INTERVIEW WITH DAVID DUNCAN-KEMP
30 August 2000
Timecode refers to tape 62_BC_SP
TF = Trish DD = David JH = Julie Hornsey DDK = Dawn

SIDE A

TF **So this is DAT Tape 22 and Betacam Tape No. 62. It's the 30 August, 2000, and we're with Dawn and David Duncan-Kemp in their home in Oakey. Trish FitzSimons recording sound for the Channels of History project and Julie Hornsey on camera.** **62_BC_SP**

JH OK. I'm rolling.

TF David, what can you tell me, just excuse me. Julie, can – you're not seeing my face at all in that mirror are you? You're not getting that camera ….. at all?

JH Oh no. No, no. I'm not seeing the mirror at all.

TF Fine. Terrific. Just checking. What can you tell me David about your grandmother Laura? Do you know anything about her life before she came to the Channel Country?

DD **Laura Duncan I**

14:01:22:00 Very, very little really. Um she was a daughter of a prominent Sydney um Solicitor and they lived at Parramatta. Um and unfortunately he ah lost a um oh I suppose you'd call it a, a case in, in Court which ah very really nearly bankrupt him and they had to sell out. Her parents came to live in Brisbane and she went out to live with her sister whose manager, whose husband was um managing Daroo **?** at the time. Um a chap by the name of, they were – people by the name of Alexanders. Ah it was there that she met my grandfather who was at the time, I understand, a pastoral inspector for one of the big companies. Um this was before the turn of the century. They were married at Daroo um I understand then in um the turn of the century they um bought Mooraberrie. But on, on, on taking over Mooraberrie they found out that the lease had expired and it took them approximately 3 or 4 years to sort it all out with the Government before they actually became owners of Mooraberrie.

TF So through your grandmother's life, and we'll talk about the case later, but – but law and law cases gone wrong and, and the government were kind of themes that recurred in a certain way, weren't they?

DD **Laura Duncan I**

14:03:04:00 Yes. I think um the way I always thought of my grandmother was that um if things didn't go her way, shall I say, um she had no hesitation in, in taking Court action or you know, threatening Court action because I understand that, at one stage there, she threatened to take um Kidman Estate to Court which is rather ironical now that they own Mooraberrie but um ah you know? These were things that she had no hesitation and I think this is why she had no hesitation in taking the Queensland Government to Court.

TF We'll come to that in a bit but is your image then, would she have had like a Victorian childhood? I mean, what – what you know, what sort of –

DD 14:03:52:10 No, I don't think so. I think she had a very, very hard um life really ah once they left Parramatta. Up 'til then I would say yes, she probably would've had a, a reasonably good life. I think that she was – to my knowledge I don't know where she was educated but I do think she was very very well educated. She had a beautiful handwriting. Um and I think she was very very intelligent. I take my hat off to her because she was left with three young children when her husband died and um there was, she would've been I think quite entitled to have sold the property in those days but she never. She battled on and tried to keep the bat – er tried to keep the, the property going for her descendants.

TF And how, how well did she manage that? I mean what was your grandmother's life as you knew it?

DD 14:04:49:22 Well she was a very totalitarian sort of a person in, in, in lots of ways. Um I've spoken to some of the older men in the country out there years ago that knew her and had stayed at Mooraberrie and I'll just quote you one instance that the head stockman of Monkira was a chap by the name of Dick Hennis and he stayed at Mooraberrie one time and he got up early in the morning to offer to go up and milk the cows for her, and my grandmother wouldn't let him near the place. She said the cows knew her and that she was, she would only allow herself to milk them. Um but this is the sort of person I

think she was. Everyone I've known that knew her, all said that she was a remarkable woman.

TF Do you think that the physical work of the place was something she, you know, beyond the kind of the cows I guess, would have been close to the house but the, the physical work of pastoralism, do you have any knowledge of –

DD **Laura Duncan I**

14:05:52:22 Ooh yes. Ooh yes, my word. She, she always – she rode sidesaddle. Ah she went in to the mustering camps and she had no hesitation whatsoever in running the, the camps on Mooraberrie and getting the cattle away. She was a great believer in ah I understand in ah baby beef and to my knowledge, that, that she was one of the first that started this idea of turning bullocks off at no more than three year old. The idea being that they'd be young and, and very good to eat.

TF Can you relate that story of baby beef to the Channel Country? Like is there anything about the Channel Country that made it suitable for baby beef?

DD 14:06:31:14 Ooh, no, not really I suppose but the only thing I can say that it was very very good fattening country. Very good fattening country. And I think this is why a lot of the big pastoral companies ah purchased um properties on the, in the Channel Country for that purpose. See the North Australia Pastoral Company. They purchased properties there wholly and solely as bullock depots where they'd send their bullocks down from the Territory wholly and solely just to fatten them so I think that, that alone speaks that the idea of, of what the type of country was.

TF I thought maybe that the reason she started baby beef was because you have this cycle of flood and drought that the baby beef meant you could you know, get them going in a good season, that – you don't think –

DD 14:07:19:06 Well – possibly, it possibly could've been so but ah, ah that – the season out there were very very unpredictable. You could have a um a reasonable year this year. Next year would be a drought so therefore all the younger cattle this year wouldn't be fat next year. You see? And, and this is just how it went I think. Um I went to work out there in 1946 and it was a very bad drought. Um it's something that I will never forget for the rest of my life, to see the cattle. How poor they can get and the fact that you had to shoot

them because they couldn't get up. Um but yet, in '47, August '47 it rained and it's remarkable the, the way the cattle responded. They were up – you know? Putting on weight straight away. It is fantastic country.

TF You say your grandmother um you know, was, was quick to go to kind of legal action. Could you tell me the story of, of – she had a battle, didn't she? With the Queensland Government. Could you tell me that whole story –

DD Well –

TF As if I knew none of it.

DD **Laura Duncan I: Court Case**

14:08:31:10 I don't know a great amount about it. All I know is that under the Sugar Acquisition Act that T.J. Ryan, who was Premier of Queensland at the time passed as a, as a war measure, that under which they could acquire stock. My grandmother was – used to send all her cattle to Adelaide and she intended to do so and she took them across the border at Birdsville and they were ah, um arrested I understand. I think that's how they, they – I was told. And the cattle were all bought back and she fought that right through to the Privy Council. I've heard that many different stories as to who won and who lost um I honestly don't know. But all I understand is that, that she was told or we were told that um technical – technically she won the case because she was using Section 92 which was free trade between the States. But as it was a war time measure, the Queensland Government had every right to pass such legislation so I leave it to everybody else to decide who was the winners and who were the losers.

TF And you say it was a Sugar Act that, that gave them the, the right to actually acquire her stock –

DD That's right.

TF Was it – it was about where she marketed the stock, wasn't it? Whether she sent them to Brisbane or Adelaide?

DD 14:09:57:08 Well, possibly. Um the Adelaide market at the time I understand, was far better than Queensland markets and ah that was why the cattle out in that country all went to, to um Adelaide. They all sent them to Adelaide. Down through Maree. Um well actually it wasn't Maree in those – yes it was. It was Maree. That's when they changed the name. It was Herbert Springs before that.

TF So if this was an issue that was not just for your grandmother but for other graziers around, were they involved as well do you know? Or was it an individual battle that she was –

DD 14:10:33:00 Well, that's something I, I'm not too sure of, but I understand it was an individual battle ah other pastoral companies and pastoralists all offered to help her but whether she accepted the help, I do not know.

TF I think it was your cousin Robyn, it would be, wouldn't it? Robyn said I think that – is it right Your grandmother was Protestant but it was mostly Catholics around and that the farmers organisation – I might be getting this wrong, so if I'm getting wrong don't blame Robyn. But, but – but the um that, that the Graziers Association was Catholic and helped your grandmother but that there was kind of sectarian feeling as well?

DD Well that's something I don't know Trish. I honestly do – I haven't heard that before.

TF Mmm.

DD But it's, it's ah I would be a little bit surprised but it, it could have. It could have happened.

TF Do you remember – I mean certainly that area seems to have been predominantly Catholic families. In Australia at that time there was great division between Catholic and Protestant.

DD 14:11:40:04 That's right. Yes. Not so much in that area. Further east yes. Ah around Quilpie, I'd say yes. But to my knowledge, I don't think that was um happened in that area. I know that the Bergans' who were on ah Currawilla I understand were Catholics, but I understand they got on very very well with them. Um but I think there was quite a lot of others around the area. I, I, I honestly don't know about that.

TF And how about with Aboriginal people? Your Mum's books portray a, a theme of very close interaction and, and the sort of vital importance of Aboriginal people, the pastoralism. What's your knowledge of that in relation to say your grandmother and when she was running the property?

DD **Pastoral Industry**

14:12:26:08 They used Aboriginals a lot but I, I honestly believe that if the Aboriginals hadn't been there, they would not have survived. That's how I feel about it. A lot of people disagree with me on, about that. Um but I do

think that the Aboriginals knew where everything was. They could um they were very very good stockmen. And when my father, when my grandfather and my grandmother first started Mooraberrie, they had sheep and the Aboriginals were always the shepherds. They used to wash them in the water holes before they shore them to get the dust out of their fleeces and they were very very good um you know, station hands I suppose you'd call it. But I think that honestly feel that if they, they didn't have them out there at the time, they would never have survived.

TF Your Mum's book describes the Aboriginal women helping to build Mooraberrie. To pummel the –

DD 14:13:22:00 Yeah. Yeah, yeah – make the pise walls? Yes. Yes. Ah I think that the poor old Aboriginal woman or the gin as she was known as, I think they were um very very good workers. Ninety percent of them I would say would be spotlessly clean from that I've – even in my young days being out there. But ah they were very very good workers. There's one thing that I can remember grandmother telling me that at one stage there that the house gins were there and she was paying them for something. What it was I don't know, but anyway, she paid – some of them with a shilling each, some of them were sixpences and the others were threepences. Now it all amounted to the same amount of money but the fact was that those that got four threepences instead of a shilling always thought they had more money because they could jiggle it and make a noise. And the ones that got the shilling, more or less cried because they didn't – thought that they never got the same amount of money.

TF Generally I think –

JH …..

TF OK. I'm rolling. Um generally, as I understand it, 'til kind of – almost like up to the '60s, Aboriginal people weren't paid cash wages. I don't know. Maybe your grandmother was – and I understand that was the case on Mooraberrie as well – um, what do you know – like you know, I guess about the kind of – the transaction? What, what your family gave Aboriginal people and what Aboriginal people gave your family on, on Mooraberrie?

DD **Pastoral Industry/ Aboriginal Labour**

14:15:02:02 Well I don't remember any Aboriginals being on Mooraberrie after about 1940. We were out – there was children in '39. Ah there was a family there. Benny and Dolly Hughes and their son Willy. Now they were paid because the – if they came from South Australia, they were not under – they were not under what they called the Queensland Act. Therefore they were entitled to be paid. But if the Aboriginals came from Queensland, they were under the Act. Now the money had to be paid to the Police Station and I understand that most of them out in that country all claimed to have come from South Australia. So as – beat the Act. I think they were very very well looked after. Um, I won't say housing-wise. Probably by today's standard it would have been very poor, but I think that people have got to realise that the, the um pastoralists – some of the pastoralists, their houses weren't, weren't what you'd call top notch either but ah but ah I think in cases of sickness and things like that, they always looked after them. Or tried as much as they could, you know, to help them.

TF The issue you were talking about, what good workers Aboriginal women were, I'm not saying specif – I don't know what was the case in Mooraberrie – but in general in Queensland, including south-west Queensland, the, the pastoral properties needed fewer women than men and they, so the women were often sent to the towns which I wondered whether maybe, because Moses was on Mooraberrie for a long time, wasn't he? After the women had gone? Was it, is that your impression that it was kind of like men left working on the property?

DD 14:16:46:02 No. No. No. No. I, ah they tried to keep the families together to my knowledge. Um and even some of the big companies, when I went out to work there in 1946, they still had black people. They tried to keep the families together because they, I think the idea was that if they didn't keep them together, the men wouldn't stay. They'd be there for a little while, then they'd go. And the idea was to keep the families there so that the men would always be there.

TF There's – I think it's from one of your mother's books where she describes I think your grandfather. Do you remember the grace that he said?

DD No.

TF I think it was white, white pioneers, black saviours.

DD 14:17:30:06 I think they would have believe in that. Yes. Yes. Um – I'm not a racist by any means but there's a lot of things today I don't believe that's right. Um there's a lot of things I would like to say but I won't. Not on, not while, not on here anyway um because I think it will offend too many people. But I honestly feel that ah the, the, the black people of those days were very very well looked after and ah they had a very good home. They were always clothed. They were always fed and I think the children um were well looked after.

TF Let's talk now about, about your mother. What was Alice Duncan-Kemp like in, in brief. If you were to give a thumbnail sketch of your mother.

DD 14:18:47:16 Well I don't know much about it. Um, I think she was reasonably well educated. Um but um I know at one stage there she took up um I would presume today you would call it, call it similar to Karitane Nursing. And ah I know that she worked for some people up around Muttaburra and up there, looking after children. But other than that, I, I will be quite honest. I don't know too much about my mother's early life. Um –

TF Would she talk of her early life a lot?

DD **Alice Duncan-Kemp**

14:19:25:16 No. No. She did not. Um, none of the family did, to be quite honest, to my knowledge. My aunt, well Aunt Trixie I don't know about, but Aunt Laura very very seldom of her early life. Um – Mum got married in Longreach, I think, in 1923 I think it was. Um and then um my father, him being an ex bank manager, they went back to the bank then. And um we, we sort of moved around the countryside from there, from branch to branch, until he retired. 'til they retired in 1947 and then went back to the land.

TF So in that time when they were travelling round and the time you were growing up, what was your mother's life? And I'd love you to use, use Mum or Alice –

DD Yeah. Yeah.

TF Rather than just she.

DD Mmm.

TF Tell me – yeah. What was your mother's life in your childhood?

DD **Alice Duncan-Kemp**

14:26:29:18 She was a very active woman in lots of ways. She loved horses and ah to my knowledge, from about 1937 onwards, she always had a horse. Um she um – she did a lot of writing, I can remember that, because in every house that we were in, there was one room always put aside that was strictly forbood -forbidden to the children, which was known as the Writing Room. And that's where my mother did all her, her writing. Um she loved to go out to the west whenever possible. Um she – Dad apparently, Dad and Mum had a, must've had holidays because ah in 1933, they drove out with the three of us and ah, three boys, and ah I think they spent over eight weeks, eight or ten weeks at Mooraberrie which I think they very much enjoyed. Um And then every, oh I suppose about every two or three years when we were growing up, we used to go up out there for holidays.

TF Is it true – I think your mother only went there – like you said she was there for eight or ten weeks in 1933 –

DD Mmm.

TF How many times would your mother have been to Mooraberrie between when she left there and when she died?

DD Ooooh!

TF Approximately.

DD We were there in '33. We were there in '39. We were there in '40. Ah we went out again in '42. I think we went out again in '44. I suppose about six or seven times.

TF So she hadn't been there from, when did – there was like, it sounds like quite a long gap when she –

DD Oh yes.

TF Didn't go there.

DD 14:22:42:08 I understand she left there when she was about 17. 17 or 18. And ah she never went back then – oh I suppose it would've been for at least I suppose about 15 years there before she went back again.

TF And why –

DD To my knowledge anyway.

TF And why was that do you think?

DD **Inheritance**

14:23:06:10 Oh I think there was a little bit of conflict between the, the, the members of the family because it was a, it was a trustee's er an, an estate, until all the children became 21. And I think there was a little bit of conflict of interest until it was all fixed up. That's what I think.

TF So there was inheritance questions?

DD Yes. Yes. I think that's the best way to put it. Yes. Um – I've, I've, I've never been told the full story ah so I don't know, but I think this is what a lot of the trouble was.

TF So your grandmother would have inherited it from your grandfather or would it ….. ….. ….?

DD 14:23:53:10 No, he did – she did not. I understand that, that ah she was the trustee but the, the, the three girls were to get the ah it was left in trust for the three girls. That is what I under – have always understood. And I think they had to wait 'til the eldest was 21 before anything could be done.

TF So was it trouble then between Laura who was living there and your mum?

DD I think there would've been. I, I, I honestly don't know on that but I think there was um I don't know how you'd call it – um, I suppose a conflict of interest or something like that.

TF And divides families.

DD Yes. Yes.

TF Yes. Yes.

DD Um, so I – no, as I say, I'm not, not dead sure on that.

TF So – it's interesting that your mother didn't talk much about her childhood and yet she was writing about it over and over again in a certain way. How do you, how do you understand that? Like where do you think the writer in your mother came from?

DD 14:25:02:24 I don't know but I, I think that, that the whole thing was that she had so many pleasant memories and, and ah um of when she was a child or in her young years, and, and just how much the ah the, the blacks meant to her. I, I, I often feel that was because she – there's only one thing that makes me head that way too, is in all the books that she wrote, she very very rarely mentions both of her sisters. Alright, she mentions Aunt Laura as Sandy but she very rarely mentions Aunt Trixie in them so whether Aunt Trixie wasn't

that way inclined and wanted to go um walkabout I suppose you'd call it, with the black, black ah people, I don't know.

TF She also doesn't mention her mother, hardly at all. Like she talks a lot about her father –

DD Yeah.

TF Who died what? When she was six?

DD Yes. Yes. Yes.

TF How do you understand that?

DD 14:26:03:16 Oh I think this comes back to the fact that – a lot of it to do with the trust, trustee business and the conflict that, that sort of came out of it I suppose. That's the only reason I, I feel about it.

TF And it's interesting – how did your father feel about your mother's writing do you think? Do you think – well, yes. How did –

DD 14:26:26:20 Oh it never worried him. It never worried him at all. I think he encouraged her because I think that ah he thought it was a, an escape for her and I think this is why, why it never worried him. It never worried any of our, the, the, the – of us children, the fact that she wrote. I think it proves that she had more brains than us.

TF It's interesting. Patricia Hodgkinson, who grew up – who was Pop …..

DD Yes.

TF She says she – she's writing about her childhood in the Channel Country, she says she drives her children crazy talking about the Channel Country which is why they were glad that she had me to talk about. But it's interesting that your mum was obviously thinking about all this stuff, but not talking about it with you kids. Why do you think that was?

DD I don't know. I think possibly because she thought we weren't interested. Because none of us sort of um I suppose leant that way, would be the best way to put it.

TF It's interesting now, like I look round this room and you've got beautiful paintings of Mooraberrie. Would I be right that Mooraberrie is now important to you?

DD 14:27:47:20 It always has been. I suppose when you're, when you're, when you're 16 years of age, and you're given a ticket to go to Quilpie to, and catch the mail truck out there and ah you know, you go grow up and you – see I was

there for a number of years there and I think this, this, it grew on me. The only – I'd love to live out in that country now but I, I know I can't. But ah it's, it's a country all of its own. Except when the sandflies are about. But it is. It's, it is, it's – I can remember when I went out there in '46, days meant nothing to people, whether it be Saturday, Sunday or whatever day. The only day that meant anything was mail day. And that was the only thing people were interested in. They very very rarely left the, the, the premise or the properties, um barring to attend musters next door and about once a year they all went to it all. You know, generally there was race meetings on. Well now this time of the year, there's five on in a row. Well most of them always went to two of them. One, ones in that area always went to Patoota **?** and ah Windorah. Or – and then when Windorah wasn't running, quite a lot went on to Birdsville but the – you know, as I say, that's, that was the only entertainment they had for the year.

TF Somebody told me that your Aunt Laura was the first woman to brave the races. That before that it had been all male.

DD **Laura Duncan II**

14:29:28:10 Well that, that could be possible because if you had known her, I can understand that. She was very much a feminist. I think, personally I often think that she was born in the wrong generation. That had she been born um 50, even 50 years earlier, Germaine Greer wouldn't stood a chance. She was a woman that could, could turn her hands to most things. She was an excellent car driver. She was a reasonable horsewoman. She could drive a horse and cart. And I mean, chop wood, so you know, there's pretty well nothing she couldn't do.

TF When you were talking about your mum, what kind of – and that you said you thought part of why she wrote was because she had such fond memories of relationships with Aboriginal people – what kind of relationships did your mother have with Aboriginal people in, in her adult life?

DD **Race Relations/Disease**

14:30:29:16 Very little, except through her books, because all the ones that she knew were all dead. And those that weren't dead had been dispersed. They, they, they'd moved out and I would say that 90% of them would have been dead anyway because um they were all – apparently from what I

understand ah most of them on, on Mooraberrie anyway, died in the early '20s. I understand it was a disease. Whether it was measles or chickenpox or one of those things went through the, the Aborigines in that area and this is what cleaned most of them up unfortunately.

TF So between the time when your mother left Mooraberrie as a young woman and when she came back fifteen years later, that aspect of the property had, had shifted?

DD 14:31:21:22 Oh yes. Oh yes. Well see there was very, very – Mooraberrie didn't employ many black, black people after that. Why I never knew but ah this, there was the odd ones as I say. That the Bennie and Dolly Hughes were there but they, they were about the only ones they ever, ever employed. Um Mooraberrie always only employed about three people. Three or four people. That was all, you see? There was never big – any big camps.

TF I was going to say, so who did they employ instead or, or was it a shift in the way that, that pastoralim, pastoralism – we'll just wait 'til this clock finishes striking.

DD You'll get another one in five minutes.

TF How many minutes ….. ?

JH I'd say about five.

TF Um was it – if, if Mooraberrie stopped employing Aboriginal people in the '20s, who did they employ instead?

DD 14:32:27:12 Mainly white people after that. Um, Arthur Churches went there in '27. Um there was, there was a few other old, old men round the area that they employed but mainly they always sort of generally one or two elderly chaps and the rest were, were ah young people. Ah why I don't know. Whether they thought the young ones were better workers or ah I often thought it was the fact that they were cheaper um cheaper labour, that was all, you know? That they could ah the wages would, wouldn't, weren't so great.

TF You're talking here about younger white people?

DD Mmm. Mmm. Yes. Yeah, they always used to get them about 7, 15 to 17 year olds.

TF When had your Aunty Laura taken over running the property from your grandmother?

DD Yeah. About 19 – in the early '40s.

TF Right. So it was a shift then. You were saying earlier, you know, Mooraberrie couldn't have functioned without –

DD Mmm.

TF Aboriginal people. But then by the '20s that ….. …..

DD Oh well see, they were established.

TF ….. ….. shifted.

DD **Pastoral Industry/Aboriginal Labour**

14:33:34:00 They were reasonably established and they had a good name. Therefore they could get finance. And that's, that's what, what kept them going, was the fact that so long as they could get finance, they could survive. And if it wasn't for the blacks, they would never have managed to, to, to get finance in the early days because the, the, the um you could say that wages were nil and um the, the, the Aboriginals did the work. Whereas in the '20s and onwards, and the whites came in. See they all had to be paid to do the work and I think this is where that, it came in.

TF And with your mum, like in, in travelling as a Bank Manager's wife, travelling around Australia, there would have been Aboriginal people in those towns.

DD 14:34:22:10 Very, very few Trish because see they went to ah Goulburn in New South Wales and then from Goulburn in New South Wales to Richmond in North Queensland. Um which there, there weren't too many Aborigines round Richmond in those days. Then from Richmond ah to Toogoolawah – well there was none there. And then to Oakey you see, so there, actually there – to my knowledge when we came to Oakey in '39, there was no black people round here. 14:34:56:10

TF So was there a –

JH Trish, I'll change tape.