INTERVIEW WITH PATRICIA HODGKINSON

Refers to tapes 77_BC_DV

P = Patricia Hodgkinson T = Trish Fitzsimons E = Erica Addis

P She didn't relate to the land at all Trish, because she resented it. From the time – she wouldn't have anything to do with my father – handsome young blood and things there, because now Helen and I, my sister and I, we came to a, a thought years ago that she was ah scared of the bush. She'd been gently raised in Melbourne amongst um really terribly civilised people who only knew about Doig and painting and the theatre and all that whatnot, and she must've been like a stunned ox when she finished up in her aunt's pub in whatnot there, and she resented and she fought the land. Well that's a bit foolish. The land always wins.

T How can a woman fight the land?

P Other women ah took an interest in the station life and they'd go on droves with their husbands when everything was right and they would help build the station up. They would entertain ah people – anybody who came you know, would be entertained. Well mother simply wouldn't have them unless they were you know, one of us. And – oh, this is an illustration of it. The stockmen who, some of them, they'd been – a great many of them were sent out as remittance men. They left old England for England's good. Their Ducal fathers you know, sent them. Go where the hell you like as long as you don't come back to England, and they got their monthly remittance cheque. Many of them never left Birdsville. There were several famous writers, people there, that never – just lived on their remittance cheques. And I know we had a couple of ah stockmen like that. Well mother finally got it into her head that these common stockmen, one or two of them, you know, might have been educated. They might be quite decent fellows. And so she – the stockmen – where the stockmen's, stockmen's hut was – way up amongst the gibbers on the hill and it was just a galvanised hut with a verandah on it and whatnot, and what these sons of Ducal identity thought of sleep – it was too hot to sleep in so they slept out amongst the gibbers anyway and so her hunger, her yearning for people of her own literary bent sort of thing,

overcame her and she let it be known through father that if they washed and had a clean shirt, they could come to dinner on Sunday night. Not tea like all the rest that come down, come to dinner Saturday night. And so, depending on how they responded to mother I suppose whether they got invited again, I don't know. But it was considered to be – first of all as Poppa has told me – he said the stockmen, they rough and tumble lot you know, absolutely wet themselves when they heard that some poor bugger had been elected to come.

T So your Mum, would she have seen her role as keeping up standards?

P Always. Absolutely. A hundred percent important. I, we just don't do that. Don't ask questions. We don't do that. You know, we don't pick our fingers. We don't get stuff out of our ears, do anything like that. We don't do that. It was so important to her because she said otherwise you might as well be a Myall black and be done with it. This is how she – I'm sure she must've been absolutely bankrupted my father when she determined that whatever happened, we had to have an education. And my eldest brother who as I said, at nine, he'd done this big drove with the horses there and whatnot, well he needn't have had any education if Pop had won his way because he was a full-blown stockman by you know, 10, 11, 12. Oooh no! Mother had him packed off to St Peters in Adelaide, you know. Nothing but the best for the family. And Helen was next, and she was at um ah some college in Brisbane I think, and then later I joined her and – at 5 I was in ah boarding school. In Longreach. That was only because mother was there waiting the birth of my baby brother. The youngest of us all then. But then ah when she went home to the station and Terry was there, a short time later I went to join Helen in Clayfield College. I think that was the one I was in. But then – we always got hauled out of whichever boarding school mother felt wasn't teaching us French properly. This is true. I'm not making it up. I am not. She just checked out every school and how they talked and ….., and she said woman's a sham. A total sham. Has no knowledge of other things. So you'd get whipped out of that school and we'd come down to Melbourne, you know, me at some Melbourne boarding school, but in 1930 a wondrous thing happened. This was this crippling drought that went on for seven years but in the middle of that, I suppose it must have been decided that ah this drought was just

taking hold completely and my father, who wasn't – who had no speaks with his sisters, the two aunts – spinster aunts – looked after grannie in Lindfield there and ah because my mother refused to have anything to do with them and they had nothing to do with her at all, and they blamed my father for everything that went wrong because he married a shocking woman. There were no speaks for I don't know how many years. But things must've been so desperate, that Helen and I were sent down to the aunts and granny, that's the only year that granny was there, in Lindfield, and we went to a public school. We didn't even know what a public school was. We went to Lindfield Public School. It was the most glorious year of my life since then. Ohhh, it was lovely. And the aunts were awfully good to us and little granny. They looked after little granny 'cos she was just about coming to the end of her life ah but the aunts were so understanding and they were so wonderful and the day after we arrived in December, I think it was, the aunts ah very large women, Scot vintage women, ah they packed us up and they took us down to Bondi Beach. Can you imagine a 10 year old who's never seen an ocean or water or whatnot? I was terrified. Here it is. All coming after me. You know, sort of coming up, out there – I ran up the sand and the aunts just laughed and said no, no, no. It won't catch you there. They jumped us up and down. But my big worry was, an Aunt Daisy laughed for years about this, I came out of that ocean so puzzled. And I said, but Aunt Daisy, who pays for all the salt? Aunt Daisy didn't have clue what I was getting at and then Helen put her in the picture. She'd heard my father rave and rave and rave for years about the cost of salt. It was one pound a ton. And that was used for the stock and this, that and the other. And you couldn't do without it. You had to have it. Poppa raving about the cost of the one ton of salt, and here they are – people swimming in it in Bondi Beach you know. But you can see, that it was such a revelation to me then. Well that year, stand out 1930, with the aunts and they took us to the zoo and oh everywhere. They couldn't possibly have been kinder. But I was a stand-out figure in the class because nobody had ever met a – you might – I think some of them thought I was an Aboriginal you know, part Aboriginal. But I had to tell them stories about snakes and things. I had plenty of snake stories to tell them. And I made – I wrote to Poppa and I make him - made him send down two snake skins for my favourite teacher and she

had shoes made out of them and whatnot. Oh it was different. You know, it was different. I made friends who are my friends to this day, you know, sort of thing. Oh, that was a wonderful year! Ah but at the end of that, I think granny died a couple of months later. Ah we had to – back into boarding school again. I think the aunts had quite enough to do looking after their dying mother and things. Back into bleeding boarding school again. And then Helen managed – didn't come home every Christmas holidays. I did. I certainly wouldn't – refused pointblank to go anywhere. I want to go home. I want to see my Daddy. I went home every Christmas. Sometimes it took 10 days – once it took 10 days for us to get off the train in Charleville, to get from Charleville - 500 miles about, to Mt Leonard, because the Cooper again is down in flood. We started out in the mail truck at Charleville. We only went oh I think about 100 miles or so when it was not possible for the mail truck to go through the floods any longer. So then we got into a buggy and horses – other passengers off the train too got into a buggy and horses but by the time we got to the cross – Windorah, the township there, and it crosses where – we couldn't cross there at all, and they fretted – rowed us across you know, in row boats to the other side, where we picked up a more – buggy – some transport, but we'd only gone a hundred miles out of ah where we were – not less than a hundred miles, before – there was nothing else. The only thing that'd get us home were camels. It was a camel ride in Windorah. So Helen and I, atop two camels, ten days that took to get home from boarding school.

T So your Mum clearly valued education a lot?

P Above all.

T Tell me about why was education – I'd like you to talk to me about your mother as a reader and a writer now.

P Yes but I think in a way, you know, you exaggerate this business of being a writer. She only dashed off a poem and sent it into the red page of the Bulletin and as I say, she did this ah book – this book of her – I don't know what the subject was of that. Whatever it was, the publishers at the Bulletin refused pointblank to publish it because they'd have to face too many court cases and this that and ….. But yes, she wrote poems. And I wouldn't know what

happened to the poems, but she had such a deep love of literature. She worshipped er Napoleon ….. …… she had a Napoleonic library. And I couldn't see what was the – what she was so entranced about. This stupid little oh fat little fellow, you know? I never got it. She had a portrait of him over the fireplace and whatnot, so she lived in her world of literature. In that way she didn't feel the pain of day to day life on a cattle station.

T She wrote a novel about Charles the Fourth or something?

P No. Don't know anything about that. I didn't say that. No.

T Oh right. I must have – must've got that. Did she write some novel set in France?

P Nope.

T No.

P I wouldn't know. I don't know about it. I would not know. But all I remember is – by the time I was old enough to understand what she was so mad about, was this rejection of her magnum opus.

T And would she literally stay inside?

P Oh yes. But it didn't do any good because at the depth of the Depression where we couldn't get any hagan**(?)** housemaids or whatnot, well willy nil, like it or not, she had to take on cooking – with the house cooking, and if you wanted clean sheets on the bed, well – she had to it. Which turned her fair complexion ruddy. You know, that – you've been out there. You know the ruddiness of everybody. The sun we got up there. Not that she didn't ….. ….. Right. And when we were going back to school, Helen and I, um there is a photograph of us taken – the whole seven of us, you know, which you said was a revelation transformation that had been. And you'll see Helen's in her uniform. I think I am too, in the um that was Clayfield College. I think we're going back to Clayfield College, and when we set off from the station in the Dodge or the Chev or whatever it was, mother would insist on us being in our best going-out college frocks and those collars was real Belgian lace I'll have you know. St Rita's College was something and it was real Belgian lace, and our hats and our gloves. Poppa used to stare. Come on you lot. Get in the

car. He'd stand and he'd rock with laughter. Woman, don't you realise. Probably 20 miles from here, those girls'll be at the other end of a long nosed shovel and they'll be digging me out of the dust. They'll be digging me out of the sand and whatnot. Poppa was always right, of course. You didn't dare peel them off when you got in the car because mother would get to hear about it, wouldn't she? But, sure enough, the first patch of sand we came, Helen and I would have to take off the gloves then. Push and shove, to get over the Birdsville Track.

T Now, your Mum, she would quite often have been at the station on her own without your father, wouldn't she?

P Yes.

T Could you tell me about that? How – how it worked when men were out doing stock work.

P Well the thing was they had to take all the men. Even little – the little piccaninny fellows that could ride.

T …..

P No. No. Little piccaninnies picked up who'd come from other stations. A muster is when everybody's joins in and tries to sort out their own cattle. Some of the other station owners would bring little piccaninnies, as long as they could ride, and do useful things around the camp, you know? They'd bring little old piccaninnies. But when our – when Poppa left, there was nobody left on the station except ah I can only think of one clear one, mother and myself and the three brothers younger than I was and there was a fellow known to me in the district. He was terribly valuable to um the men out there ah because he was a donkey man. A donkey man who'd come up from South Australia, and because ah my father – either then or a bit later – cottoned on to the idea that to save money, good old Dope and Tropic and um those things, get a donkey team up to put in those tumbrels. They could get things for free and for nothing. They didn't have to be watered or shod or …… or anything. So they got ah um Rommel, that was name, Rommel up from South Australia and ah he was the, the donkey man who had to construct this tumbrel suitable for these donkey things there and ah to get us set up with a donkey team, and

there it was. And with Rommel came all sorts of stories. I don't think one of them was ever verified, about his – whether he murdered one, two or three – I can't remember, you know, but they were fanciful glorified things and did he look the part? He had a red bandanna round his neck. His face – the Birdsville face. Red sort of thing there, and he had earrings in his ears. Bad enough now. But then, ….. earrings in his ears, and he had an old battered hat and his black curls. Black curls? ….. shaved your hair after that. He had his black curls. He couldn't have looked more like a gypsy or a banderdero or anything like that if he tried. And ah – but with all these – he was over at the ah the other side of the creek where there was a stone stumpy which he put the gibbers together and that was his house. But um mother was very aware. You shouldn't go away and leave me with that awful man across the creek and Poppa would say, I'm sorry but the muster's got to go on and there's nothing wrong with him. He's a decent fellow. There's nothing wrong with him. And this night there was brilliant moonlight, I suppose about 10 o'clock or so. Mother had the gun, a 22, beside the bed. She couldn't shoot for toffee but no matter, she had the gun beside the bed, and she and I, she kept on saying – I had to sleep with her – and she – I hear a noise. The dog's barking. The dogs are barking. The dingoes are howling. Oooh. She was all a twit. So we got up the end of the 54 foot hall and we looked out and in the brilliant moonlight, here is Rommel, staggering up the, the track to the station. Well, she really went to pieces. She said I've got to shoot him. I've got to shoot him. There was no choice, you know? She had to shoot him. Then when it got to the point, she said I can't shoot him. You've got to. Whatever – 10 – 12. We were 12. You've got to. So she tells me I have to shoot Rommel for coming up the track. I could no more fire that thing at anyone else. I just clattered on the floor. The gun went off anyway. Whether the noise of the gun going off startled Rommel, but he went back to where he came from. He was probably totally harm – but how were we to know? You know, we just weren't sure.

T So you're – a woman being left alone in a homestead, was that unusual? Or did that happen ….. ?

P No way. Women had to be left alone for many weeks at a time. Before cars – motor cars. Yeah. And mustering. If your man had to go off to a muster, well he had to go off and that was it. That was his livelihood.

T So I'd like you to tell me what the companies did to handle that situation. I'm thinking about –

P Ohhhh – I'm glad you've - see you bring back the things that I thought I'd nearly forgotten about. What they did. What they did was, Sinclair Co - Scott & Company included, was they ah had to get um companionship for the lady of the house when the men were away so often. And so these glorious beings were called ladies companions, and I've told you about the Hagan clan. There were her six boys and seven girls, or vice versa. I don't remember. And the boys were noted stockmen. We had Jimmy Hagan at that time. He was our ah head stockman. And none better. Oh, a station owner. He really felt that he'd ma – had it made when he got a Hagan boy, you know, stockman – because they were born to be stockmen. But they never had a day's education in their life. Any of the boys. But Mrs Hagan, as the story went, she was at a convent, her being educated at a very select convent in Adelaide, when Joe Hagan – young Joseph Hagan, this fellow from the bush – how they made contact God only knows – but it is true that she jumped the convent wall, got up beside Joe on the saddle – off. And from then on they produced children. You know, 13 kids and all. But Mrs Hagan insisted by foul or fair weather, her girls would have an education. She did that by putting the girls, a section of them, into the best convent in Adelaide and when the dear nuns got a bit too pressing about the bills, well she whipped them out of there and put them into the next one and whatnot. But by hook or by crook, yes, she did have – the girls do have – the top half anyway, they got a good education. By the time the bottom half, they refused to go anyway but still, we got ah first of all we got Edie. Edie. She – we, I – Helen and I, thought she was the most beautiful thing we had ever seen. Edie. Very pretty. Very attractive. A bob hair on that. But she wore – oh we had to dress for dinner naturally if you're mannered. No choice. Edie would come to dinner in this lace frock which had handkerchief points. Do you know what I'm talking about?

T …..

P In the 19, 1920s, there were – the hem was handkerchief points. These frocks were beautiful and we used to stare at this being, this wondrous being, and she was beautifully educated and had a very false voice and at the same time we have her brother Jimmy, head stockman, up in the stockman's hut. Jimmy um picked on a mickey that was too – mickey. Um a great big er calf, in between being a calf and being a bull kind of thing, you have this great mickey thing, and ah Jimmy Hagan, he's on a horse. He throws the thing around the neck of this whatnot. The rope broke and onto the gibbers went Jimmy and they thought he'd broken his back. There's no Flying Doctor thing at that time but they had to put him on um coolabah thing, a stretcher – a made stretcher – and get the buggy out to get him to hospital in Birdsville you know, the next – the next day. So Edie is going along up to the men's quarters there and ….. she's packing, packing a port as they say in Queen – packing a port for him. And she said James, James. I can't seem to find your pyjamas. And Jame, Jimmy turned around and he says what's them sis? He'd never worn pyjamas in his whole life of course. And Edie, his sister, had never heard of anybody who didn't wear pyjamas.

T And that's an interesting tale about kind of both class and gender in a certain way, isn't it?

P Yeah.

T Like it's about women as the civilising presence or something like that.

P Yes, but Mrs Hagan who we say was gently educated in the convent, but she was a very far seeing woman. Unfortunately the didn't have the pill in them days, did they? Or she'd have preferred it if she'd have the pill, but she didn't, so there it was. But she knew perfectly well that the only thing that'd get her girls out of the bush, if they got an education. And she fought hell and high water. Old Joe. He was only the mail man and he ran the – between Birdsville and Mt Leonard. He ran the – ah a weekly mail if conditions were good. A fortnightly. Or a monthly, or not at all, you know, depending how things were. He started off in ah in a buggy. Ah conditions got too bad for the buggy and horses. He rode a hundred miles up. Conditions got too bad again. He'd have to go on um camel – oh, he hated camels. Hated them dreadfully

but he had to have a camel run and then he gave the whole thing away. There was no way you could get your mail up ah from there at all. But he was a wonderful character. Otherwise I don't think Mrs Hagan would have jumped any – any old convent fence, would she? He had something, and by Gawd –

T I'm just going to –