

INTERVIEW WITH SYLVIE DUNCAN-KEMP

30 August 2000

Timecode refers to tape 65_BC_SP

Topics in Bold

TF = Trish SD = Sylvie JH = Julie

TF You're going to change tape. **So this is Tape 65. It's still DAT Tape 23 with 13.39 through the DAT Tape. Um and this is the second Betacam interviewing Sylvie Duncan-Kemp in her house at Oakey. It's the 30th August. Trish FitzSimons on sound. Julie Hornsey on camera. 65_BC_SP**

TF Um – oh, I've forgotten my thread for a minute. So did your Mother talk much – in Pam's books, book – and in your Mother's books, there's some discussion of the way that the Duncan's changed the way they lived on the land, according to what Aboriginal people wanted.

SD Mmm. Mmm.

TF Did your Mother talk to you much about that?

SD 17:01:35:10 In bits and pieces I think. We found out that um she knew a lot about um where to find different plants and, and things like that. And she used to go out. She used to tell me that she'd go out with the, with the blacks when they went out on their hunting trips and yeah – said with the gins and mmm.

TF But I guess the stuff as well – I'm interested in is – you know I gather that Mooraberrie got sited in a particular place because that's what the Aboriginal people wanted and for parts of the year, they would tell your Mother's family, I gather, you know, they couldn't go to the particular parts of the property and that sort of thing. I wondered if she ever talked to you about that?

SD No. Not to me.

TF No.

SD No.

- TF So her writing was very private then?
- SD 17:02:31:06 Oh definitely. Very much so. Yes. Dad had nothing to do – none of us had anything to do with it and my father certainly didn't either. Not that I know of anyway.
- TF So did you resent that Writing Room that took your Mother away?
- SD 17:02:45:06 I could have but not um – sub - subconsciously I suppose I could have, but I don't really think so. It was just something that she did and um it was part of life and that – yeah. Besides we were too busy doing other things.
- TF And when the books came out, would you get caught up in kind of publicity or, or was it all very low key?
- SD 17:03:10:00 Well I don't remember when the first one came out in 1939. I don't remember anything much about that at all, but I do remember when *Strange Paths* came out, when it was published by Angus & Robertson, Mum was very disappointed.
- TF That was '61 I think.
- SD Yeah. Mum was very disappointed in Angus & Robertson – the way they published it, and she thought they were very mean. Yeah.
- TF What was she unhappy about?
- SD 17:03:39:00 Um – I think the whole, the whole kit and caboodle. When you, when you, when you, when you compare that publication with the publication by Mr Smith from Smith Patterson in Brisbane, there's no comparison. Although, mind you, Mr Smith put in a lot of um stuff that had nothing to do with the book. But, you know, photographs and things like that. But ah yes, he certainly made a, a much better um job of publication and Angus & Robertson, I think, were of the opinion that they – I don't know whether they really believed her or not – I know The Sydney Herald didn't. She got a very – very nasty um crit from The Sydney

- Morning Herald. It couldn't poss – a woman – a woman couldn't possibly know anything about you know, what she – what she was writing about. Yeah.
- TF It is interesting that what your Mum was writing about was – that she goes back and back to the same period –
- SD Mmm. Mmm.
- TF In the past. And that when she writes the first book, she hasn't been out to Mooraberrie for, for 15 years or whatever.
- SD Oh yeah. Long time. Long time. Mmm.
- TF So what – what role? You know, why do you think your Mother needed to write these books?
- SD I wouldn't have a clue. I really don't know. But I think probably it was just something that she had to get out. Excuse me.
- TF Do you need to –
- SD No, I've got – I have asthma and, and every now and again I have to cough.
- TF Well that's fine. That's fine. Um – and do you think there's any relation between – like how, how many times did you Mother go to Mooraberrie between when she left it to get married and when she died?
- SD '39, '43 – that was it – that I can remember. Mmm.
- TF And so it's – there's – at one level, it's unusual that she's writing, writing and you know, writing such detail –
- SD Mmm.
- TF About somewhere that goes back to her childhood. Um, did, did any irony of that ever strike her? Or um –

SD 17:06:04:16 No. It just seemed to flow out of her. Excuse me but I'm going to have to –

TF Yeah. And do you think, did your Mother ever – do you think she ever wrote about anything other than Mooraberrie? You know, was – did she have um an identity as a writer beyond Mooraberrie or –

SD 17:06:40:04 I don't, I don't know. We, she did have a, she did write a sort of a novel I think called *Ryan – Rising* or something but um she never – I don't know whether she submitted it or not. But I think we found it in her – in all the copious bits of paper that were left – oh, you no. There was a drawer full in her dressing table in the other house and we'd had a mouse plague, and it was just shredded. Just a drawer full of mouse. Yeah. Terrible. So I ah I don't know what was, you know –

TF So why do you think she was writing about Mooraberrie but not actually kind of going there? You know? Like what was that connection between a place that she's remembering and remembering but, but not

SD **Alice Duncan-Kemp**

17:07:04:20 I think, I think it all stems from her father. When her father was alive, he and Mum did everything virtually together. Yeah. And I think it was he who introduced her to the Aborigines and um because he was – if some of the tribes around there couldn't agree – they had a, you know, having a disagreement or anything, they'd always go and ask Duncan, as they referred to him as, and, and he um, if he um suggested they do it this way or do it that way or you know – um, said they should, it should be this or should be that, they agreed to you know, abided by what he said. Mmm.

TF And he died, but what connection is there then to, to her not going back there?

SD 17:08:37:10 I don't know. I don't know whether Grannie resented the fact that the, the, the only boy in the family died and she didn't. I know they didn't get on.

And um and she, I think she just sort of went away. Like a lot of Aborigines do. They just go away. When they go away to die, they just go away. Yeah.

TF This is, it's out of time –

SD Mmm.

TF But it's interesting that your Mother, that her ashes are not at Mooraberrie, isn't it? Did you discuss that with her?

SD I don't know, but I suggested to David that we take them to Mooraberrie and he said no. That they were to go to be with Dad and Bill. Mmm.

TF So you don't remember your Mum expressing an opinion about what she wanted?

SD 17:09:43:20 No. And um there was a great kerfuffle too when Aunt Laura died. Um before – well before she died, David asked her what she wanted, because he knew she, she wanted to be cremated. And um he said what do you want done with your ashes? Do you want them to go back to Mooraberrie or do, do you want to go, want them go into St Mary's, Kangaroo Point with Grannie's. And she said oh, I don't know. Oh I suppose. Better go back to Mooraberrie. And of course that caused quite a ruction when she did die and um and the Gallagher – Aunt Trixie wanted them to stay in Brisbane. Mmm. But David stuck to his guns. Yeah. So that was another reason why we didn't get on with the Gallaghers.

TF And how would you describe your Aunt Laura? What was she like as a character?

SD **Laura Duncan II**

17:10:48:06 Um – a bit like me actually. So I've been told. Um spoke her mind and um she was bossy. Mmm. And she was, she was the boss. Yeah. And she was Miss Duncan of Mooraberrie. Very definitely. Yeah.

TF People describe her as being very elegant as well.

SD Yes. She always dressed very smartly, even if she was only in a pair of old overalls and um riding boots. Mmm. Yeah.

TF It's interesting. Obviously in, in literary circles and although it seems like your Mum's books got sort of forgotten for a while and –

SD Mmm.

TF Perhaps are being found again. But in literary circles, it's Alice Duncan-Kemp, that is associated with Mooraberrie.

SD Mmm.

TF Out in the Channel Country, it seemed like they –

SD It's Laura.

TF it's Laura.

SD Mmm.

TF And they didn't necessarily pay a lot of attention to your Mother's presence.

SD 17:12:10:00 No, because Mum wasn't ah well I – yeah, probably. But then Mum didn't live out there either. And I think that's, you know, if, if she had lived there, I mean she was um round Winton she was better known. Mmm.

TF What was she known for around Winton?

SD 17:12:33:14 Um, well she used to ride. I know when we were at the farm here at Jondaryan, she used to ride in um get on one of the horses and ride from the farm through Jondaryan into Oakey and then back again. In a day. Right – I suppose, I don't suppose it's very far but yeah. She was riding my pony Jenny one day and – she was crossing the Oakey Creek at Jondaryan homestead and Jenny had had enough so she laid down in the water. And Mum thought the horse

had had a heart attack and it was, it wasn't. It was just Jenny saying I've had enough. 17:13:14:14

TF And in a way, like your Mother has – (interruption)

SD Than she was in, in the house. Yeah.

TF Except when she was riding – writing.

SD Mmm. Mmm.

TF In the way, in your Mother's books, she has such sort of loving descriptions of the environment.

SD Mmm.

TF Did she have that kind of relationship to the environment she spent her adult life living in? Like would she have known all the plants and animals and um?

SD 17:13:58:10 I think she was always interested in, in um things like that. I can remember when she was living at David's. Um she used to live in the old garage actually. And um these two little mice came in to drink the cat's milk, so she got out of bed – I don't know, it must've been about – early in the morning, and she got out of bed and lay on her tummy and watched them. Lapping milk. These two little field mice. Yeah, but she was like that. Yes.

TF So she was happy to be eccentric?

SD 17:14:36:08 I think she – yeah. I think she related, a bit like me, she related more to animals than to humans. Mmm. Because I think, somewhere along the way, human beings let her down. Yeah.

TF And would that fundamentally have been when you say that you're talking about her relationship to her Mother?

SD Mmm. Mmm. Because she was very poorly treated by both Grannie and Aunt Laura in certain ways, particularly monetarily.

TF You're talking about the inheritance –

SD Mmm.

TF And how the estate?

SD Mmm. Mmm.

TF Went.

SD 17:15:13:20 Yes. And Aunt Laura said once to Grannie that she didn't know why Alice was kicking up such a fuss. All, that all she wanted, she herself wanted, was Mooraberrie. Mmm. Yeah.

TF And how about your Mother's relationship to Aboriginal people? Like, in her books she's writing very much of, of a dependence and an interdependence and friendship with Aboriginal people. How did that get played out in her, in her later life?

SD 17:15:49:18 She didn't come into contact with any that I know of. Not even around Winton. They'd all gone. See the Ab – what they call, what they call Aborigines today, the majority of them would not have survived back in the old days. The Aboriginal elders were very strict about that sort of thing and um a lot of the gins were either um kicked out of the tribe altogether and the children were – the children – the result of um a union between a white man and a, and an Aboriginal woman, were either taken away and disposed of or just left out to die.

TF So are you saying that your Mother didn't regard half – half Aboriginal people, part Aboriginal people as Aborigines?

SD 17:16:50:06 I don't think – I don't think that's um I don't think that'd probably be right but I don't think she, she just sort of regarded them as, as human beings.

- Mmm. Because she always used to say the poor old Abo. You know, he's gone.
Mmm.
- TF And – she was quite involved with anthropology, wasn't she?
- SD Mmm. Mmm.
- TF Do you want to talk a bit about that?
- SD 17:17:19:22 Yes. This fellow Winterbottom. I think he diddled Mum out of a lot of stuff. She had cases and cases of Aboriginal spears and woomeras and collamons and things like that, and she sent them down to him to be put in the Museum. And um I don't think they ever went to the Museum. I think they – ah we don't know what happened to them. David took them down from Donald Downs but nobody knows exactly what happened to them.
- TF So Winterbottom – who was he exactly? And yeah.
- SD 17:18:00:20 I think he was ah God, I don't really know. Better not say anything. I might be had for – for libel or watchamecallit. Slander or something. Yeah, slander. Um – whether he was part of the Queensland University, I don't know. I'm not sure now. But um she used to um converse with him and correspond with him a lot. And um she had always been interested in anthropology. I think she would have liked to have had the opportunity to go to university I think and study anthropology. She was a great believer in Margaret Mead who has since been um mmm, shown to be beyond the pale, if you like? Mmm. But it always was one of her pet subjects.
- TF And how about Aboriginals?
- JH ... battery's gone so
- TF Maybe there's a story in one.
- SD You're running out of batteries. You know, maybe – time to go home. Oh dear!