

INTERVIEW WITH PAM WATSON

4 September 2000

Timecode refers to tape 75_BC_SP

Topics in Bold

TF = Trish PW = Pam Watson JH = Julie Hornsey

TF So this is tape 75? So this is Betacam tape 75, time code 04. We're still in DAT tape 27 I think. The DAT is just at 7 minutes 20 seconds and so this is the fourth Betacam tape in an interview with Pam Watson on the 4th September 2000. **75_BC_SP**

Um, where was I at? We were, you were just in the middle of something I wanted to go back to –

JH The importance of –

TF Oh yes.

PW Yes.

TF I'll ask you that again. Yes. When I put, first put in my um project application, I got back the, the feedback that it was taken as like the local history of a particular –

PW Yes.

TF Area of Queensland. It sounds like you perhaps had some of that response to, to your book. How do you respond to that? I mean –

PW **History/Pastoral Industry**

04:01:42:15 Well I, I think it was a microcosm of what happened elsewhere so I think it's a valuable for that reason. Ah so you had the same pastoral industry all over Australia. You had the same um ah stress with, with Aboriginal people on the two questions of access to water and pasture and ah relationships with women. The, many of the people themselves moved around. I mean Costello, Durack, De Satge and Collins all had properties in other parts of the country. Ah Collins and De Satge both became members of Parliament. Um so I think it has a lot wider implications than simply the um, the, its geographical locations.

TF And indeed members of those families are still um very significant today –

PW Oh yes.

TF Aren't they?

PW 04:02:38:08 Oh yes, particularly Collins. Through ah NAPCO and the Duracks of course. They went on to West Australia and they've been important there and they're important in politics.

TF When we were talking about um Michael Costello's biography was, of his father, we were, almost said that he was kind of writing the biography that he, that he had to write.

PW Yes. Yes.

TF The biography that was determined by his time. How, what might that kind of perspective relate to, to your book? I mean, how, how, how if it all is this a book of the late 90s as a book that Pam Watson likes, had to write if you like.

PW 04:03:24:00 Ah, well, it's certainly a book of the late 90s but it's not, it doesn't represent a popular idea I think. I certainly didn't have to write it. I'd be making much more money being a Pharmacist. Um but it's certainly, it's part of its times I think isn't it?

TF Yeah I mean, I'm um um I'm sympathetic to that notion that all history is contemporary history.

PW Yes. Yes.

TF Which doesn't mean it's inaccurate but it means –

PW No.

TF That what you focus on represents –

PW Yes.

TF The where you've come from.

PW Yes. Yes. Yes.

TF Yes. Um in, in our interview with Liz Debney, she put forward – we talked to her quite a lot about native title and she put forward the notion that, that it was all very easy for we city people to come out to the Channel Country and to be sympathetic to native title and sympathetic to Aboriginal people because we weren't facing claims on our backyard or whatever. Um, how do you respond to that notion? I mean at one level I have a sympathy with that notion although um you know, I don't think it takes the vital importance of, of native title away but, but how do you respond to that?

PW **Native Title**

04:04:47:04 I suppose um I have a certain sympathy for it too but every lifestyle has its disadvantages. The pastoralists have had years when they've

had very good conditions and also I think that original ah court decision, I can't remember now whether it was Mabo or Wik, but it pointed out that the pastoralists were not going to suffer if there was going to be a conflict between the Aboriginal people and land use and pastoral uses. It was going to be the pastoralists that would succeed so I don't, you know, I'm disappointed that pastoralists should have the opportunity to do something in this regard to make up for the past and they're knocking it back. 04:05:30:14

TF I think, yeah I think that was Wik. Um I mean generally I've found great ignorance actually. Nobody really understood what native title –

PW Well it's complicated. Ah I mean even Harradine used to bring his lawyer with him so I –

TF Where do you see your work next heading Pam? Like, where's the future of –

PW Um.

TF Your intellectual work.

PW 04:05:54:00 I think I'm going to do something based on my PhD probably and - but again I don't want to make it an academic work. I, I want to make it a work that's readable to the average person so um I have to see how that works out. I, I'm really very interested in um the New Yorker has published lots of articles in which the researcher is almost part of the, the story. The only one I can think of, there was one on Freud in, in the - *Freudian Archives* I think it was called. Ah and then there's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* where ah Pet – Laurence is, you know, present. Um so I'd like to do something about that on this whole question of drugs and their economic and social consequences. But I don't know whether I've got the energy yet or – or whether I can stand the absolute concentration that it demands.

TF How long –

PW I mean I could just get old, be - or I could just be old.

TF How long did this *Frontier Lands* take you for instance?

PW **Gender Relations**

04:07:06:02 Ah it probably took me three or four years concentrated writing. I'm a very slow writer and I need lots of drafts and ah I go down many a blind alley and so on. I mean in the beginning I was terribly interested in the gender difference between the men and the women so that was going to be the whole focus of the book. But then I thought that's, that's an irrelevant

issue you know. I shouldn't spend time on that when there are more important issues involved.

TF That's interesting –

PW Mmm.

TF Because I called, yeah, coming –

PW Yes.

TF Coming after it's –

PW Yes.

TF They're the questions I've got a particular um got a particular interest in. Ah how important were field trips to the Channel Country in working on *Frontier Lands*?

PW **Moorberrie/Women/Land**

04:07:56:04 I've had a couple of field trips to that area before you see so it probably wasn't significant to go that last time when I went with my daughter. On the other hand ah that was the first time I knew I was actually going to be writing about it and ah my impressions of Mooraberrie the property were very um very moving to me because you know in Alice's books, every location has the significance of one sort or another. This or that water hole, or that sacred tree. And there seemed to be lots of people there, and you get there now and it just seems absolutely deserted. You know it's lost its particularity and I can see how when Aboriginal people were put into reserves, how hard it must've been to transfer knowledge about the past when you actually weren't living in the country. I mean now, even a lot of the names Alice used, you can't find out where those areas were. I'm sure that struck you. 04:09:04:20

TF So

PW **Race Relations**

It's, it's a really sad sort of deserted place now. And I mean that's a twist on the usual story isn't it? Which is that these were trackless wastes or things when whites arrived. But now ah that's not true when you read Alice's stuff you know, it's, it's full of people and movement and colour and activity, but when you go there now, it's really sort of dead.

TF And beyond Mooraberrie, did you feel in travelling round, I don't know when you were in Birdsville, I don't know precisely where you went. But could you

feel the um the weight of this history, for want of a better word? And if so, how?

PW 04:09:51:06 Well I certainly, I certainly did feel the weight of history but it was in the absence of any trace of it left that's what particularly struck me I think. Um and I was ah I went to, to see – what's the lake? Um, gosh, I can't remem –

TF Not Tuteka –

PW Ah –

TF I was going to say Tutekawa.

PW No, that's Mexico.

TF Yes. What I'm saying is a name something like that.

PW **Women/Land**

04:10:23:16 Well you know the lake I mean and you know, all around there there are these, it was sacred to women. A lot of women ceremonies were celebrated there and all around there, you may not have seen them, but there were um clay ovens where people would've baked emus and things like that and it's just deserted. And Alice speaks of beautiful rushes growing to the edge of the water. Well now they're all sort of ah ah, the dirt is frozen into the shape of cattle hooves and things. It's, it's a really sad spot.

TF Where in, in this process did you run across Joslin Eatts, Pam?

PW 04:11:05:14 Oh she got in touch with me. She ah, she is also very interested in Alice Duncan-Kemp and has read all her books and she um sees, Jocelyn says she wanted to raise her people up and she saw Alice Duncan-Kemp's books as sort of some way of doing that and she rang the university and asked them if they had anyone who was, who knew anything about Alice Duncan-Kemp or that country, so they put her on to me.

TF She was very lucky, wasn't she?

PW Yes.

TF That she happened to ring a university –

PW Yes.

TF Who had staff -

PW Yes that's right.

TF That would.

PW But, but she's got a lot of um initiative, Jocelyn I think.

TF Do you in anyway see yourself almost as part of a genealogy of historians? Is that ah um –

PW Ahhh.

TF Is that a concept that is fruitful(?) to you?

PW 04:12:05:12 I haven't seen that but I concede there's some truth in it now you've mentioned it. Look I see myself as mostly just doing my own thing in a quiet sort of way. Persisting in things that interest me.

TF You said that part of why you'd taken up the book was um because you, you were interested or angry really, about the lies going down politically.

PW Yes.

TF Do you think that our view of the past influences the present? And if so, how?

PW **Race Relations/Pastoral Industry**

04:12:40:00 Oh yes, I do tremendously. Um well people don't really realise how much I think Aboriginal communities have the, how much they've been damaged by pastoralism. I mean, everything that decimated Aboriginal communities, and I use that sense very carefully – that word carefully, one in ten. I don't mean to imply that they are wiped out, but everything that happened to Aboriginal people made money for pastoralists. You know, the fact that they came in and put their cattle on the ground. Ah Costello made a quarter of a million British pounds in 1970. Um when they ah got rid of all the Aboriginal people on the property, they put up the ah price of their property and they enabled them to ah pay more to the managers and so on. The ah, the kidnapping of children and women um made, lowered sort of the costs of running the properties. Um the fact that Aboriginal people weren't tried if they were said to have committed a crime, saved them money because they didn't have to send them to the coast to be judged. Um - so I've run out again. 04:14:01:12

TF Is there anything that –

PW I'm not wrapping up things neatly like I did in the beginning, I'm sorry.

TF That's fine. Is there anything I haven't asked you about that you think is, is really significant to understanding your book, its place in your life and the history of the Channel Country. The of those things.

PW No, I think you've, you've ah covered it very well really.

TF Well then why don't we just sit here and do what I call an atmos so we'll just record the sound – oh except we – oh I suppose we – OK. So this is an atmos in Pam's living room.

PW You poor girl. You're stiff and cramped.

(background sounds)

End of taped interview.