

**INTERVIEW WITH SYLVIE DUNCAN-KEMP**

**30 August 2000**

**Timecode refers to tape 64\_BC\_SP**

**Topics in Bold**

TF = Trish SD = Sylvie JH = Julie

**SIDE A**

**TF So this is Tape No. 64, Betacam Tape No. 64, DAT Tape 23. This is the first tape of an interview with Sylvie Duncan-Kemp in her house in Oakey. It's the 30<sup>th</sup> August 2000. Trish FitzSimons sound recording. Julie Hornsey on camera. 64\_BC\_SP**

TF 16:18:06:06 So Sylvie, we can stop and start and if I ask you about anything that you don't want to talk about or don't know anything about –

SD Mmm.

TF We can just move on.

SD OK.

TF So, I know you don't want to talk much about your grandmother, but if you were to characterise Laura Duncan, the elder, how would you do it?

SD 16:18:20:22 Mmm. Very forthright. Um – God, how can I? What can I say. Hey? Now stop grinning at me like that.

TF You can say nothing if you want.

SD 16:18:44:00 No. Um well, we just didn't see eye to eye. And we didn't – well, we just didn't get on. Mmm.

TF How much time did you spend with your grandmother.

SD 16:18:53:12 Very little. Very little. I did – see David, David was the one who went to Mooraberrie, worked at Mooraberrie for so many years. I was at boarding school from when I was 8 until I was 18. What I call ten years hard labour at Glennie.

TF Where's Glennie?

SD Toowoomba.

TF And where were your parents at that time?

SD 16:19:16:14 Um - to start with they were here in Oakey, then they moved to the farm at Jondaryan and then they went to Winton. Outside Winton.

TF So your father wasn't a bank manager in this period? That was all earlier .....

SD 16:19:29:06 Um – until 1947 he was. And the last, at the last four years he was bank manager here at what's now the ANZ but used to be the Bank of Australasia and um I was at Glennie Prep then out at Smithfield, which is now a um restaurant.

TF And so you would have been at boarding school – I mean I went to boarding school, I don't know, 35 miles from where my parents lived –

SD Mmm.

TF So I don't find it so strange, but it, it was pretty close to –

SD Yes.

TF Yeah.

SD 16:20:05:20 But um they wanted me to go to a school like Glennie. But ah, yeah, and um we didn't have anybody I could stay with so I could go as a day, day pupil. Yeah, so I boarded. It was dreadful. Hated it. Yeah.

TF And, and with your Mother then, so how much time would you spend with your Mother? Like do you have a strong sense of your Mother's life –

SD No.

TF During your childhood?

SD 16:20:36:08 No. No. Because when I was at home, um – she would be in her Writing Room. She would shut herself away and we got – you know, we,

we – I got the distinct impression that, you know, don't disturb. Do not disturb. Mmm.

TF So this would have been – I don't know how old you are Sylvie, but which book would she have been writing when you were – through the period? This would have been the books that were published in the late '60s.

SD **Alice Duncan-Kemp**

16:21:51:08 Yes. Yes. She was always writing. Always scribbling. My God, was she scribbling. We've got bits of cardboard. Bits of Kellogs Cornflake packets with scribble on it and she always scribbled in pencil. And a blunt one at that. So nobody can read what she wrote. And they say my writing's awful but hers was disgusting.

TF So she would be scribbling while she was making your school lunches –

SD Yeah.

TF And then you'd go to school and she'd type it up?

SD 16:21:35:02 Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. She was always, always doing – you know, yeah. Yeah. So we virtually looked after ourselves. Although she did do the cooking. Mmm. And the washing.

TF And what would your Mum say about her writing? Like how would she have presented her life?

SD 16:21:00:00 Ohh, she never said much about that ah part of it. Just that she was busy doing, you know – we didn't even know whether she was really writing or not. We just thought she was. She probably was. But she must've been because you know, we've got bits and pieces everywhere of her scribble. Yeah.

TF So in the period of your childhood – so she'd written one book back in the '30s –

SD Mmm. It came out just – about 1939 I think.

TF Right.

SD Before the War broke out.

TF And then –

SD That's when we were in Toogoolawah.

TF I mean did you see your Mother's writing – was it an economic thing ..... ?

SD No. No. It was just something she did. Yeah.

TF And how would your father – how did he relate to her writing?

SD 16:22:57:02 Um – I don't really – I think he ah I think he was behi – I don't know. I never – we never ah discussed that, you know. I think in our, in our childhood you were seen but not heard. Um – you didn't complain about things. Yeah.

TF And did your Mother talk to you – like did you grow up hearing about the Channel Country? Go back to your childhood. When would you have first – when would the term 'Channel Country' first have meant something to you.

SD **Women/Land**

16:23:33:12 Um Channel Country very rarely. Ah, it was always Mooraberrie, Mooraberrie, Mooraberrie. Um – we went out there – I think the first time we went out was in 1939. And I was very small. I can remember being put on an old chestnut gelding called Mate who, because I was only knee high to a grasshopper, he looked as though he was about ten feet tall. And I was um in my own poley saddle with bucket stirrups, and I can remember going up one side and straight off the other. Mmm. But yeah, but we used to – I used to – we used to go riding a lot and Arthur used to come with us.

TF So how old would you have been then? This was '39.

SD 16:24:27:20 I wasn't quite 5. I think we were out there in the mid winter holidays. We – school in those years were four terms and we had holidays at

Easter, mid winter, Michaelmas and Christmas, and I think they were always the mid winter holidays we went out. Because it was dry. Mmm. And ah yeah. Cold. Yeah.

TF And – you probably don't remember this – but do you think you knew about Mooraberrie before you went there? You know, like –

SD 16:25:01:04 Ah, I think so. I think so. I think it was um, um – well I can remember when we were still at the bank in Toogoolawah, Grannie and Aunt Laura came to visit and we would've known then, and I – God – I can't remember how old I was. I would've been about 2 or 3 I suppose. Yeah.

TF And did your Mother talk to you much about her childhood at Mooraberrie?

SD No, not until I got older. Yeah.

TF Because it's interesting. David seemed to indicate that she never much talked to him.

SD No.

TF About her childhood.

SD 16:25:39:20 I don't think she talked to – I don't think she talked to any of us very much because it wasn't, it wasn't the thing to do. But with her own private being if you know what I mean, she could – when she was sick, I remember before she died actually, she was in the hospital out here in Oakey and um – I got – I was working at the Department of Unsocial Insecurity and – in Toowoomba – and they rang me and said you'd better come. Your Mother's gone into a coma. So I just dropped everything and raced – raced out to the hospital in Oakey and um – I sat with her for a while and I said to the, one of the nurses, I said, no she's not in a coma. I said she has the habit – like, a lot, a lot of Aborigines, she can disappear within herself. And when she will come to, she will be healed. And she'd had a touch of pneumonia I think and when she did, she came out of it about the next day, and she – yeah, she was OK.

TF So for you to interpret your Mother's sickness in that way –

SD Mmm.

TF She must've talked to you a lot or had you read her books?

SD **Alice Duncan-Kemp**

16:26:59:20 No. No. I had not read her books. I must confess. I still not – I have not read much of them even now. What I have read is extremely interesting and easy to read but I think from what I, what I know about her, is what has – yeah, has been what she has told me over the years. And um she's told me a lot about what the Aborigines do and how they heal themselves.

TF And did she believe herself to have absorbed –

SD Mmm.

TF A lot of Aboriginal culture?

SD Mmm. Mmm. Mmm.

TF So what kind of words would she give to that?

SD 16:27:39:14 Ohhh. Wasn't so much words. It's what she could – it was unspoken. She could always tell you what she was, what she was thinking or what she was, what she wanted to get across but not in so many words. I can't – I can't explain it.

TF So she – I mean her books have a kind of indirection –

SD Mmm.

TF To them in a way.

SD Mmm.

TF Pam Watson describes them as being spatially rather than –

SD Well she –

TF Temporally organised.

SD Yes. That she jumps from spot – yeah. Mmm.

TF Yeah.

SD 16:28:22:04 Yeah. But she always – like I said, she always says there when the cold weather's coming, they used to chase the willy wagtails away. Yeah. She used to get – old Mary-Anne used to the cow whip, her cow whip out and, and chase them. Mmm. Because it brought the cold weather.

TF And the two Aboriginal women that we – there were pictures of there today. I've forgotten the name. The –

SD .....

TF ..... girl.

SD 16:28:46:18 Well Mary-Anne was her – I didn't know those two. The only one I knew anything really about was Mary-Anne I think who was her sort of Nanny.

TF And Maggie? There's –

SD Maggie was married to ohhhhhh.

TF Moses, I think.

SD 16:29:10:02 Yes. One of them. Yeah. But they were, they were the house gins. And I think the others were outside. Yeah.

TF And what picture did your Mother give you of, of the kind of, the economic role if you like, of Aboriginal people on Mooraberrie? Like what – did she talk much about that?

SD 16:29:35:10 No. I think they used to come in – I can remember 1939 they came in and camped on the other side of Mooraberrie Creek because we used to go over there at night and talk to them. But um – whether they were self-

sufficient or whether Mooraberrie gave them stores, I'm not sure. David would know that. Yeah. 16:30:11:02

TF And did your Mum talk –

JH - change tapes.