INTERVIEW WITH PAM WATSON

4 September 2000

Timecode refers to tape 74_BC_SP

Topics in Bold

TF = Trish PW = Pam Watson JH = Julie Hornsey

TF **So this is Betacam No. 74 which is the third Betacam of an interview with Pam Watson. It's still um DAT Tape No. 27 and it's 1 hour 2 minutes and 25 seconds and this is the 4th September 2000 for the Channels of History project.**

74_BC_SP missing t/script 03:01:16:20 – 03:08:06:06

Some written notes on the printed transcript

PW That those ideas are hard to under – er er questions because they're so general.

TF Yes. I know.

PW Oh um.

TF 03:08:12:08 When I asked David about why it was that you know, Mooraberrie having being thickly populated with Aboriginal people they then had all disappeared by the time Alice went back, he said it was because the family could then get finance. Which is a very – if it's true, you know, it suggests that -

PW I know.

TF That early on the Duncans were absolutely dependent. You know David said yeah, couldn't have existed without Aboriginal people but –

PW Right.

TF But once they were established and could get finance, then it was like there was a preference for white workers.

PW Right.

TF Which, I mean Alice is not necessarily – Alice is speaking from her perspective, but it throws an interesting light –

PW Yes.

DAT 27 AND 28, PART SIDE B

4 September 2000

TF … of an interesting life

PW Yes.

TF On that pastoral Aboriginal, the nature of the, the exchange I guess.

PW **Race Relations/ Pastoral Industry**

03:09:05:02 Yes. Yes. Um certainly properties that did not have an Aboriginal population were worth more and they had – it was easier for them to get white workers. Ah one of the stories was the, the ah manager of Collins's property which was next door to Morraberrie, there's a letter from him saying um you know, don't tell us not to shoot blacks. You know as well as I do that everyone else is shooting them and ah you'll face economic ruin if ah you've got too many blacks on your property so I said ah I conceded it might have been easier to get a loan if you had none because you were more likely to get into overseas investment or very other, other sorts of investment if the property was known to be completely trouble free.

TF Because am I right that in the 19th century, um, I mean, would you, would the word of war ever be an appropriate one or, or how would you characterise that early um period of contact between black and white. Going back before the, when the Duncans were running Mooraberrie.

PW **Gresley Lukin**

03:10:17:00 Right. Well that's an interesting question because if you looked at um Gresley Lukins's editorials, he talks constantly about the war of extermination that's going on and I've in fact just been looking at that, that um in his replies, you know these 18 replies he got, nobody queries that it was a war of extermination and um ah and some people agreed that it should take place and some agreed that it shouldn't. And also a Mary Durack when she's, in her book, she talks about by 1874 the white pastoralists all decided to get rid of the Aboriginal people by bullet or by bait. Now which is a terrible thing isn't it? And ah you know she's such a respected figure that every time I hear John Howard talking about no rules were ever broken or, I get very annoyed.

TF So we were talking to a descendant of the Hammonds, Tullys and Duracks yesterday and she felt that there had never been trouble between her family and Aboriginal people. Not, not serious trouble. You, how do you respond to that?

PW Ah, she's a Costello relative?

TF Hammond is her main -

PW Main. Ah.

TF Is her main um line. Yes.

PW Um, well I would –

TF …..

PW **Race Relations/ Pastoral Industy**

03:11:47:02 You know, he, they're the dominant group aren't they? I think you have to ask, ask the minority groups what happened really to get the picture. But the very fact that they bought their cattle in and drove the Aboriginal people off the land meant that they weren't getting food any more. Um they lost their homes, their sacred places. I would, I would think that it'd be very unlikely that there was no trouble.

TF So –

PW You know, did you see, when you were up in Boulia, did you see their Centenary of ah of Foundation booklet?

TF No, I have the McGlinchy clan booklet. Maybe I, actually I think I – that's the one Keith Donoghue did. I think I did.

PW 03:12:33:06 That might – but if you look there and they asked what happened to the Aboriginal people, when they died of starvation, grog and lead poisoning, the lead poisoning being by bullet, and that was often referred to in those days, that term.

TF Um –

PW Besides –

TF Um illness is another cop, you know, falling back before like the influenza epidemic.

PW Yes.

TF That's another common um – explanation.

PW 03:13:01:06 Yes. Yes. And that's ah Jeffrey Blainey takes that up when he criticised the um the High Court for their talk about Aboriginal people being eradicated, he says nonsense. That the majority of them died of illness. They died in very large numbers from venereal disease but that's a very different illness from flu. It's got a very big social component and even in those days, people were aware if you had venereal disease and you slept with somebody, you passed it on and it was almost always fatal.

TF Although I came across a reference to stockmen. This, I don't know if it was in the Channel Country but it was in rural Queensland, stockmen believing that if they could just sleep with a woman who didn't have VD they would be cured.

PW 03:13:50:14 Yes. Yes. I think ah Ann McGrath brings that up in *Born in the Saddle*. But very often of course what happened, I think they believed that about gonorrhea. Ah the idea was you passed it on to someone else, lest you pass it on to the young woman you slept with. But very often you DID pass it on. You weren't cured and you also passed on syphillis. But I mean it's a very immoral act, whatever the, your reason for doing it.

TF What do you think accounted for that shift from like that state of war on the frontier to then the situation that we get in Alice's books where, you know, black saviours, where the, where the pastoralists, they're dependent upon –

PW Yes.

TF Aboriginal people. What, what accounts for that transition?

PW **Race Relations/Drought**

03:14:36:20 I sup – um I don't really know the answer to that. I suppose that both existed simultaneously. You know certainly the Aboriginal people were willing to help when the pastoralists first arrived and they were willing to help Costello. It was only when the drought came and Costello wasn't giving them cattle ah ah as food, that they ah were very hostile and attacked the homestead. So that may account for the transition, I don't know.

TF How about like the Debney peace? Could you describe what Debney's peace is and what um significance or otherwise you would give to it in the history of the Channel Country?

PW **Debney**

03:15:20:18 I was very careful with Alice Duncan-Kemp's books not to take anything for ah, not to automatically believe everything she said so I always checked if there are other accounts of things, if it fitted in with ah white cultural practices or Aboriginal cultural practices. Um, I could, the, the story of the Debney peace is that all these Aboriginal people were fighting amongst themselves and ah ah Debney tried to bring them all together to establish a peace. Now there are lots of reports about how Aborigine, how the whites coming into the area ah meant that the tribal boundaries were forgotten and

people squabbled amongst themselves. Um so that sounds quite valid. Whether in fact Debney actually made peace with all these groups or not, I have no idea. And whether in fact he got some land set aside for them which is another thing he says, I just couldn't, I wouldn't have an opinion on, but I know that it sounded like a strange practice for the police and the pastoralists to get together and have all these negotiations but I spoke to a friend of mine and he said, see if the policemen ah had a background in the Indian Army and I did, and it turns out that that was done very often amongst Indian groups in, in British India so ah you know, that's consistent with the story. 03:17:01:20

TF Do you think it's part of that process, do you think Debney's peace is part of what sometimes gets called letting in?

PW I don't know. I mean a lot of his um, a lot of the tribes he was talking about came from far away. There are, there was a guy there from um Lake Eyre and ah so, they wouldn't be letting them in so much.

TF I, you know, I wondered whether the Aboriginal –

PW **Race Relations**

03:17:37:16 That was 18, that took place in the 1880s. It was too soon for the letting in. See because I think ah Costello and Durack only came in about 1860. In 1874 Mary Durack was saying they were out to shoot and poison the blacks. Um so I think to have the Debney Peace as the sort of letting back in is too soon.

TF Talking about Collins, do you want to just give me a thumbnail sketch of, of Collins and the Collins' family's um economic involvement in the Channel Country?

PW 03:18:20:12 Right. I'm not sure I've got the fingers, figures at my finger tips but um Collins came in as a young man. He'd ah, he met Cos – the Collins' had properties all over the place and Costello arrived in the Dawson River area to buy cattle and he told Collins about all these wonderful opportunities to get land from Aboriginal people, and Collins went out there and in fact he did that. He got a huge amount of land and then later he went into the Northern Territory and did the same thing there and um ah they formed this big company, had lots of important politicians in it. Um it was called the North Australia Pastoral Company, and ah 37 of their descendants I think still own or have control over those Aboriginal lands and draw an

income from them even today, all these years later. But the company is now huge. It, it controls ah a section of Australia as big as Sweden and, and Denmark I think it is. It's one of the top five pastoral companies.

03:19:34:06

TF So in talking to Isabel and Shirley, Isabel Tarrago and Shirley Finn yesterday –

PW Mmm.

TF They were a bit hazy about the details of Glenormiston's ownership but it would seem that their family worked there mainly when Glenormiston was owned by Collins and White and the Fraser family.

PW Yes.

TF Was very significant –

PW Yes.

TF And they felt that they, that the Frasers were going to protect them and then, because NAPCO, then NAPCO I think according to that, *You Can't Make It Rain,* the – about '68 that NAPCO buys Glenormiston and I know even that book talks about the sort of the interlocking shares.

PW Yes.

TF This, this company pastoralism is very complicated.

PW Oh yes.

TF Do you have any sense of, of Glenormiston's ownership structure at all, or is that too, too detailed to ….. ?

PW No that's too detailed. I don't know. I know there was originally a family called Coglan who owned it, or who managed it, and it was after that um that ah NAPCO got it.

TF You mentioned -

PW **Race Relations: Chinese/ History**

02:20:46:02 And, and, and they were an interesting family Coughlin, the Coughlins, because he was terribly interested in Aboriginal life and ah he gave all these wonderful things to the museum and for a while the Queensland Museum had a Coughlin Pavilion and there's a very interesting story um about um one of the Coughlin wives, I think it's, was the mother of the person who told me and this woman had married very young and she was very inexperienced and ignorant and she was out on the Mulligan River on, on this

property all by herself. Her husband was away and she had two small children and it was the only the Aboriginal people for company which, you know if you, if you take Alice's point that it was a very alien ah and complex group, you could see how a stranger would feel. And one day this guy arrived ah and wanted to work as a cook and she thought there was something just a little bit odd but she couldn't, you know because she was very naïve, she couldn't really pinpoint it but he was wonderful to the children. He'd take them down to the lake and draw things and um tell them stories but he was also interested in their mother. That made her a bit nervous. He'd touch her hair and feel her clothes and he was always asking her to come to his cabin so she found that quite horrifying but eventually this guy got ill and she had to go to the cabin and there was this huge ah Buddha there so she realised he was Chinese and then he got a lot worse and he, they had to take him to Mt Isa I suppose, and when ah they got there he died and they discovered it wasn't a he at all. It was a Chinese woman. So, you know, I found that an interesting story. I've, I always think the early history of Australia is fascinating and …..'s boring. Strayed pastoral memoirs had've spoilt it all. 03:22:53:00

TF Where do you think a pastoralist memoir like the Costello one, it is very - self-serving is the first word that comes to mind.

PW Oh yeah. Yeah.

TF Where do you think that, that tone comes from?

PW **History**

03:23:06:16 Well I, I, I have a certain sort of sympathy for those kind of memoirs in the sense that I think um at the turn of the century, you know the whole sort of view of life changed and we began to try and get away from our convict roots and we set up this, this alternative view of the wonderful noble pastoralist and by the time that view had been set up and written about by Banjo Patterson and all these people, if you were writing a memoir, you almost had to conform to that pattern that had already been set down.

TF And do you think part of that pattern, part of that whole way of thinking was to um what's the word? Not talk about con, convicts or –

PW Oh yeah.

TF Or kind of –

PW Yes.

TF Yucky things.

PW **Gresley Lukin**

03:23:59:04 Yes, absolutely. I mean um Gresley Lukin faced a tremendous amount of pressure and he was ah it was said about him that ah talk about a white brutality. The blacks is just a cover for an affair with a black woman and that he was disloyal to his country and disloyal to his caste and all these things.

TF So how –

PW 03:24:20:04 And I mean Vogan had a bad time too. He was another journalist. He um he worked for the 'Illustrated National Times' and he was their correspondent for a, for the whole of Australia I think and then he, he wrote a book. It was a novel but he says that it was based on ah the truth and ah it went to two or three editions. It was the first Australian novel but it was a horrific picture of what pastoralists were doing in places like Glen Ormiston and others. And the 'Illustrated London Times' dropped him and ah for ten years or more he couldn't make a living out of writing. Mind you, his boss, ah Lord somebody or other, was part-owner of ah a lot of properties that he wrote about so in a sense you could say he cut his own throat.

TF Do you want to describe the process of producing your book? I'd like you to tell me about the, the trip to the Channel Country and then we'll, I'll, we'll talk about um, um, you know responses to it, because it seems to follow out of talking about the responses to, to Lukin's book.

PW OK, but I've got a sore eye and I have to put drops –

TF OK.

(pause in taping)

TF This is still Betacam No. 74 and this is DAT tape 28, the beginning of um so we're in the third Betacam second DAT of our interview with Pam Watson. **No transcript 03:23:54:08 – 03:30:24:20**

PW Something important and relevant and ah you know, having little afternoon teas or fancy lunches wasn't one of them. But I don't think I was guided off being very say pro-Aboriginal. I never was and it just sort of, I got interested in the questions and I followed them through and I became much more sympathetic to that point of view.

TF Do you, it had never occurred to me until I spoke to Alice's children the other day, but after talking to Alice's children, a, a certain kind of um I guess it's really the, the, a certain similarity, some, some points of coincidence between your life and Alice's life um struck me. Most obviously with pursuing a, a passion for anthropology. You're not and look, you can, there are as many differences as similarities –

PW Yes. Yeah.

TF But, but do you feel you identify with Alice at all?

PW 03:31:18:10 No, not a bit to be honest. Ah since you've raised the question, I've thought I can see parallels in, I think of myself as an incredibly focussed person you know, and that if I pursue a course of action, nothing else ah sort of intrudes on it and I think she must've been very like that. And I think she was also very visual, you know, and I also think that is true about myself. Um but no, I didn't, I didn't relate to her at all.

TF It's interesting –

PW I certainly think she's wonderful but -

TF It's interesting you, when you were talking about how say the Costello biography was, was of its time because it needed to be written um within that kind of Australian –

PW Yes.

TF Legend context.

PW Yes. Yes.

TF And then you were talking about how you came to write *Frontier Lands* and *Pioneer Legends* and it being um connected to Australian politics and I forget it is who says 'all history is contemporary history'. Um but what am I trying to say? I've lost my thread. I, I suppose – no, I'd better come back to that one when I've thought – um, um I'm kind of interested in, in how you look at your book from standing outside it but I'll, I'll come back to that. Can you describe the process of um of reception to your book, you know? How, how did you, how did you launch your book and what kind of responses have there been to it?

PW Ah you mean trying to find a publisher? That kind of …..

TF Yes.

PW 03:33:04:14 I had no trouble getting a publisher actually. Um I submitted it to Allen & Unwin which I, I was keen to have them publish it because they've done so many good books on a white/black contact. Um at first they told me they didn't have room for it and then they called up later and said yes, they had. Um so it was very effortless and ah compared with my work on Pituri it was just such a pleasant experience, the whole thing. Although we didn't have a bits of fights and things.

TF And then following through to when it was actually published. What kind of response did you imagine there would be to the book and how did that actually unfold?

PW **History**

03:33:47:04 Well I thought it'd be a very controversial book and it hasn't been. I mean, it hasn't got enough attention to be controversial I would say. Um there was no local review in the 'Courier Mail'. Um 'The Australian' gave it a very good review after it'd been out about six months.

TF That was in 'The Australian' review of books?

PW Of books. And it was the lead story there in about three pages. So that was good.

TF And how did you understand that, because I mean I think it is, the things that you write about are indeed apposite to our current politics. How do you understand that there wasn't more reviewing of it, attention paid to it?

PW 03:34:32:08 I really can't explain that. Um the 'Courier Mail' makes very strange choices about what it reviews I think. I mean it'll review books on strange potters. You know potters of Sweden or something like that. Um I think probably for the Sydney papers, the idea that this is about an isolated section of Queensland probably wasn't ah attractive or appealing enough.

TW And what do you, I mean that was certainly the feedback that I got in my first application say to the Commonwealth Centenary Federation was Channel Country is, is an isolated part of rural Queensland. What, how do you respond to that notion?

PW **History**

03:35:20:14 Well I think that's a shortsighted view actually because each of those five people, or at least four of them, were very significant. They owned properties almost everywhere. Ah the Collins family is so important now.

They currently own 0.7% of um Queensland land or they have a lease on it I should say. Ah they've properties all over the place. The same was true as Costello, ah De Satge made a fortune out of it. Um Durack of course died young so um not Durack um Duncan. So we don't know how he would've turned out. Moreover all the conditions ah that generated those contradictory memoirs, existed almost everywhere over Australia. I mean the pastoral um the pastoralists had the same problems with Aboriginal people everywhere. That was problems over access to women and ah white misuse of Aborig – access to water and white misuse of Aboriginal women and children. Ah the same people were often involved elsewhere. You know they went from one place to another. 03:36:32:00

JH ….. …..