, I don't know. I don't think she would have liked it. She didn't like fuss. Yeah. She just liked getting on with what she had to do. Yeah. And I – you know, it's funny. There are days when I think you know, she's never been in this house because this house was never – this part of the – this was a farm when she was still alive. But there are times when I know she's here. Mmm. I can smell her. Smell her Ponds cold cream. It's stupid isn't it? Yep. Dad – my father was, was totally different. We had no – um – yes. He was, he was brought up in the old school that you didn't cry. You didn't make a fuss. And kids were sent to boarding school when they were 8. Yeah. 17:36:20:10

TF But you had a close emotional connection to your Mum?

SD I think so. I think so. Yeah. Towards the end anyway we did. We used to talk a lot. Yeah.

END OF TAPE