INTERVIEW WITH PAM WATSON

4 September 2000

Timecode refers to tape 73_BC_SP

Topics in Bold

TF = Trish PW = Pam Watson JH = Julie Hornsey

TF **Yeah. OK. So this is um Betacam tape No. 73. We're still in DAT tape 27 and the DAT is now on 34-48. This is the second Betacam of an interview with Pam Watson in her home at Toowong and it's the 4th September 2000.** 73_BC_SP

JH **And the time codes are 2.**

TF OK. Um now where were we? Pam's -

PW I don't know.

TF Oh, we were – I want to ask again, I mean it's interesting that in, in writing your last book, you went back to the Channel Country. Now what am I hearing? Have you got a tissue in your hand again?

PW Yes. OK. Start again.

TF Yes. What was in, in writing your last book you went, you were going back to this physical area of the Channel Country.

PW Yes. Yes.

TF Was that itself part of, of what made you write this book? I mean people with this, with my project, keep saying to me, you know, why the Channel Country?

PW Right.

TF So now it's my turn. How did, what constellation of reasons brought you back to the Channel Country?

PW **History/ Race Relations**

02:02:19:00 Well in fact um by the time I did this work on pituri, I knew so much about it. You know, I'd read all the explorers' reports that went through it. Ah as an example, there was – in 1880 there was a guy called Edmond Kerr who collected a ah questionnaire on um Aboriginal people from all the pastoralists and one of the – he had four, I've forgotten the number of questions, but one of them was about pituri. So I read the whole three volumes of his book and I became aware of how many people knew about the

massacres and um for example Kerr says between five and fifteen percent of people were shot during the first five or ten years of settlement. Now you know, when you hear politicians sort of denying all this, it's horrifying, because people knew a lot about it. Um I mean I'm appalled by Howard's sort of um dismissing it all as black arm band journalists and quoting Blainey who's an expert on mining companies, not Aboriginal/white contact. Um – so –

TF How did the – oh sorry. I beg your pardon.

PW **History/Pioneers**

02:03:42:18 So I suppose that there were all these conflicting stories from the Channel Country and I was aware of them from something else, from the pituri study, and at the same time they seemed to be ah matters which were very contemporary, you know. This whole question about what was true, was it the sort of, the classic pioneer legend or was the black arm band legend? So it seemed to me particularly appropriate to look at how those early pastoralists themselves thought about what was going on. Did they write in terms of their pioneer legend or did they, did they admit the black things that were going on? And in fact when I looked at them, the only thing they all had in common as far as the sort of classic picture of pioneering, was that all of them ah all of them ah legitimately sort of praised pioneers for their courage and their hardship and everything else, but ah there were great differences apart from that.

TF How would you define those differences? Do you want to just tell me kind of whose accounts you looked at and just in, in broad terms, the um the differences between them?

PW 02:05:00:20 Right. OK. Well there were quite a range of characters but their lives overlapped which was important in drawing comparisons. So that each one of them owned a property that was later owned by one of the others so was the, there was that togetherness. All five of the men were born within 30 or 40 years of one another and some of them knew one another and they were a very interesting mix of personalities. There was um Costello, whose family had come from very poor Irish background, but he'd been born in Australia. Ah Patrick Durack, whose ah, who was by this time Costello's brother-in-law and he was a migrant. And then there was, also from Ireland,

then there was ah Collins who seemed to have, I think he had a Protestant sort of upper class Irish background, you know? Quite different from Durack and Costello. Ah then there was Oscar de Satge who um who came from a royalist family I think, and had been exiled to England for some sort of plot. And he was one of the founders of the Queensland Club and he was very much the aristocratic gentlemen and his book is full of references to, you know, belles of the Government House set and all this kind of thing. Um and then there were the Duncans, who were quite, quite different too.

So ah, it was a big range. 02:06:38:16

TF And how will, just – I'll ask you this question and then we'll just let the City Cat go past, but how would you characterise in broad terms the differences in their account? Like, for instance, um did the men's accounts accord with the pioneer legend or, or in, in you know –

PW Right.

TF In really broad brushed terms. How –

PW OK.

TF How did you find that these pastoralists did view this history of contact?

We're ready. We can go now.

PW **Pioneers**

02:06:56:06 OK, well the um the three men, that's Oscar de Satge, ah Collins and Costello um, their memoirs all coincided largely with the pioneer legend but when you sort of got below the surface a bit, there was all this ah, um it became across clearly that it had been very exploitive. That um they bought properties and then sold them. It was more really like real estate development I thought. Um but there was no talk about the, the ah country having Aboriginal people in it. Um, can I give you a story – an example –

02:07:43:00

TF Please. Please.

PW **History**

From um Costello and Costello's son wrote this memoir and Durack's granddaughter. Well they tell the same story about how the family got into the area and according to Costello, his father went up as a young man. You're led to believe he's all by himself and he has this traumatic trip. The cattle and the horses all die. He had to slit the horse's throat to drink the blood, other,

otherwise he'd have died and it's only his determination and his bushman skills that get him back home. Now when you turn to Mary Durack's account of exactly the same incident, first of all, Durack um Costello isn't alone. There's two Duracks with him and another white. She does describe how they get to this desperate situation but they're saved by a party of Aboriginal people who give them food and drink and then firmly point them to the south. Now that's an entirely different thing. Um then ah Costello and the party insist on going further and once again they're at the point of starvation and once again the Aboriginal, the same Aboriginal people appear and again help them but indicate that they must you know, go back to where they came from. And a third time it happens that Costello ah goes to start off and at that point the Aboriginal people raise their spears and they escort them back to the fringes of white settlement. Well you know, that's an entirely different – I mean it's, it shows that Aboriginal people objected right from the beginning from whites being there and that Aboriginal people were present in the area. They certainly didn't treat the people, the whites savagely. They didn't massacre them or anything like that. So I think that's a very significant difference right from the very beginning. And Mary Durack and Costello, there are a couple of places where they tell stories about the same incident and their stories are quite different, where Costello's shows the blacks to be brutal and irrational and Mary Durack's account is much more pro-black and um and supportive of what they were doing. 02:10:10:05

TF Mary Durack's account really emphasises, and I know this is a point you make in your book, but there's like interdependence between these Irish Catholic families -

PW Yes.

TF Doesn't she?

PW Between the families themselves.

TF Between the families.

PW Yes. Yes. Very much. And that again is not really consistent with the pioneer legend which tends to have the sole male hero out doing things.

TF And where does Alice, I'd like you to tell me where you came across Duncan-Kemp's books and then I'd like to come and talk about the view of this contact

history that we get from, from Alice. Where did, where did Alice Duncan-Kemp come to your awareness Pam?

PW Well I, I, when I was doing this thing on pituri I went to the ah the Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island. (interruption)

TF So I think we were, where we were at when we just stopped was I was asking you where you had come across Alice's work.

PW Oh yes.

TF Yep.

PW Ah I don't know whether I answered that so –

TF I don't, I don't think so.

PW Mmm.

TF So I think we should start from there =

PW OK.

TF And then, then I'll go on to ask you about um you know, the view of history one gets from her work, but – so where did you come across ADK?

PW **Alice Duncan-Kemp**

02:11:25:10 Oh, simply when I was doing this research into pituri. I went to the Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and asked them for a list of every publication in which the word pituri occurred and Alice Duncan-Kemp's was one of the books so then I ah was very taken with it and I read the whole four um –

TF So her four books, do they describe different parts of the – this is the naïve question. Do they, do her four books describe different eras of the Channel Country?

PW 02:11:59:16 Ah, no I don't think you could say that. I think there's an awful lot, lot of overlap between the four. She does have quite a lot of information about Aboriginal life before whites arrived but her principal informant was a guy called Moses who as far as I can tell, seems to have been born about 1850 um – he died a very old man just at the beginning of World War II. So I, she names him as her principal informant together with her father ah so she does cover a fair range. So some of it is talking about before whites arrived and then she talks about um ah when Aboriginal people were taken ah which is both in 1900 and about 1925, I think. 02:12:55:00

TF When –

PW So she covers a huge span.

TF When you say 'taken', what do you mean?

PW Oh they, they were ah taken away from their country and put on reserves.

TF There's so many different angles. We'll have to pick through them. Alice's children seem completely certain that Moses died about 1920. What evidence do you have for, for Moses being alive up 'till the 40s?

PW 02:13:22:22 Ah a book written by a guy called Baker or Barker, who is a policeman out in um in that area, in the Windorah area, and he was there just before World War II and he was introduced to Moses. And he says this was Mrs Duncan-Kemp's Moses and he refused to speak English any more which I thought was very sad. Um maybe this is not relevant to your question but ah Dawn also told me that ah Moses just disappeared when Alice went and I thought it was one of those stories whites tell about Aboriginal people you know, that he was so devoted to the Mrs, the young Mrs, that when she took off, he vanished into the background um and there was no longer any need for him to guide her sort of. But if, if at what, Mooraberrie and that area was his traditional area. He would never have left. He would've had, retained a whole lot of responsibility for sites there with everything else.

TF Jocelyn put forward and I, I didn't get a chance to check the tape so this is a kind of um my memory of what Joslin said –

PW Mmm.

TF But words to the effect that Alice in, in writing a lot of her books, wasn't really, it wasn't really Alice writing. It was Alice virtually transcribing what Moses was saying to her. What do you, what do you say to that and going on from that, how would you characterise the relationship between Alice and Moses?

PW 02:15:14:12 Well if the inference, if the inference is that Alice didn't write the books um I think that's rubbish because she had to be willing to listen to Moses to start with. She had to have a very exceptional personality to accept what he said. Um, she says herself that Moses wouldn't always answer her questions. He'd say um ah 'I'm much too busy. You little girls are a waste of my valuable time, Miss', which I love. Um and she says all the time that there

were things that no-one would discuss with him. Things that they thought, that ah were tribal business only and sometimes she only found out about them because she got the wrong idea and rather than leave her with a faulty idea, the Aboriginal people would set her straight about something.

TF So going on from that then, how would you characterise the Alice/Moses (interruption) how would you characterise the Alice/Moses relationship?

PW 02:16:25:08 Ahhh, severe on Moses' part I think. Um Alice describes how she'd make mistakes and his eyes would go as hard as wood and he would say to her 'none of your white fella ways' and ah he certainly would correct her for swearing and um and ah for not, not um riding a horse properly or this, this and that. Um it's a very interesting question because traditionally, a senior Aboriginal man would not have been familiar with a young girl ah and would have not had much communication with her. That's the story anyway. But then on the other hand ah you'd have to wonder how many situations would arise where the possibility could even come up and if it'd be even mentioned if it did come up. And there's lots of talk about how Aboriginal people ah manipulated their white ah conquerors as much as they could to get the best out of them. And I can visualise a sense that Moses may have seen that he's got this very intelligent young girl very interested in the culture and he may have um you know, found it very useful to promote her interests. 02:17:54:02

TF Was Moses a fully traditional Aboriginal man or was he in some ways bi-cultural?

PW 02:17:59:14 Ah he certainly went to a um a white school. If he was born about 1950, he probably had been at least one initiation grade before whites arrived. Um I suppose you'd call him bi-cultural. I, I think that story about him refusing to speak English at the end of his life is terribly moving because there would've been very few who spoke his languages around.

TF That's just Kay. So gone on. You said something like a ring of authenticity? I, I –

PW **Alice Duncan-Kemp**

02:18:36:06 Oh I think, you know, the conversations that um ah where they're quoting Moses, they have a ring of authenticity I think. Do um do you know that ah Aboriginal people often spoke and understood fluent English but

the pastoralists addressed them in pigeon English? Ah it comes in that book called um *'Born in the Saddle'*. I never realised that and one of the things that makes Abor – um, Alice's books sort of ah curious in a way is all the speech is, is rendered in good English. But then I think, she spoke all those native languages so probably she had the conversations in the native language and just translated them into her English.

TF Did Alice have contact with – close contact with Aboriginal women or was it mainly from an Aboriginal male perspective that she was ……

PW 02:19:34:16 Oh no. She um she had a lot of ah ah contact. For example she had a nurse, Mary Anne, and she spent a lot of time with Mary Anne and the other little kids that Mary Anne looked after. Um and it was Mary Anne she says who taught her Aboriginal etiquette and ah that kind of thing and ethics and –

TF How about stockman Maggie? Like, all the stories –

PW Yes.

TF Of Alice's sister Laura. She was clearly very at home in the saddle. How, what's your sense of Alice in that regard and how significant do you regard stockman Maggie to, to Alice's development?

PW **Alice Duncan-Kemp**

02:20:16:00 Um she did say she was important but she's certainly not the Aboriginal woman she talks about most. Um which would have been Mary Anne and I think there was another one. Stockman Maggie was the wife of ah some other figure that she saw a lot of. I can't remember who. I don't think stockman Maggie was very important. But certainly Alice taught, learnt to ride early and in the Channel Country they used young kids to tail cattle. I'm not quite sure what that means but um so Alice worked from quite a young age.

TF Do you want to talk now just in very broad terms, you've filled us in the kind of view of history you get from Costello and um de Satge Collins Durack –

PW Mmm.

TF How would you characterise the view of history that one gets from Alice's books? And if you could include Alice's name in the answer.

(interruption)

TF I'd like you just to, to summarise for me Pam, the view of contact history that one gets from Alice's books.

PW **Race Relations**

02:21:34:00 Ahhh, it's a bit hard to say because her books are so rambling. Ahhh, she certainly, she certainly emphasises I think that um, that ah Aboriginal people um made the pastoralists successful and you know, her father used to have them say before meals as Grace, white pioneers, black saviours. Um, I've dried up on that question. Um –

TF No, that's very interesting. I mean I was asking David about that because the, the way in which, in Alice's books one gets the sense of the, of the landscape being thickly peopled with Aboriginals.

PW Yes. Yes. Oh yes.

TF Do you want to just talk about – like talk about that a little bit?

PW Yes. Yes. Yes. I, I mean that's the thing. Well you start and I'll work around it.

TF No. No. I can try and …..

PW OK. So what we're really thinking about is, did she know a whole range of people?

TF Mmm.

PW 02:22:47:06 Yes she did. Ah and she seemed to have known a lot about the women's ceremonies and um um and I get the feeling that the whole place was crowded with sacred spots and points of reference and that's one of the things I think, when you go to Mooraberrie, that it is so bare and so harsh. There's almost nothing. It's lost its particularity sort of.

TF How would you define the relationship between the Duncan-Kemps and Aboriginal people? As, as –

PW As Alice portrays it?

TF Mmm.

PW **Race Relations**

02:23:24:18 Oh very good I think. Um in fact that's one of the interesting things about Alice's books because although ah anthropologists and historians interviewed Aboriginal people in a pastoral context, for anthropologists they always ah dropped that. They, they – there was a pressure to present Aboriginal people as the sort of untouched ah and so there's almost no books

about the two groups interacting which, which Alice gives you and the sort of um compromises the whites had to make. The certain sort of um dangers that could very suddenly arise. Um, I think in a strange way, Alice's books make you see Aboriginal people as um complex and very alien and you can see how whites must have had to watch their step. There are, there are - a couple of bits in the books which were quite fascinating I thought was, one of them was where Alice was out with Maggie um, and ah a white stockman rode up. Mmm, look I'm, I'm a bit uncertain about the context, but whatever it was, ah there was an Aboriginal used there and a white stockman, and the Aboriginal guy said something about this is our land and the white stockman ah took up a whip and slashed him across the chest and ah there's just this wonderful bit where the mark swells and swells and swells and you don't know what's going to happen, and Maggie intervenes and calms it all down. Um so I think she, she gives a very – it's a – to my mind it's the only interesting pastoral sagas I've ever read. 02:25:23:14

TF How would you broadly character – or, or before that, um, I mean the, the Duncan-Kemps made do with – they, oh not made do. The Duncan-Kemps changed their form of pastoralism partly to accommodate Aboriginal people, didn't they?

PW Yes. Yes.

TF Do you want to, to talk about that a little?

PW **Race Relations/ Duncans**

02:25:43:14 Yes. Well for example um, the children had to conform to all the, all the regulations. If they were going along and they came across a heap of little stones, they were required to add stones to this or they were required to chant little prayers at various times. And um, Maggie or whoever was in charge of them, would insist on this and if they didn't do it, they were punished by their parents and made to do it anyway. Um, there were other things too, like um Moses warning Alice, being a women, you must always sit on the left side of the tree and ah she would do that. And certain parts of the property weren't ah, couldn't, were out of bounds to whites and to cattle during certain ceremonies and ah so they really accommodated to Aboriginal people a lot. Mind you, it's also true to say that um William Duncan was very aware that there were enough blacks out there to wipe out the whites if they

were offended. Ah so, you know, there, there was reason behind what he did. But that doesn't detract from its being you know, quite exceptional from the way other people behaved. And they allowed all sorts of Aboriginal people on their land, you know, to arrange marriages or ceremonies and things like that. 02:27:05:20

TF On that thing of, of the, the otherness of each group to the other, could you tell us the story of, of them finding Aboriginal people inside the house?

PW Oh yes.

TF Was it - ….. to the Pise**?** Walls ? …..

PW Yes. Yes.

TF I filmed the Pise so I'd like to talk about –

PW **Moorberrie**

02:27:23:10 Oh you did. Yes. Well that's one of the ah, you know, obviously the family made these terrific efforts to communicate with Aboriginal people but they didn't always manage it and one particular time they came in and ah, oh they got up in the morning and they found ah not Moses, it was stockman Maggie's husband there with some of the other people and they were chanting to the inside walls and nobody knows what it was about. Someone was standing guard over the bathroom and ah nobody knew what it was about. And another time, the ah, the Aboriginal camp all changed names and nobody knew why that happened so ah – there are all sorts of odd things like that. 02:28:10:15

JH Well look I might change tapes.