

INTERVIEW WITH PATRICIA HODGKINSON

Refers to tapes 77_BC_DV

P = Patricia Hodgkinson T = Trish Fitzsimons E = Erica Addis

T Camera tape number 77, third of three with an interview with Patricia Hodgkinson. It's DAT tape number 76. It's the 10th January 2002, and we're recording for the Channels of History project. Trish Fitzsimons on camera. Erica Addis – I mean what am I saying? Trish Fitzsimons on sound and Erica Addis on camera.

E I'm rolling two.

T So Patricia, when we were talking about you in the, in the bush, it sounded like – well how would you describe your relationship to the land of Mt Leonard? You know, what – what, what were your feelings for that land?

P My feelings for it were er I was so interested in it because of my father telling me all of the features of that land. To begin with, the sandhill country. You know, Mrs Duncan-Kemp wrote a book called 'Our Sandhill Country'. Well the marvels of the sandhills at – they, grasses grew on the lower slopes of the sandhills and they were button grass and grass and all sorts – probably knew the names of all of them. But he would get me down – get down off that horse. Get down off the horse and Poppa would turn over the leaf of one to show me how it retained its moisture and give me the, the history of all the plants growing there. What it meant, that when the cattle were starving, they could have recourse to the sandhill grasses – things like that. He also was, as I was telling ah Erica before, about the stars. All stockmen, everybody, depends for their very life on the stars at night and Poppa who knew so much about them, on the handkerchief of lawn in front of Mt Leonard, bare handkerchief width there, he – we took out a blanket and Poppa was in the middle. We kids were each side and he told us every star, constellation – everything about the heavens. And I've never, ever got over my fascination for – he knew all the Greek myths and Greek legends and that made – we were never afraid of night. Not ever. Because it was too fascinating. There were too many things to watch at night-time. We were never, never afraid to go out on our own in the dark at night-time. And it was – it was never boring. For me, anyway.

T How about the day? Like how did you feel about the extremities if you like, of that Channel Country land?

P We never even noticed it. Like kids don't. We – at Christmas Day 1929 ah Poppa had just been on this long court case I was telling you about in Adelaide, and he came back with all the equipment to build a tennis court, and the next day black, white, brindle – everybody, got in the big old trucks and ah got ah I don't know how many, ant hills. You know those 12 foot ant hills? That made the tennis court bed. There's nothing finer than an ant hill bed. He got reluctant blacks and everybody else, erecting a huge 12 foot fence all around it because come what may, on Christmas Day, we were going to play tennis. Christmas Day came and at dawn it was 129. There wasn't a lot we could do about Christmas dinner but we waited until nine o'clock at night when the sun had gone down a few hours. We then went out and played the first game of tennis.

T You mentioned the ant bed. What was Mt Leonard? What was the homestead actually made from?

P Um the homestead was the first original part of Mt Leonard, which was a rectangular shape, was made of ah pize. Ah what do you call it? Mud brick sort of things. Yes. And by the time we got there some years before, they had ex – doubled the house. This rectangle joined on to this rectangle which was all wooden. The hall ah from the kitchen to the bathroom way up the other end, was 54 feet long. That was some hall. When the Boulia dust storms came and the sand got underneath things, I always remember being told to sweep the sand out of the hall. It looked as if you were sweeping the Sahara away.

T And do you know who had built that of Mt Leonard?

P Ah no, but my brother um he – I can't think what he – he's got some information on who was the first person to build it there. I don't know, but it was certainly ah the Sinclair Scott & Company came along in 1919 I think and they – oh Sinclair, it was Sinclair, Scott his partner, was actually drowned on Mt Leonard and it's the only grave, proper grave – you know, headstones and

whatnot and it's still there. We had a look at it you know, a couple of years ago, and it was the only proper grave there was for hundreds of miles.

T Oh the reason I asked you who built the pise is again in Alice Duncan-Kemp's books. She talks about the Aboriginal people building the pies homestead of Mooranberrie and I wondered whether that's something that you would give credence to.

P No way. No way. For one thing, the Aboriginals were there for stockwork. Absolutely nothing else. There were no craftsmen or technicians and they never, never, never did their Aboriginal craftwork. It was with great reluctance that my father stood on the toes of old Joe and made him get in touch with some of his tribe because during the War um I dated God knows how many Americans and Lord knows how many Americans dated me, but every other one of them wanted a real true ah boomerang. Not the stuff that you buy in shops there. So I sent orders up there because my father's Mayor, and of course he'd get very reluctant blacks who could scarcely remember themselves how you fashioned proper boomerangs. Their boomerangs were to get their food. They weren't to enchant tourists.

T When you talked about the sand in the hall, it was about in the '30s that that guy, Radcliffe I think was his name, an Englishman came out round the Channel Country and described just terrible dust storms. People eating their dinners, kind of holding their plate under the table and that kind of thing. What do you remember about dust storms as a child?

P The dust – the famous dust storms out there were the Boulia dust storms. Now you've been to Boulia. They rolled in over the plains and kept going south, you know. We were south-west sort of things. And you could see – tell a Boulia dust storm when it was coming. It was just one huge black cloud filling the sky. The whole sky. And it came relentlessly on its way, and it enveloped the whole of the station. The blacks went back into their humpies and you took shelter wherever you could, but even so, you know, it blew under the doors and it was pretty awful and you choked Boulia dust. You ate Boulia dust. There's nothing for it except to lay still or sit still 'til it blew itself out.

T And how about floods? What do you remember about when the rivers were flowing?

P Ohhhh! That's really, really spectacular. When the Cooper is in full flood round Windorah, you know that's where the hub of the Cooper is out there, when the rains finally come and the Cooper floods out, it floods out for 60 miles in one direction and 100 miles in the other. Ever seen pictures of it? The Cooper in flood? Well it takes four days from that time at Windorah, to come down and fill up the creek at Mt Leonard. For four days you can hear it roaring. Roaring over in the distance there and you hear this roar getting louder and louder and louder and then it squeezed past Mt Leonard. Fortunately when Mt Leonard was built, it was built on a rise. The creek was quite a way down there. It was built on a rise. Even so, it came right up to the garden fence on one occasion, but it was the roar of the Cooper. And there was my father, who for four years before that probably, he'd say for Gawd sake, Hughie, send her down. And my father's agonised face, day after day, this raisin sun and the awful business of his having to go out and shoot cattle and horses and whatnot. We had ah for really heavy station work, we had ah two – I think we started off with more but we had two um Shetland ponies – you know, draught horses. Two draught horses. Dope and Tropic. And they were the love of my father's life 'cos he would put them ah together up to a big tumbrel, like they sent people off to the French Revolution in, a great high tumbrel, when the wood had to be brought in. They'd bring in half a forest of gum trees for winter firewood and all this sort of business, but Pop loved good old Dope. Ah that was his favourite, because Poppa was not tall. He was about five tennish – five eleven – something like that, but he played with Dope. He'd catch hold of Dope's ears and Dope would toss him up just as if he was a sack of flour or something or other, and Pop'd resist him and then Dope would just think so He played games with this draught horse. He had to shift them way, way from the station as the drought got worse and worse and worse, and finally, Whyree – Whyree was an out – had been an outstation but it was the last vestige of water during this dreadful drought so he shifted Dope and Tropic out there, but he went out whenever he could spare time. Ride out or ride – drive out. I was with him on this occasion when we

drove out and Dope was dead. He'd perished. And Poppa just put his head in his hands and he howled. His mate. And that was the first time I ever saw my father cry but as – I knew what he felt about this marvellous horse, sort of thing. Ah the – and it also showed me the cruelty, how a huge great draught horse like old Dope, died for want of water.

T So when the rains came then, what was the feeling around the flows?

P When the rains came, I can remember it, at the corner of the station – two corners of the station, were the water tanks. There were two there and two on that corner. Great big water tanks which had been dry for, I don't know, one or two years. When we knew that the storms were coming, there'd be lightning and thunder, dry lightning – dry thunder, we kids would get up on top of these water tanks and we'd do war dances because of the gorgeous noise. We made nearly as much noise as the thunder and lightning did. It didn't think - seem to occur to us to – we'd be struck dead or anything. Nothing like it. We made more noise than the thunder and lightning and when this great thing of water came down, up on the tanks we got and we made more noise than the Cooper made coming down. The excitement. But, when the Cooper came down, our creek – Browns Creek – because nobody calls it that but that's the creek beside Mt Leonard, when it came down it was horrifying Trish. One million grey rabbits. Solid, wall to wall, a million rabbits. Do you think I've ever eaten rabbit in my life since then? And everything that ever lived or crawled is floating down and of course the pelicans. Now the pelicans will stick it out longer than any other bird. They – when they're finally reduced to it, they would fly up and down Mt Leonard creek and of course all that the darling pelicans do is sour the water. We had to drink the same water and bath in the same water, and it was foul but it was all that was left. And all of a sudden the pelicans taking off. They can go somewhere else. They can go south. Go wherever they like. This great flock of pelicans. That's memories of flood.

T And so was there any kind of – I mean I heard what you said about the creepy crawlies and the dead rabbits and so on, but was it more tragedy or more – were you basically welcoming the flood waters? You know, how would your father have felt when flood came?

P He would think that um finally Hughie, up there, had answered all his prayers. Because that's how all the stations live. They live from flood to flood. It's the only thing that makes the grass grow. And it's the only thing that you know, the stock are safe for at least another year or so.

T And flowers? What do you remember of wild flowers in that country?

P Marvellous. And this can be borne out by the Shell Company of Australia. In 1927 I was seven years of age and the floods had ah been through, and practically short time later, all the sandhills right outside Mt Leonard's front door, all Daru Plain, 60 miles of this plain up to Mooraberrie, up to Mooraberrie whatnot, all covered in wild flowers. But it was the perfume that sent we children out of our brains. We'd never smelt a flower in our whole lives. There were none. And the heady smell of things. And, I know Poppa was away, but Mr Park, our bookkeeper – ah we had a Chevrolet at the time. The kind that you put curtains up, you know. Oh, you didn't need the curtains. He just drove on Daru Plain straight through the wildflowers. They came right over the top of the car. But we were speechless. Not only the colour, but it was the perfume of these things. So he drove for miles, straight through the wildflowers. Right. That was 1927. 1948, after War's finished. I've been to England and come back to live in Australia, and Christine – my daughter in May 1st 1948 and it was then that ah the Shell Company announced that they had made a film out in that country and it was all about the wild – Back of Beyond. It's the beginning of Back of Beyond. And they made this thing. I heard it on the radio I think, and I rang them up and said ah wildflowers in that. I saw wildflowers in 1927 and the Shell man he said, yes, he said and you saw the same ones. They'd been laying dormant there waiting for the right heat and I don't know what else, but he said they would be the ones you saw in 1927. Now, he said, well you must come and see our film. I said unfortunately I've got a week old daughter. A daughter. He said, that will not be a problem. We'll send a car for you. They sent a car for me. I went into the Shell Theatrette. I couldn't get over the fact it's the same ones I'd seen, but that sent our senses absolutely wild and introduced us to the fact that in other parts of Queensland, they had things called flower gardens and you could actually have perfume all day if you wanted to.

T Now your Mum was the one that – I want to talk about your mother now. She was the one that loved to strew violets on the flower – on the table at Mt Murchison. Tell me about your mother's life now and how she related to the land we've just been talking about.