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OH 593/5

Full transcript of an interview with

CHRISTOBEL MATTINGLEY

on 17 July, 24 July, & 21 August 2001

By Karen George

Recording available on CD

OH 593/5 **CHRISTOBEL MATTINGLEY**

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Sentences that were left unfinished in the normal manner of conversation are shown ending in three dashes, **- - -.**

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J.D. SOMERVILLE ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION, STATE LIBRARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA: INTERVIEW NO. OH 593/5

Series of interviews with author, Christobel Mattingley, recorded by Karen George for the State Library of South Australia's Honoured Women's Oral History Project Part 2. The interviews took place at Stonyfell in South Australia on 17th July, 24th July and 21st August 2001.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

This is an interview with Christobel Mattingley being recorded by Karen George for the State Library of South Australia's Honoured Women's Oral History Project. The interview is taking place on the 17th July 2001 at Stonyfell in South Australia.

First of all I'd like to thank you very much for becoming involved in the project and agreeing to an interview. I understand that you have some connection with the Honoured Women's Oral History Project.

Well, it was I who suggested it to Di Laidlaw at the lunch that she gave for the women who had received Order of Australia honours.

So it's fitting that you're having an interview, I think.

Yes!

So can we start, perhaps, with your full name and your maiden name?

I was born Christobel Rosemary Shepley.

What's your date of birth?

The 26th October 1931. I was born in the middle of the Depression, and my father, who was a civil engineer, was out of work and he became ill with TB. It was a very tough time for my parents.

What was your father's name?

Arthur Raymond Shepley.

And your Mum?

She was Isabelle Margaret Mary Provis, *née* Provis, and then Shepley.

Can you tell me a little bit about their background?

Yes. My father grew up in Leabrook. His father was some sort of a manager in Lions, the food firm, and they had a house in Bretwalder Street in Leabrook. And he

had two brothers, two twin brothers older than he, and a younger sister who had a disabled knee when she was growing up, so there was always a certain amount of pressure on the family because of her ill health. And my father won scholarships to Prince Alfred College, where he was *dux* of the school and Head Prefect and tennis champion and several other things, and then he went to University of Adelaide and graduated in Engineering, and won a scholarship overseas. But his family were not well enough situated to enable him to take that scholarship, which was perhaps just as well – he mightn't have met my mother, because he took a job with the railways and that led to him going up to Murray Bridge to work on the construction of the railway bridge, and at that stage my mother was living in Murray Bridge. Her parents had kept railway refreshment rooms and hotels in various parts. At that stage they were at Murray Bridge, and I think that's probably where they had the Bridgeport Hotel. I know they'd had the refreshment rooms, but they must have been at the Bridgeport Hotel then, and that was where my father met my mother, and they were married at Murray Bridge, 21st October in 1926.

Whereabouts were they when you were born?

We were living at Brighton then. They'd bought their own home in 39 King Street, Brighton, just opposite Sir Douglas Mawson's home, only a few doors from the sea, and I was born in a little cottage hospital in Jetty Road, Brighton, which subsequently became an old people's home, and recently when I drove down there I couldn't recognize it at all, so maybe it's been demolished and other things built on the site[1].

Are your first memories of Brighton, then, is that where you go?

Oh yes, very much so, of that little house on the sandhills and the beach, the jetty. So Brighton was very important. It was a lovely place to grow up, up there on the sandhills, and the emu running through from the Patersons' place, which was down in a dip in the sandhills among the pine trees, and they kept a wide variety of animals including a couple of kangaroos and an emu, which used to – which we had a very healthy respect for as children when we encountered it in the sandhills. And they had peacocks and the sound of peacocks is one of the sounds of my childhood.

What were your interests as a girl, growing up there?

Well, as a small girl there – I was only just eight when we left there – I loved the beach, I loved swimming and I loved all the freedom of the beach. And I loved the garden and my father kept canaries and zebra finches, and we had chooks and we children had bantams, and we had a large cat, Smoky, a big grey cat, because I was afraid of dogs at that stage, and so we had the cat, which always used to sit up on the gatepost at the front in King Street waiting for us when we came home. And that cat translated itself a bit into *The sack*. A lot of these things have translated themselves into stories. And –

That was a question I was going to ask, (laughter) so it's good that you – – –.

– well, we had a big cypress hedge along the front and then the house, because it was built on a sandhill, was higher above the hedge and with a lovely big, flat lawn that we used to play on, and a parapet along the roof of the garage, which was the lower level. And there were brick steps coming up from the front gate and stepped garden beds, and I can remember my father preparing one of those for me, it was my garden, and we planted linaria in it. He was a great gardener. At that stage he was beginning to go deaf and so the garden was always a great solace to him, and he used to grow shirley poppies, and they were where the fairies lived and sometimes left presents for my sister and me, and down the other side of the house there was the fence between us and the neighbour's tennis court, and that was covered with pink ivy geranium, the deep pink one, which I always remember being in flower. I suppose it wasn't always, but there was a sleepout along the side of our house and we all slept out in the sleepout and looked out onto this lovely bank of pink blossom. And along the base of that there was a little garden bed which had lachenalias in it, and there was just an army of little – well, they're sometimes called 'soldier flowers' – army of these things marching on the brick path, and I can remember being with my father digging up the bulbs at some stage, and the fascination of bulbs, and it remained with me ever since.

We used to go down to the beach to get shellgrit for the chooks, and Dad converted one of the fowlyards into a pen for my two rabbits and put wire netting all

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[1] It has become the Brighton Community Centre – CM.

over the floor, the sandy floor, which is where – again, where the beginnings of *Ginger* came from. And of course the bantams were part of *The sack* too. And up in the sandhills there used to be boxthorn trees, and we used to gather the boxthorn berries for the chooks – the chooks used to love boxthorn berries.

How many brothers and sisters?

There was – I was just going to tell you, there was a big pine tree with a swing in it and we used to have slides down the sandhills, just, you know, on our bottoms, and I can remember my father having a garden rubbish heap, which was an early compost heap, and I can always remember the fabulous things that grew in that when he planted it, you know, wonderful big pink snapdragons and glorious things. And we had a huge violet patch – seemed huge in those days. I guess it was, would have been at least half the size of this room.

I only had one sister. She was three years and six days older than I am so we always had to share a birthday and hers came first, and it used to be always the time of the school picnic. We went to a little school called Hopetoun, which was in the Anglican Church Hall at St Jude's, Brighton, and the Misses Fleming ran that. They were remarkable women.

Tell me about them.

They were maiden ladies who drove a T-model Ford, which the big boys had to tie up the doors of when they got in, before they went home. And looking back on it I can see they really were educators and they were very much in advance of their time. I mean, the things they did have been sort of since introduced as the new educational measures, you know. Family grouping and individual progression, that's what it was all about, and – – –.

Did they encourage you in writing at all at that stage, or was that something that came later?

No. I just loved words, I was fascinated by words because I was a very shy child – and my sister was very extrovert and I was very shy – so words, reading, words were very important to me, but not spoken words. Though we used to play charades, we used to love charades, and we used to play a lot of word games on pencil and paper, but no, they just encouraged each child. Because I was so shy and unable to contend

with the rough and tumble – I mean, it was only a small school and the Brighton public school was next door and I used to be terrified, you know, it seemed an *enormous* place to me, and dauntingly full of people in the school yard. I suppose there were only about sixty of us, but even so that was too much for me. I was five and a half when I started school, I started in May. And (pause) because there weren't enough chairs in the hall some children had to sit on the floor, and for some reason this seemed to me the height of ignominy, and when my mother found out I didn't want to go to school, this was why, because I couldn't score in the rush to get a chair. She consulted with the Misses Fleming, and they wisely allocated me a chair. When school was over each afternoon one of the big boys had to carry Christobel's chair and put it on the sack of bran in the corner, which was used for cleaning the floor for dances. (laughs) Woe betide any child who took Christobel's chair! And after that I was all right – and after that I suppose I sat on the floor with the best of them, I don't know. (laughter)

You said you loved words. Do you remember what books and things were important to you then, as a girl?

Well, in those days, my sister – again, these ladies were very advanced – my sister was learning French and it was a book about mice, and so I remember this book vividly, and I was so envious of this wonderful book with its pictures of mice and the *petits souris*. (laughs) So there was that, and I also – we had all of Dad's books and he had Latin books and German books in old Gothic script and all that, and my mother had never thrown out any of her books either, so there was a wealth of books. And Dad used to read us stories at night, and Mum's mother, my grandmother, had made us a big scrapbook out of all sorts of pictures out of magazines and scraps, you know, those, which my sister and I used to make up our own stories about, all these pictures. I can still see some of those pictures, you know. It was a great big ledger book, I suppose they'd used it in one of their businesses, and it was filled up with all these wonderful pictures.

What kinds of things?

Oh, I can remember the three little birds from Aeroplane Jelly or something, used to tweet, tweet, tweet, or Bird's custard, I suppose it was. And the pretty scraps, you know, of angels and flowers and all these things, and there were travel pictures of

faraway places and all sorts of things, pictures of cats and dogs and – – –. And then later on that progressed to another phase when we went to live in Sydney, we used to get catalogues from David Jones and Farmer's, and my sister and I used to play – spend hours on those catalogues. Hour by hour we'd take a page in turn, so this was her page and she'd choose what she wanted out of that page, and then it would be my page and I always seemed to get the corsets or the brassieres or something (laughter) – a bit hard to make a story out of them!

What was your sister's name?

Margaret.

You mentioned your father was unemployed when you were born. Can you tell me a little bit about that and how that perhaps impacted on the family when you were a girl?

Well, I was not aware, of course – my parents were very good parents and, although they were really struggling, as I look back and know now, that never affected us as children, you know. There was so much warmth and so much love and we were wanted children. I was – and I hope this tape will be on restricted access, because I was one of twins, I found out much, much later in life, and my twin sister died at birth, and it was a very, very long time before I found all that out and sorted the story out. But I could see now how that shaped me as a writer, and I can see why it probably bonded me very deeply with my mother. My sister turned out to be – well, in later years, revealed that she'd been jealous of me and the bond I seemed to have with my mother, and she always claimed that Dad was her special thing. I always thought I had an equal relationship with everybody. I loved my father deeply and learned a lot from him. But no, Mum in latter years was the most frugal person. I mean, all the time I knew her she was the most frugal person. She never threw anything out. She was a hoarder and a recycler long before recycling became a fashionable word. I mean, she'd unpick clothes and remake them and unpick jumpers and reknit them and all this stuff. Well, of course, a lot of that carried on into the War years when things weren't available anyway, so I mean many were the clothes that I had that were unravelled from something else or unpicked from something else, and they were always lovely because she had a flair for that sort of thing.

But her mother used to send down baskets of food from the country, a big basket of – hamper came down each week, and Mum reckoned they lived on that – that, and six penn'orth of soup vegetables and a shank of mutton. And of course we had the chooks. But milk must have been pretty scarce when Mum was having me and so on, and when I was very small – one or something – all my teeth dropped out and I didn't have any teeth until I was eight or so. I had a sort of gappy smile, which probably compounded my shyness, I don't know. But Mum tells the story – she's dead now – but she used to tell a story – that was her story; I don't remember it at all – but she found me crouching in the hedge one day, and she said, 'What are you doing?' And I said, 'I'm pretending we're poor.' And Mum said, 'Well, you don't have to pretend, we are.' (laughs) But I don't remember any of that, that's one of Mum's stories. But I mean I used to do a lot of pretend games and imagining games, and the sandhills were wonderful for that and the beach was wonderful for that. And we used to have one of those old bell tents, green and white striped bell tents, and of course in those days they were woollen bathers and we had rubber sandshoes, rubber shoes – bathing shoes. I was always red, my sister was blue. We wore them in swimming, and oh, we'd be down at the beach every day in the summer and so would all the friends and relations of my parents. Sometimes Mum used to feed nineteen people on Sundays, and sometimes – I don't remember this either – but they used to, when they got a car, they'd drive into the Hills on a hot Sunday (laughs) to get away from all the people who'd come invading!

Did they all live, the family, in the area – – –?

No. They all – the grandparents lived up here at Leabrook, and my mother's parents were down at Victor Harbor by that time. And there were aunts and uncles, and Mum was the oldest of her family, oldest of a family of eight – or one of the children died. She actually brought up her youngest sibling – and so our home was always their home for the whole of her family, so they used to come and go and bring their friends and all that.

You mentioned the twin that you think had an influence on your writing – I wondered what sorts of ways do you see that that influenced you?

Oh, because I always felt there was something missing in my life, I always felt I was reaching out for something, somebody, I didn't know. And of course originally I

was shy and didn't find it easy to talk and communicate in a spoken way, I guess writing filled that need with me and it was something I found I could do, and I found the magic of words and the power of words, and so that became something that was very important to me, and it was a way of reaching out. But it wasn't until we were having our third child and I was very large, and my sister said to me, 'Oh, you're probably having twins,' and I laughed. And then she said, 'Don't laugh, you were a twin yourself.' Of course I know now that twins miss a generation generally, but there were other sets of twins in the family, on both sides.

What impact – sorry.

Oh, that was when I started to try to find out, looking in the Births, Deaths and – Registrar and all that stuff.

Do you remember the first sorts of things you started to write?

Oh yes, vividly.

What did you write?

Well, the first thing I really remember writing was when we moved to Sydney. My father was an engineer and we went to Sydney for a new job for him. He first – when I was growing up he worked at Noyes Brothers, an engineering firm in Adelaide, in Pirie Street, and sometimes we used to go in there on Friday afternoons and then go to the Market on the way home, and I can remember driving home snuggled up under the rug with a big tin of boiled lollies they used to get, which were the most beautiful colours and patterns inside them, and the smell of celery and all those things (laughs) in the car. Anyway, we went to Sydney when I was just eight, and it was the beginning of the War, and it was very hard to get into any schools, or our parents wanted to send us to a church school. It was hard to get a house, it was hard to get everything, and we had no relations or friends or anything. And the estate agent at Wahroonga – we had to live on the North Shore line because Dad's job was up on the Hawkesbury River and transport was always difficult and it was a matter of being able to catch a train if he had to – so there was an estate agent at Wahroonga who found the house we did live in, rent. And he said to my mother, 'Look, I'll have a word to Sir Martin McIlrath, he might be able to get your daughters into PLC. Well, Sir Martin McIlrath was the owner of a big grocery chain

in Sydney at that time and he was one of the two major benefactors of Presbyterian Ladies' College, as it was then, at Pymble – now Pymble Ladies' College – and he – I don't know, places were found for my sister and me, so we started there in 1940. I started in Year Four and was the youngest in the class by a year, and I stayed that way all through my school life. I was always one year younger than everybody else. So yes, and I remember the first story I ever wrote there was a homesick story about the children next door and playing in the sandhills.

What was it like for you to change schools from the tiny school, I guess, at Brighton to another all-girls' school?

Yes. In some ways it was a bit of a shock to the system, it was such a big school and there were over six hundred girls there then, but the junior school was in a separate building in a separate part of the grounds, and so on, and my sister was in Grade Six so we were not totally split up when we first began there, and I soon made some good friends there – still my friends – and one of them was my bridesmaid, and we're still in touch. I'm still in touch with a lot of those – well, women now, but girls I grew up with. So I had four and a half very happy years there. Four and a half.

Do you think there are advantages or disadvantages to going to an all-girls' school?

Well, I ended up at co-ed school in Tasmania, so I started at co-ed school and I ended up at one. At that stage I don't see that there were – for me at that stage it was fine, but I'm glad I ended up at co-ed school. I think there's a lot to be said for co-ed schools, but there are some things to be said for one-sex schools I know, too, and each has its – again, it depends a lot on a child, but I had no brothers so for me it was good to go to a co-ed school.

Can you talk perhaps a little bit more about the writing? I remember when I first met you you were talking about writing poetry in the back of your mother's books or something.

That's right. Mum – well, it was the wartime, and paper was one of the things that was short, scarce, you know, unobtainable, and so very early I started writing poetry when I was probably about nine, and that was the year I was in Grade Five and I had a very, very good teacher. *Very* strict. Miss Dossiter, she was a very strict woman

and very stern, and we were all rather in awe of her. But she was, looking back, she was a very good teacher and she introduced me to a lot of things which I'm very grateful – she was very insistent that I improve my handwriting. She said it let down the rest of my work, which I thought was, you know, rather hard. She used to call me in before school to do extra writing while the others were out playing. Didn't appreciate that then, but I do now. And she introduced us to nature study in a very intelligent way. She introduced us to the word 'ecology' which, in 1941, was a very unusual word. And that school had huge grounds, and she used to take us out looking, putting ecology into practice, helping us to study and understand about what we were seeing. So I'm very grateful to her; that really gave me a firm foundation for my nature study and love of nature which has always been with me.

And my father built on that in that year when I was in Grade Five, the year I would have turned – I would have turned ten at the end of that year, and that was the year my father gave me *What bird is that?* for my birthday. I remember the Neville Cayley book. I remember having seen it and yearned for it, and my sister kept saying, 'Don't be silly, don't be silly, Dad can't afford that. You know they can't afford that.' It was twelve-and-sixpence. And so when my birthday came Dad had got it for me and written in it, and then that Christmas he gave me another book I yearned for which was Thistle Harris's *Wildflowers of Australia*. They were the two major reference works at that stage in Australian nature study. And that was eight-and-sixpence. And he wrote in it, 'A reward for a good year's work.'

And then the other thing they did was to subscribe to the nature magazine *Wild life* which was published in Melbourne by *The Sun*, I think, or *The Argus* – one of those big papers which were very important at that time, and it had an editor called Crosbie Morrison who was a very well-known naturalist, and so I had the joy of anticipating the arrival of this magazine every month, and it had children's pages, and that was where I sent my first pieces, written about things I observed walking home from school or out in the bush at the weekend, when Dad used to take me out into the bush around Wahroonga. And then I used to send pieces off to the children's page of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and they got published, too.

What kinds of things did you send there?

Well, again, a lot of them would have been sort of natural history stories. My first poems didn't get published in the school magazine at PLC, and that was a great blow. I can remember waiting, you know, the school magazine only came out once a year and because it was wartime and rationing and all the rest of it only one copy per family, so of course my sister got it, being older. So I had to sort of look over the shoulders of other kids in my class who actually got a copy and, you know, wait to see. I didn't ask anybody if I could see if my things was in, (laughs) I just (whispering) waited, and of course it wasn't – – –. So by this time I'd found my mother's recipe book which had a lot of blank pages in the back, and I've got that recipe book somewhere, I found it when I moved – clearing out her house. Wonder what I've done with it? It was, as they were in those days, a bit like an autograph book which may be why I've got such a passion for autograph books, but it had multi-coloured pages, you know, segments of pink and yellow and green, blue. And people used to write their recipes in for you, you know, you'd find different handwritings where Auntie Dorrie had written in or Grandma, you know, their pet recipe. But at the back it was blank because she hadn't got that far, and that was where I used to write my poems. Pink for almond blossom and blue for the sea, and orange for the lion poem I wrote, and (laughs) all those things.

That love of nature, other than the teacher you were talking about, where do you think that stemmed from?

Well, my father was a very patient, observant man, incredibly observant man. I mean, that was one of the side factors of increasing hearing loss, I think. You have to learn to use your eyes. And he didn't try to stifle it in any way, you know, he encouraged me by buying the books and the magazines and taking me out for walks. And we also used to go to the beach a lot at Sydney with a precious bit of ration petrol, they'd save it up and we'd go to have picnics at Avalon. Avalon was our favourite beach – it was still quite wild in those days, not very settled. And we used to have holidays at Newport, which again was a beach that hadn't got suburban, and there were wonderful bush tracks all around there with koalas in them and orchids – wonderful bush orchids, I can remember those. I remember being very angry with my sister for picking some, and I would have left them there. But that comes out in *Show and tell*. But she took them home and did some lovely paintings of them

because she had a great artistic gift. So my mother still had that picture of the orchids that Margaret had done. So it was innate, I suppose, and my father did foster it. My mother gave me – hopefully kept giving me books of *101 things a girl can make and do*. (laughter) And then a second book of *101 things* – – –. But my aptitude wasn't that way. I would try, but I was never as good as my sister at that. I used to say my sister's brains were in her fingers, because she didn't have any great academic brilliance, whereas mine was more academic and hers was more practical. My mother was immensely practical, very good cook and a very good dressmaker and sewer and all those things. But I liked to do 'fancywork', as it was called in those days, and I did various bits of embroidery, which I enjoyed doing because they were flowers or birds or things like that. And I used to like cooking – still do – and that sort of thing. But for making things and for drawing and painting I had nothing like the skill of my sister, the talent that she had.

You mentioned that, even at that early stage, you had an interest in Aboriginal culture – – –.

Yes, I did, yes.

Tell me about that, where that came from.

Well, I didn't know it at the time but I was born very near to the Tjilbruke Dreaming Trail here at Brighton, and the beaches we used to go to, we went to Port Willunga from time to time because I had a – my cousins from my father's side had grandparents who lived at Port Willunga and kept the little post office there, and so sometimes my sister and I would go down with our cousins and stay down there at their grandparents, which is why I have a deep bond with Port Willunga and still go to Port Willunga – we've got a house there now we never get to often enough. And then those clifftops that are all covered with houses now, you know, they just had sheep and billy buttons and bluebells, and we used to take boiled eggs and have picnics up on the clifftops. Nobody ever worried about us falling off the cliffs. I mean, there were no roads or anything. And that was where we got swooped by the magpies along the road back to Aldinga, which was the beginning of *Windmill at Magpie Creek*, with my cousins. But – sorry, I lost the track of what you asked me and went off on my own.

About your connection with Aboriginal culture – – –.

Oh yes, so always I was treading Aboriginal ground that was still unbuilt on, still uncovered by concrete and still uncovered by bitumen and tar and bricks and mortar. But it was never talked about – – –. (end of tape)

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A: TAPE 1 SIDE B

And that was where we got swooped by the magpies along the road back to Aldinga, which was the beginning of *Windmill at Magpie Creek*, with my cousins. But – sorry, I lost the track of what you asked me and went off on my own.

About your connection with Aboriginal culture – – –.

Oh yes, so always I was treading Aboriginal ground that was still unbuilt on, still uncovered by concrete and still uncovered by bitumen and tar and bricks and mortar. But it was never talked about because people didn't talk about Aboriginal issues in those days, in the 1930s. They hardly knew, they weren't aware that people were shut away in missions, compounds, and were not allowed out and, you know, it just wasn't something that was discussed. When we went to Sydney to live, that was when my awareness started to grow in several ways. In school holidays my mother would always take us down to Sydney on the train to get a haircut or buy a new blouse at Farmer's or shoes or something, I suppose, and the treat after having done all that was – you know, we were each allowed a treat. And mine was either to go to the Museum, the Australian Museum, which was a magnificent museum, or else to go to Tyrrell's Bookshop, which was a *big* bookshop with a big second hand section near Wynyard Station, or else to go to Dymock's, which was just along George Street. And I used to save up my pocket money all through the term, I used to get threepence a week pocket money, my sister got sixpence, and I used to save that up to spend in Sydney at a bookshop. And I've still got the books I bought then. You could buy a book for one-and-threepence then. That was five weeks' pocket money, (laughs) or two-and-sixpence, that was ten weeks', that was the whole term. And because it was wartime a lot of those books were paper backed. I've got an Alec Chisholm book, *Mateship with birds*[2]. The cover's fallen off, I've read it so often,

[2] Alec H. Chisholm, *Mateship with birds* (Whitcombe and Tombs, Melbourne, 1922).

but I bought that for one-and-threepence on the bargain table in the basement of Farmer's, I suppose it was, it might have been David Jones.

And I bought quite a lot of books at the Australian Museum bookshop, and I've still got those, and most of those were – well, they all were – no, not – several of them were about Aboriginal culture. Some were Charles Barrett's books of travels in Australia, nature travels, with photographs; but the one that was incredibly important to me was a vocabulary, an Aboriginal vocabulary, a little slim, narrow book with a grey cover and there was a bit of line drawing on the front, which was a vocabulary of Aboriginal words from all over New South Wales. They hadn't been put into language groups or anything, you know, it was just overall. And I used to love that book, I used to read it and read it and read it, because the words were *so* euphonious. And of course I lived in an area where there were still a lot of Aboriginal names like Wahroonga and Waitara and Warrawee and Turramurra, Killara, you know. Those were the train stations that we used to go past that I loved, and going up to Peats' Ferry we went through places like Berowra and other names, and there was a conservation park called Muogamarra, which I wrote my first story about, which was never published, and of course up on the Hawkesbury there are big sandstone art galleries, rock carvings, and some of them are right near the site of my father's bridge, and they put little fences around them to try to protect them. I can remember looking at these things and then going off into a little sandstone cave that overlooked the site of the bridgeworks, this lovely golden sandstone looking down over the river, sitting there pretending I was Aboriginal. I was always trying bush foods, you know, I'd eat bits of this and bits of that, and one of my Aboriginal friends, when I told her about that once, when I was doing *Survival*, she looked at me, she said, 'Christobel, you *were* Aboriginal.'

But as for people, you know, they were still invisible. The language, the names were there and the carvings, some of the carvings were still there – there was a stingray, I remember it – but once again, there wasn't much petrol. All the expeditions we made were sort of carefully planned. And we went down to La Perouse in Botany Bay and of course La Perouse was the big Aboriginal mission in Sydney, a big settlement there, and we saw these Aboriginal people walking along the road looking so sad and so dispirited, and nobody said anything about who they

were or why they were there. Probably my parents didn't even know, you see, or why they looked so sad. But I just have a memory of the sadness of those people.

But I just loved the language. And I was so lucky, because it was a boarding school and the headmistress, the Principal, Miss Knox, had this habit of reading out all the boarders' travel arrangements two days before the end of term. And we'd sit there – oh, I suppose – it seemed like hours! – in assembly while she read out – and it had a big boarding school, there must have been a couple of hundred girls, you see – she'd read out all their travelling arrangements as to where they caught the train to and first class sleeper or second class seat or whatever it was (laughs) for such-and-such, and then often they'd have to change and get another train to somewhere else, and so many of those names were these beautiful Aboriginal names. And they used to just roll over me, and the other kids used to be playing noughts and crosses and ..... around you, but I'd just sit there spellbound listening to these words. I loved them, I just loved them.

And when we went to Tasmania I was – oh, I must have been thirteen then, I was in second year, the beginning of second year, and we left at about March, because Dad had this – he'd finished the bridge and he'd got this job in Tasmania, Chief Civil Engineer at the Hydroelectric Commission. And it was still wartime – it was 1945, it was still wartime – and we drove, we were driving down to Melbourne to catch the ferry to Tasmania, and my mother had a miscarriage on the way and she had to get left behind in Albury. At the time, with all the stress and constraints of war, the hospital was very short-staffed and over-full and my mother was put in the morgue. She had a miscarriage and then she was put in the morgue – to be by herself, you see? We went and saw her there before we hit the road again and went on. She got left behind and we went on, down to Melbourne where an aunt, my godmother, one of Mum's sisters – who was in the Army by then, but she had leave and she came and met us – – –. We stayed at the Victoria Palace, which is quite a decent sort of place now but in the wartime it was very rundown and terrifically used – overused – and I can remember there was torn-up newspaper in the toilets, you know, for toilet paper, and there were actually fleas in the bed. (laughter)

What do you think you understood about the War, as a girl?

Oh, quite a lot, because it was taken very seriously, of course. My father wasn't called up because he was deaf, he was deaf enough not to qualify. But my mother had two sisters who were – one was an Army Sister and the other was an AWAS, and they used to come and go from our place on their leave. One was – oh, they were both up at New Guinea, so we sort of knew all about what was going on in New Guinea, or some of it – at any rate, we were aware of it. And of course the War came very close to Sydney and my father's bridge, the Japanese Midget submarines penetrated the Hawkesbury, and my father's bridge was threatened. So we were terribly aware of that.

I can remember my mother had booked for us to have a holiday at Manly, right on the seafront there, and we'd gone down and we'd looked at the place and we were all excited, and I'd saved up seven-and-sixpence and worked out how I was going to spend it on those Snow Queen ice cream things that were all – I mean, you get them everywhere now, but they were special, you only got them at Manly in those days. I worked out how long seven-and-sixpence (laughs) was going to last on Snow Queens. Anyway, and then suddenly there was Pearl Harbor – bang! – and that was the end of that. No way was anybody going to have a beach holiday at Manly.

And then, of course, the Japanese submarines tried to get into Sydney Harbour and then they tried to penetrate the Hawkesbury. And Dad's bridge was very strategic, because there was only a railway bridge at that stage, so he was building the road bridge which was needed for transporting the troops north. There was a ferry, the Peats' Ferry – the Peat brothers actually ran these ferries, you see, that's why they were called Peats' Ferries. It wasn't P-E-T-E, it was P-E-A-T, that was their surname. So the queues for the ferries used to bank up – well, I don't know about for miles, but for dozens and dozens and probably hundreds of cars, right back up the road at busy times and times like holidays and Christmas and Easter and weekends and that sort of thing, you know, it took a long time to get across the Hawkesbury in a car. So for troop movements, you know, it was quite critical and they all had to go by rail, I suppose, to get across the river before dispersing further up. So it was a high priority job.

So my parents listened to the news, you know, the wireless, the radio was very important, and we kids on the way home from school, we had to catch the train from Pymble up to Wahroonga and that was Pymble, Turramurra, Warrawee, Wahroonga,

there were only a few stations. But we kids used to scarper through the carriage, we were only supposed to be in one carriage, but anyway we'd scarper on that to see if anybody had left a newspaper, and we'd glorm onto that – and because they were evening newspapers of course they were always a bit more spectacular than the *Sydney Morning Herald.* [section deleted] So we were aware of it, and the War was still on when we went to Tasmania.

And in fact when I went to school there there weren't enough coupons – clothes were rationed, all sorts of things were rationed – we didn't have enough coupons for me to get a school uniform of the school that I went to, and PLC had had the Black Watch Tartan, which I was very proud of, loved, and I went to this school, Fahan, in Hobart which had a brown uniform. And brown was my colour, I used to wear a lot of brown, my mother put me in brown a lot. So she got me a brown tunic that I used to wear the navy blue blazer of the Black Watch outfit over the top. Anyway, I was desperately unhappy at that school. Dad had originally tried to get me into The Friends' School, but they had said they really couldn't squeeze another student in, so Dad had put me into this girls' school, which again was run by two maiden ladies – they weren't sisters, Miss Travers and Miss Morphett – and again they were educationists, you know, they really were educators. But it was in an old house, a rundown old house, with sort of seedy grounds and everything was shabby and didn't work, and the laboratory was in an old sort of bedroom, and it wasn't very PLC at Pymble. I just couldn't believe this place. And the girls were very cliquey, and I was an outsider, and I was much in advance of where they were, and they used to pinch my books and copy my stuff. And I got unhappier and unhappier there, and so in the end fortunately my parents realised it wasn't the place for me to be, so after a term and a half Dad went back to The Friends' School and spoke to the Principal, Bill Oats, and said could they possibly take me and they did. So I had one term of that last year in 1945 there, and then '46 and '47. Is that right? Yes, I think it must be[3].

Did you have ideas at that stage what you wanted to do when you left school?

[3] It is – CM.

I certainly didn't know I wanted to be a writer. I just wrote. You didn't know about people being writers, you know. There were books that you read, but you didn't necessarily connect them with people writing them. There's much more focus on that now, and it's much more whipped up about meeting authors and signing books and author sessions and all this. There was none of that in those days. I mean, I admired Neville Caley enormously and the nature writers that I read, and I knew they were real people, but I never met any of them or even aspired to, I suppose. But there weren't a great many opportunities in those days in Tasmania. You either became a teacher or a nurse or a librarian if you aspired to have a profession. And my father envisaged me as a very good secretary. But my mother had had to leave school before she finished her schooling, to go home to look after her sick mother and bring up the youngest, the baby, and the rest, and she had a very good singing voice and musical talent. And she always felt that that was the way she could have gone, and I think she could have been very good in light opera and those sorts of things. She always loved the *Mikado* and she did a lot of Gilbert and Sullivan and that sort of thing when we were growing up, and used to act in – she used to act in the Hobart Repertory Theatre and so on. So she wasn't about to see me stuck in a secretary's job. Dad said, 'Private secretaries are right hand to the – – –,' all this. No, Mum wanted me to have something of my own, you see, so I had a flair for languages and I won several scholarships to the university, and although I was only just sixteen and three months they bent the rules and let me in.

And that was where I met David. (laughs) He'd just come back from the War, and had been held up in his studies because of the terrible injuries and the ill health he'd had as a result of his 'plane being shot up over Germany. So he was only one year ahead of me at university, you see, and I met him at the Glebe Theatre Players – that was the drama club at the university – on the first night I went to – the first meeting for the year, and there he was. He was the Secretary, sitting up on the platform taking the minutes in a Savile Row suit and a Savile Row tie. He'd been in England and, as an officer in the Air Force, they used to get their clothes made at Saville Row – uniforms, and their clothes. Which was a bit dazzling. (laughs) He had a car.

So you mentioned that at university you got involved in some community service type things, World Student Relief, was it? Can you tell me about that?

Yes, World Student Relief. Well, that was quite big in those days. It was sort of an offshoot of Student Christian Movement, I think it was. It was sort of parallel with that. I never belonged to SCM – lots of my friends did, but I – I don't know. David did and lots of people did, but I didn't become a part of that for reasons I don't – – –. Ah well, and I guess in a way I've always been a bit of a loner, I'm not a loner now, but (pause) – well, in some ways I am. But yes, so because everybody else was doing it I didn't, I think it was as simple as that, really. (laughter)

Have Christian principles been a part of your upbringing – – –?

Oh yes, yes, Mum always had a deep faith, a real faith, and as a child I was taken to church or went to church at St Jude's, Brighton. I didn't much like Sunday School. Again, it was part of the sort of institutional, organised thing where I – – –. I can remember a big sandpit we had there and we used to put little animals and make Bible scenes in the sandpit. But I didn't feel – well, again, I really was never very comfortable in a large number of people at that stage. But I used to love that little church. It had a blue ceiling with stars on it, gold or silver, but I used to love it. It's now only the chapel at the big St Jude's. But I loved that little church, I really loved that little church. And then when we went to Wahroonga we used to sing in the choir at St Andrew's, Wahroonga, my sister and I, we used to go to choir practice and sing on Sundays. And then when we went to Hobart there was a little Anglican church just at the bottom of the road where we lived in Sandy Bay. We lived in Red Chapel Avenue, and the chapel was a dear little red brick church right at the bottom, perched on the cliff overlooking Sandy Bay. And I always took myself to church. Parents – Dad wasn't a churchgoer, but his mother had been very devout and I loved that grandma. She was the deaf one. And she gave me her little prayer book, and I always aspired to have a prayer book like that. It was brown, kid leather, and it was so worn, it was just so worn it was amazing. I used to love that little prayer book and I used to read it. I couldn't read it now, the print was so tiny. And there was a Bible, and the Bible that had belonged to Dad, and it had pictures and colour pictures and so on. I used to love those, I used to try to – I used to read them, it was all King James, but I used to read them and in that Year Five, that Grade Five I was in, the teacher used to read us Bible stories from a book called *The precious gift*, and it was a retelling of Bible stories by Theodora Wilson-Wilson, and I loved that book so

much that my parents got me that and it's still out there in my study. And so, you know, I loved the stories of people like Esther and Ruth – *loved* those stories – and Miriam and, you know.

And when I was growing up in Sydney my father made me a bookcase. He was not at all handy – no, he could do wonderful mathematical calculations (laughs) in his head, but doing things with his hands wasn't his scene either – but it was a great labour of love out in the garage at night, so I wasn't supposed to know that he was making me this bookcase, because books were so important to me and that's what I wanted. And he made this bookcase. And the top shelf of it was, you know, it only had a backing a couple of inches high and so it was just a sort of open shelf, and in a way that was my little altar. I used to put little things that I'd found, feathers, beautiful things – oh, look, there goes a rosella into the tree – and beautiful stones and bits of bark and that was my little sort of altar of precious things. And I really had a sense that they were God's Creation. And I had this little prayerbook of my grandmother's and the old little black Bible with its pictures. So it did mean a lot to me, always did mean a lot. I always had a sense of the Creator, God the Creator, and God the Holy Spirit.

Taking you back to the uni, you say you didn't get involved in the Christian Student Movement but you did get involved in this World Student Relief.

World Student Relief, sorry, yes, you asked about that.

That's okay.

Yes, that really appealed, I suppose. I guess I've always had a sort of – well, The Friends' School was very good. One of the things about Quakers, you know, is that they encourage the spirit of service – not in a heavy-handed way, but it's there. And people who've met me much later in life have asked if I'm a Quaker. So I guess I was so moved by the effects of war on people and already so aware of how privileged I am and was, compared with so many people – most people, and the stories of students struggling in terrible conditions in war-torn and war-ravaged countries, and having lost families and all that sort of thing, it really appealed to me. And I did my first radio broadcast for World Student Relief, I can remember it.

What was that about, do you remember?

Well, it was about World Student Relief and trying to interest people into supporting it. So I would have done that when I was about – well, I was sixteen when I went to university, I probably did it when I was about seventeen. And I was heavily involved in that for all the time for three years I was at university.

That spirit of service that you're talking about, was that something that your parents had had, or was that – – –?

Yes, it was, looking back on it. Especially my mother. All during the War she used to work for the Red Cross and she used to go and cook at hostels (sound of magpie call) that were set up for servicemen to come for their R&R, and sometimes we used to go with her –

Magpie.

– on – oh, he wants that bit of string for his nest. That had a birdseed thing – yes, so Mum, I can still remember her uniform. She had this blue Cesarine [overall] that she used to launder up every time that she needed to go to wear to cook in, and she'd go on Sunday afternoons, after lunch. She'd catch the train and go down to Sydney to this place and cook, cook, cook for all these fellows on leave, and homesick and wanting some – – –.

And also she used to work for the Comforts Fund and we used to go, in the holidays we'd go with her into the Comforts Fund office where they'd pack parcels of comforts, hand-knitted socks and packets of cigarettes and packets of peppermints and all these things. They all had to be packed up and sewn up and labelled. And also during the War – well, it was more after the War when we were in Hobart – I got some penfriends. And there was a girl called Rita in England, and we were so shocked at what the English people had gone through, the deprivation they'd gone through and the rationing and so on, Mum used to do these big parcels of food to go off to England, and they had to be very carefully done. And I think they were supposed to be seven – you could do seven pounds or eleven pounds, I think it was – and they all had to be sewn up in canvas or calico. It was a big job. And you had to weigh them just so, you know, so if you'd sewn this whole thing up and you got down to the Post Office and it was one ounce over seven pounds, you know, you had to take it home and take out a few spoonfuls of sugar, you know, unstitch the whole thing and take out the sugar or dried apricots or whatever it was you were sending.

And she used to embed eggs – because eggs were like hens' teeth over there! – and there was a way you could send fresh eggs, you know, which were just treasure. You'd get a tin with a lid like a Milo tin or something, and you'd pour dripping into it, and you'd embed an egg in the dripping and then you'd pour more dripping over that so it was covered, and then you'd put another egg in. You might be able to get three eggs in a dripping tin. And now that was like *gold* in England. The dripping was, and so were the eggs. And the sugar, and the dried fruits, and sometimes, you know, something like a cake, a fruit cake or something like that. So Mum did all that sort of thing. Yes, she was very generous.

And she used to – I can remember here in Adelaide when we lived at Brighton, she used to work for Kuitpo. That was a funny word in my childhood. Mum was going off to work for Kuitpo – it was a funny word, wasn't it? I mean, you think how it's spelt. Anyway, the Kuitpo Colony, Mum used to work for, that were those alcoholics and people. And also I can remember, you know, they used to have balls which I suppose were fundraisers, and the ladies used to do the catering and do the flowers. One of the things they used to do was colour arum lilies, and they'd get these buckets of arum lilies and they'd all be painted different colours.

So she was always – and all through the years in Sydney she was always working for charities, Red Cross and Comforts Fund and this Air Force House place.

Do you think it was then a natural progression for you to start doing that kind of thing, or – – –?

Well, that church we went to, St Andrew's, there was a little thing making things for the mission I used to go to on Saturday afternoons, making singlets out of old socks. Poor little babies out in the tropics. (laughter) But the things we used to – making rugs, of course, at school, we used to make rugs out of knitted squares, all that sort of stuff. And we were always, at PLC Pymble, we were encouraged, you know, there was a weekly collection, and we were encouraged to help others less fortunate, and that went on at Friends' and, you know, it always was an awareness that not everyone has it as good as we do.

I'll just stop you there – we're about to run out of tape.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B: TAPE 2 SIDE A

This is the second tape of an interview with Christobel Mattingley being recorded by Karen George for the State Library of South Australia's Honoured Women's Oral History Project. The interview is taking place on the 17th July 2001 at Stonyfell in South Australia.

So we were talking a little bit about your university time and your involvement with World Student Relief. You said that you were the first person to do Honours in German, I think.

I was, at the University of Tasmania – or certainly the first person to do German for ten years, because with the intervening war German was not a subject that was greatly in favour. Again, because I didn't want to be one of the herd, French had been the dominant foreign language there at that time for a long time, and the professor – Professor LA Triebel, was actually – came from Alsace-Lorraine, so he had French and German, but he considered himself French. And after a year of doing French – oh, I did German too, in first year, but it hadn't been offered after first year, and I think I was the only person doing it then, I don't think there was any – – –. We had a lecturer called Derek van Abbé, who came from England, he came from Cambridge. He actually went back to Cambridge, and after that we had – or I had – a German woman. She must have been a German Jew, looking back on it, Erika Wolff, her name was. And she used to have the most *appalling* handwriting, and she had written out all her notes, and I used to sit there – there was only me and her, sitting across the table – and she'd just rattle off all this stuff at a huge rate. (laughs) But I loved German, I loved the Romantics, and I loved the poetry. I loved the German poetry – it really sang for me, and I really wanted to do it. And everybody else was doing French. That was the pattern, you know, they *all* did French and they all became librarians. And I didn't want to do French and I didn't want to be a librarian.

Why didn't you want to be a librarian?

Well, everybody else was doing it, and that was what – you know, that was what people did in Hobart. So I really wanted to do German because I'd been teaching myself German since I was a child, and my parents had paid for me to have special lessons when I was at PLC Pymble. German wasn't a curricular subject, but there was an old Swiss lady who came in on Friday afternoons after school and gave German lessons – German, and there was just a handful of girls in the school who

did it, daughters of diplomats and so on. And so I was in that group. And that was when I read *Eric and the Detectives* [*Erik und die Detektive*], that was the first book I ever read in German, had an orange cover.

Did you ever write stories in German?

No; I wrote essays in German, but I didn't ever write stories or poems. But I used to love them. And then, when we moved to Tasmania, at The Friends' School, luckily enough, German was on offer. But there were only three of us doing it. And with a very acidic old (laughs) German teacher. He wasn't German, he was Australian, but he was – oh, he'd come out of retirement to help during the War, and he had a very sarcastic tongue when he needed to. Anyway, so I did that. And so then, when I went to university, I could carry on. So I went on with German, and then when it came to second year the professor really wasn't that keen on offering German for one, but anyway I was allowed, and then I went on and did Honours in it, and because – well, because it was one-to-one and they absolutely assessed my work I never had to do exams after first year. Imagine that now. And I was allowed to do the third year and the Honours year combined, so that was what I did.

Did you develop any ideas at uni about your future, what you were going to do?

Well, I still didn't want to be a librarian (laughs) so I applied to join the Department of Immigration as a graduate clerk. They used to enrol a lot of – enlist a lot of young graduates in those days, and my first employment was actually in Hobart, in the Department's office there, where I had a lot of face-to-fact contact with displaced persons, as the new migrants were called, or 'New Australians', as they were called. A lot of the people from Europe whose homelands had been overrun and who'd lost their family, and so on, they were coming out in big numbers in 1949, '50, around that time, and they were the people I was dealing with. And again I became so aware how privileged I was, and that they had had experiences that I would never know about. I could never begin to imagine.

Are there any abiding memories from that time?

Yes. Yes, some of them – I think I showed you last time you were here, I think I showed you two paintings out in my study over my desk of a young man called Andre Simon, he was Hungarian, and he was working up on one of the hydroelectric

projects of my father – but there was no connection there – but he came in, and he'd only been up there a few weeks and he'd seen the wallabies and he'd seen the kangaroos and he brought these and he gave them to me, and I was the clerk behind the counter. But I went out with him a few times. And there was a Latvian fellow who used to take me out, and he used to take me out dancing, and we used to go to Wrest Point with some of his Latvian friends. And again I was so aware how their lives had been in such different paths from mine, although they were a few years older than I was, of course, but I was just so aware of the tragedy in these lives. And the letters that used to come pouring in to that little office, it was my job to try to redirect them, and the migrants were supposed to keep themselves registered with the Department, any changes of address, but quite often they didn't, you see. And in any case there were these huge filing cabinets of cards and these letters had the European handwriting which to us was quite foreign at that stage, you know, it is a different style of writing. And the names, of course, were just so incredibly different, especially the Polish names. There were a lot of Polish people at that stage. There was a Pole in the Department staff, Roly. And so to try to match, it was my job to try to match these names either on envelopes or – when I was in Canberra it was on envelopes, but in Hobart it was just big lists that used to come from Canberra. Used to try to go through them and find if we had any addresses that matched. And I used to persevere so much with it because I knew how important those letters must be to those people. So that was really a labour of great love.

Do you feel that that period had influence on your later writing –

Oh, yes.

– because you wrote a lot about war and displacement?

Oh, yes, yes.

Can you talk about that a little bit, how – – –?

Well, you know, I guess it was the – well, it was the second layer, because the first layer was when the War broke out when I was a child here in Adelaide, and I heard about refugees on the radio, on the wireless, sitting there in the corner. And I'd never heard this word and I don't suppose many people had. I didn't know what it meant, and when I asked my parents and they explained how people had to suddenly

leave their home and leave everything behind, that worried me terribly as a child, as a little girl. And that was when I packed up all my precious bits into my kindy case and kept it under my bed in case we ever had to do that. So then, going to Sydney and the uprooting that involved, and the loss of family and friends and pets and neighbours and community, and the starting again, that again was a sort of a parallel – not nearly as violent or traumatic, of course – but when we went to Sydney we had nowhere to live, we had no friends, no relations, nothing. Dad had a job, that was all. I mean, we spoke the same language and everything. So that was a sort of parallel experience which enabled me, I suppose, to empathise with these people I was then meeting in Tasmania. And so that really was the sort of second layer, I think, that sort of nourished those first seeds about the refugees that had lodged in my subconscious very powerfully as a child, a sense of, you know, displacement and dispossession. And, you know, I went through that sort of dispossession process several times with Dad's job. So I was aware of what it implied, though nothing, as I say, nothing in terms of the trauma and violence that most of those people experienced.

Were you still writing during those years that you were at uni – – –?

I kept a nature diary when we lived in Sydney, that's in the National Library now, and I did this little family magazine – I'd love to find a copy of that, but I think it's gone long since – when I first got rejected by the school magazine, in the holidays I did this little family magazine with my poems and stuff in it, which I typed out on the old Imperial typewriter that somebody had given us, you know, and charged my family threepence for. So I was into self-publishing right at the beginning. But then, no, when we went to live in Tasmania my writing took a different turn: it was writing to my friends back in Sydney, and I used to pour my heart out to all of them and lots of them wrote to me for a long time, and so I still had some of those friends. There were three people in particular who kept up the correspondence and who came to stay with us in Hobart. Mum was always such a hospitable person, we always had people coming to stay or meals, so they were always inviting our friends to stay or taking them on holidays when we went on trips. So that was what my writing was, you know. That was good practice, really, looking back on it: I was writing all these letters about what life was like where I was.

Did that continue through once you got a job, and – – –?

Yes, it did, because once I got a job, once I'd been three months in Department of Immigration in Hobart – – –. And my father left his position at the Hydroelectric Commission because he didn't believe in Lake Pedder, he didn't want to see Lake Pedder flooded and he didn't believe that that was necessary, and he took a position with the State Electricity Commission in Victoria. And it was just about the time – well, it all happened at the same time – that our family home broke up in Tasmania and they sort of – looking back on it, I guess, they sort of waited until I went through my graduation ceremony in May, and all in the same week, you know, the house was packed up – it was still a rented house – and the house was packed up and they went off to live in Victoria in the LaTrobe Valley because Dad became the General Superintendent of the new LaTrobe Valley scheme at Morwell, and my transfer to Canberra had come through with the Department at that stage, and I got shifted up to Canberra. So I went and lived in a hostel in Canberra, which so many public servants did – and still do, I think, though not to the same degree now – and worked at the Department there, and so I was still writing letters; I was writing letters to my family. So letter writing was always a very important part of my growth as a writer, I suppose.

After that job with the Department of Immigration you moved into library work –

I did.

– even though you hadn't wanted to be a librarian!

I did, yes, that was the funny part.

How did that come about?

Well, I started off as a clerk, as I had in Hobart, and when I got to Canberra – of course, it was all much bigger, *much* bigger, and I was put as a clerk into the Division of Assimilation, and I was still working on the letters – and this was when I was going through the tea chest of letters, actually handling the letters – and I was working with foreign language newspapers, but I was away from people. And sometimes I used to have to go – each department had its own library, and I'd go to the library for something or something or other, and I struck up a friendship with the librarian. She was a very nice – she was older than I was, but not that much older –

she was a nice girl from Western Australia, and she was getting homesick or she was going to get married, I forget what the story was. But she said to me, 'Christobel, you ought to apply for this job.' And it wasn't like being a librarian in a public library, which is how – or the State Library – which it had been in Tasmania, you know; it was research librarian. And so it appealed to me because the subject interested me, and it meant I was working with all the people in the Department. There was a special Research Division too, and there were quite a lot of (sound of distant telephone ringing) interesting people in that department, and one of the lovely things about it was that if I didn't have the material in my little library I'd go across to the Parliamentary Library – because there was no National Library then, the Parliamentary Library was it – and so on a lovely sunny day I'd set off and walk to the Parliamentary Library and do some research there in that wonderful old panelled library. You know, it was a wonderful place. It was wonderful just to walk up the steps of Parliament House and walk across the Great Hall and go in through those big doors, and this beautiful place with its red leather and blackwood panelling and beautiful bound volumes of this, that and the other, do the work and walk back in the sunshine, in the beautiful Canberra winter sunshine. It was lovely! (laughs)

Then my parents saw – at that stage there were only two library training schools in Australia. You could sort of do things at the Parliamentary Library, you could do some study there, which is what I planned to do. But the State Library of New South Wales and the State Library of Victoria both had training schools. And my father saw an advertisement for scholarships to the State Library of Victoria training school, so he sent it to me and urged me to apply. Well, I was happily going along where I was, I rather liked it, and I'd met someone I liked and, you know, I had a 'feel' for Canberra. And I could nick down to Sydney from there and visit my old schoolfriends and it was easy, it was good. But Mum and Dad thought I should get proper training; they didn't think what I'd get at the Parliamentary Library was good enough and they wanted me to have proper qualifications because David was still on the horizon and he had this bad medical history, you see, which obviously concerned my parents because they'd been through exactly the same scenario. So they were determined I should have proper qualifications which would enable me to hold down a job whatever happened. So I applied for this scholarship and I got it! Well, there were several given, and I got one of them. Four pounds a week, it was. So I left

Canberra. I wasn't there a whole year, really, because I went in May and I left in time to start the course in February or March, I suppose it was.

What year would this be now?

Must have been 1951, I think. (pause) No, it must have been the beginning of 1952, yes, because I graduated in 1951, I went to Canberra, and then 1952 was the year I spent in Melbourne at the State Library, and it was a wonderful year. I loved that library – oh, there was such an ambience in that library. Well, I'd always loved the State Library of New South Wales because our parents used to take us there, too, when we went to town, and I loved walking up those steps and through those great doors, you know, those – oh, I know the name of the sculptor: who did those doors[4]? That was part of the Women Artists film script – anyway, through those great doors and over that wonderful mosaic, you know, then going to that huge reading room with all these wonderful galleries of books and books and books, and climbing the stairs and going up and finding the nature study books up there, things I could never aspire to owning: Waterhouse's book on butterflies and all those things. Anyway, I loved that library, you know. It just sang to my soul, that library. And in a different way the State Library of Victoria did, too, with that great big dome, you know, and the history of it. And we were in a poky little slit of a room out the back in the library school, but we had a wonderful teacher, Frank Perry. He was a wonderful man, a very gentle man, a real stereotype librarian in lots of ways, I suppose, you know, just so bookish and so gentle with – we were all girls; I don't think there were any men in the class. Anyway. And, you know, we had the run of the whole library, all the back areas and the whole library itself, and he used to take us up and the Chief Librarian used to have us into his office to show us the rare books, and of course the State Library of Victoria had a fabulous collection from those bequests[5] they had. And so where we were, being shown these precious ..... and all the lovely illuminated manuscripts – oh, it was *wonderful*! And the catalogue – of course, it was still card catalogues in those days – and we were taken through and shown the handwriting of all the Chief Librarians since the library was begun,

[4] Daphne Mayo was the woman sculptor involved.

[5] The Felton Bequest.

you know, you could recognize who had written each card, who had catalogued each book, and there was a tremendous feel of scholarship and dedication. And we had to do bibliographies, that was one of our things, and I decided to do mine on shipping, and I got up into areas of the library that were just wonderful, you know. You'd climb up little circular iron staircases up into attics and all sorts – oh, it was a *wonderful* year!

And on our four pounds a week I lived in a funny little flat down in Hawthorn, just off Riversdale Road, and on payday we used to all troop off to Little Bourke Street, and there was a favourite Chinese restaurant. We used to trail upstairs, up rickety old stairs, and sit on rickety old chairs (laughs) and have a meal that filled us. And then we'd go down to the market and buy cabbage and whatever was the cheapest possible thing to live on for the rest of the week! (laughs) The girl I shared a room with, she was a kindergarten director, and she used to bring home all the leftover milk, so we always had milk.

Did you have an interest in children's literature at all, in that phase?

Not particularly, no. On afternoons off from lectures I used to go all over Melbourne looking at libraries. Box Hill was the library then – oh, that was big, very important. And St Kilda. And I used to go to all sorts of libraries and look at the children's areas and so on, but I didn't have a special feel for it. But then, when I got up to – well, then, when I graduated, I was the top of the year and I couldn't get a job because I was only nineteen and people thought I didn't have enough experience – or was I twenty? Must have been twenty. I must have been twenty – and people thought I didn't have enough experience, and so I got knocked back and knocked back and knocked back, because I had these brilliant qualifications and people thought I was too young. And so, in the end, there was a position going up in the LaTrobe Valley. The State Electricity Commission financed the libraries in five towns in the LaTrobe Valley. They were the richest libraries in Victoria at that stage, because they were underwritten by the SEC which was sort of in lieu of a local council, you see – or at least, the Scheme embraced five libraries. Some of them were council libraries which were much more poverty-stricken. So it was a regional library, it was one of the first regional libraries. And so Dad heard that this job was

going, and so I put in for that and I got it. And it wasn't because I was Dad's daughter, I do know that.

But the Chief Librarian of the SEC was a wonderful woman called Dorothea Garrett, and she was erudite and elegant and what you would hope a librarian would be, you know, the epitome of a cultured woman. And she was my mentor in those years – in that year; I was only there a year. Because it was pretty rugged. I was in the deep end in a – although it was funded by the SEC it had a local library committee, you know, which was drawn from the people of Yallourn, and they weren't erudite and cultured, (laughs) lots of them, and they'd been running the library their way for a long time and here was this young whippersnapper out of library school who thought she knew better! (laughs) Anyway, I set up an adolescent section there, which was one of the first ever anywhere, and I worked in the children's library when the children's librarian was off, or something, and I had to go round the other branch libraries, which I loved doing. Some were – oh, there were three others, three or four – anyway, that meant catching a train out into the back blocks up in the Mirboo North and Boolarra area, and it was a tiny little branch line and tiny little narrow gauge track that ran through the fern glades. Oh, it was a magic little trip in this tiny little train that looked as if it had come out of the toyshop. And these tiny little villages out in the back blocks in the dairy country, where the town clerk was the king, you know. (laughs) Oh, I had some funny experiences with them. And I had to buy books for all the libraries and every so often go down to Melbourne and buy at Cheshire's, where Andrew Fabinyi was the manager then, in those days. Andrew Fabinyi was a Hungarian who'd come out after the War, and he was a very intelligent, cultured man. He'd been one of our lecturers at library school, occasional lecturer. And so you'd go into Cheshires, and it was in the basement in those days, and you'd get a trolley and you'd spend all day walking round, you know, picking books up and putting them in the trolley. But I couldn't shop like that for some of the branch libraries, because they had their own little places where they'd get lots of Mills and Boon and Western, and I had to go to them, and buy those.

So setting up the adolescent and the children's section, did you start to get a feel for what was out there in children's literature, then?

I suppose I did. But it wasn't really until – well, then I came – well, after we'd lived in England and I had a job for a week in a library in England, I couldn't stand it, it was so awful. And I was looking after the children's section there. That was at Brixton. It became infamous later on. But Janet – what was her name? What was that librarian's name who turned the things around[6]? She used to come out and talk at library conferences. She did wonderful things in making libraries more accessible to people, and it was at the beginning of the sort of influx of Asian and West Indian and so on people, and sort of integrating them in – oh, what's her name? Anyway. No, the library I was at at Brixton was a Carnegie library, and it was a massive building, very impressive and so on, but mausoleum-like. And the hours were from nine to nine, six days a week. And we were newly-married and it didn't seem like a good idea.

When did you marry?

At the end of 1953, and my husband was teaching at Geelong Grammar, and I'd applied for a job to run the Geelong West Library, which was a sort of little institute library, really. It was just trying to become municipal, you know. It frightened the daylights out of that library council, you know, there was this young thing who had very different ideas about a library from what they'd had! So I didn't get that job. Then the daylights started to get frightened out of me at the thought of going to live at Geelong Grammar, and you had to live on campus and all the staff was much, much older than me – because, you see, David's nearly ten years older than I am, so I was much nearer in age to the boys than I was to the staff at that stage, and it was a pretty closed community. And I began to think I couldn't do it. So David gave up a job he *loved* – he loved that school – to take me to England, because he'd loved England when he was there during the War, and being a historian it meant a lot to him. And so, three days before we were married, we decided we were going to have to go to England. So about two weeks after we were married we got the first boat we could get berths on, went over. And then, of course, he didn't have a job, neither did I, and that was when I got this job in a library, and I think I was being paid thirty shillings or something ridiculous a week, and then I got a job as a copy typist.

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[6] Janet Hill.

Been to some interesting places in the City of London and Bond Street and all sorts of places. And then I got a job as a supply teacher. Oh, which also took me to interesting places like Lavender Hill – you know, that film, *The Lavender Hill mob*, was made. That was long before your time, but well, that was around Clapham and Tooting Bec and all those areas. They had markets, you see, they had lovely markets, street markets, so, you know, the bit of *Rummage* came out of all that.

Did you write while you were over there?

Again letters, letters, letters, which I wrote as a sort of diary and sent to my parents, and when we went travelling I'd start travel diaries, but it was jolly hard to write them, you know, when you were driving along and you were wanting to see things, you didn't want to be writing. And then you got there at night and you pitched your tent and it was dark, you didn't have any lights and everything. I started, so the letters really became my diaries. My parents kept them. I've got them somewhere or other in a box. So that, again, that was my writing. And then I saw the London School of Journalism was offering classes, or offering correspondence lessons, so my father paid for that and I started off and I did three or four of the lessons, and I had to post them. Yes, that was in London, wasn't it, the London School of Journalism? And then gradually you had to do articles that you had to try to market and sell, you see, and I was sending mine back to Australia and they weren't working. And then life sort of got a bit hectic and I slipped up on doing them and I never finished that course. I always felt so guilty because my dad had paid for it and I never finished it.

When we came back to Australia I thought about doing it, and by then I'd been offered the job at Prince Alfred College to set up the new library there, so – and that was the senior school library – so again that meant I was working with adolescents again.

When did you start to write full-time, I suppose, or in amongst – were you writing in amongst once you were – – –?

No, not really, only these letters. And I – – –. (end of tape)

VS: END OF TAPE 2 SIDE A: TAPE 2 SIDE B

When did you start to write full-time, I suppose, or in amongst – were you writing in amongst once you were – – –?

No, not really, only these letters. And I mean once we came back to live in Adelaide, well, my parents were in Melbourne so I was still writing letters. I was always writing letters. And so then we were building our house at Stonyfell during those couple of years, and finally, after five years, we had our first child – much longed-for – Rosemary, and by this time we were in our house down in Allendale Grove, and I became a full-time mother and loved it, but was still writing letters, of course, but that was it. But then there started to be children's book weeks. That was about the time the Children's Book Council got going. And my husband was very sweet and good and he used to mind the children or the baby or whatever it was at that stage so I could – oh, and then I got interested in campaigning for the Burnside Library. I was one of the people who campaigned to have the first Burnside Library built. There was a councillor who was at our church at St David's, Councillor Bill Langman, and he was one of the councillors who was keen to have a library, and I sort of backed him up and lobbied for that. And then the library was built, the first little library – it's in its third stage now – and then the Children's Book Council started, and I went to the first Children's Book Council exhibition and became really rapt in what I was seeing. And it was just when Australia was starting to publish its own literature for children.

What kinds of things inspired you then?

Oh well, there were those Lesley Rees books about birds and animals, you know, *Karrawingi the emu* and all of those, beautifully illustrated by [Walter Cunningham] and others. They were a beautiful series of books. And [John Sands] did them. I mean, there'd been the *Billabong* books, I'd grown up on the *Billabong* books and Mary Grant Bruce and Ethel Turner, and my mother had had Ethel Turner books, you see, so I'd read all those, and they were the *Seven little Australians* and so on. But now people were starting to write contemporary, and when I read Patricia Wrightson's first book, *The crooked snake*, I thought, 'Oh, I could write a story like that,' because it was about children in the bush, which was very much like my own childhood. You know, it was very much like the sort of things I had done as a child. I identified very strongly with that story, and I sort of began to think, 'Oh, maybe I could write a story like that.'

I had toyed – oh, no, I had thought, when I was at university I had actually thought I would like to write biography, because I had read some wonderful biographies by French writers, Anatole France and people like that. I'd read some André Gide and things; I'd read biographical and autobiographical material, and I thought, 'Oh,' you know, 'that's what I'd like to do: I'd like to write biography.' And I used to think I'd like to write book reviews, you see. But anyway, when I read this book of Patricia Wrightson's, I really felt there was that sort of story in me, too.

And so that was when I started writing, when we'd had our second child by then, Christopher, and it was those – and Rosemary would be at kindergarten in the afternoon and Christopher would be asleep – and it was when you had that precious little slot of time you could call your own. And that was when I started writing. And also when you're washing the nappies you can do a lot of thinking. I always found I work, I think, well when I'm with water. Water's supposed to be my sign. And anyway, I always work well when there's water, or when I'm preparing any speeches or lectures or anything I love to walk on the beach, paddle along the beach at Port Willunga. But in those days over the laundry sink, the never-ending nappies, you know, that was when I used to think my stories. And the children were listening to *Kindergarten of the air*, and there was always a little story on that. That was how I first – or no, second that was, really – first of all I wanted to write the story about the Ranger's children in this national park, which I based on Muogamarra up on the Hawkesbury River, and really it was set there. And flower thieves coming in and taking the Christmas bells and the children trying to trap them and foil them. So that was what I wrote, and I really enjoyed writing it. But I knew when I'd finished it, I knew I'd write the next one better.

Anyway, nobody ever wanted that one because it was ahead of its time. A lot of my books have been ahead of their time. You know, conservation wasn't a big thing then. People went in and pillaged what they wanted out of national parks and had no sense of responsibility, and so it wasn't seen to be of any interest whatever. I can particularly remember one very damning comment about how uninteresting it was. (laughs)

So you sent it off to publishers – – –?

How irrelevant it was. Yes. There were very few publishers in Australia at that stage publishing children's books, and the ones there were, like Angus and Robertson, all had their own writers like Ivan Southall and Colin Thiele. Rigby's had Colin Thiele, Ivan Southall was Angus and Robertson. There were very, very small possibilities. And I sent – about the third time, I suppose it was, fourth – I sent it off to Lansdowne, and again [I'm] a bit wary of this, but Lansdowne had it for a very long time, they didn't acknowledge its receipt or anything. Had it for a very, very long time, six months or more, and I heard nothing. And so I wrote and said, 'What's happened to it and could I have it back if you don't want it?' And some time afterwards it came back in a plain brown wrapper with nothing to indicate where it had come from or anything else, and not long after that Lansdowne brought out a children's book so close to mine that it wasn't funny, but the thieves were not flower thieves, they were bird thieves. And it was by an author who was already published so she had a name, which I won't say here. So that was a bitter experience, and I never felt I could use that story again.

And by that time we had our third child, and then I was asked to do the library at St Peter's Girls' School, to set up a junior school library there, and that was where we'd sent our daughter and I was already beginning to see that it didn't measure up in all sorts of ways, that school, to what we had thought it would provide when we enrolled her there. And I thought, 'Well, if there's a good library there in the junior school that will cover a lot of the other shortcomings and deficiencies,' and seeing we lived so close I could just walk there and I used to take the baby in the pram. And so I only worked part-time: I did two days a week and the rest of it I did the work at home, so I went off and bought books and they all came home to our place and our children had the benefit of them (laughs) and I'd take them over to the library in batches and I'd catalogue them at home. I loved that. I loved working there, with the children.

Do you think that was a further inspiration for writing, the fact that you were with children?

Yes. Oh, definitely, definitely. Because I always do come alive when I'm with children. I think children are very special. Got such vitality and such freshness and such originality and such honesty, and – oh, I love children, I just love children.

And so I had three of my own and three hundred of other people's, so it was great. I loved it, I really loved it.

In what ways do you think that influenced your writing?

Well, because I had my own children I was seeing all the stories there are in everyday life. Everything's new and different and an adventure, isn't it, when you're that age, and words are fun and, you know, there's just so much zest and vitality in children and in life. And I was seeing the world through children's eyes, I was very aware. And the child in me had never died, I was always very aware of the child within me. And I think, I mean I never *have* grown up. So that was when I really did start to write, after this one got knocked back enough times for me to think, 'Well, I couldn't send it out again.' I had been trying to write little short stories for *Kindergarten of the air*, and one in particular I tried to write and it was about a windmill, because by this time we'd bought our little hideaway place in between Aldinga and Willunga, an old stone house that had been a farmhouse, and then it was almost a hundred years old, and it had this wonderful great mulberry tree, and it had a little windmill that was broken. And I'd always loved windmills, so I desperately wanted to have a windmill. So we went through quite a saga getting a windmill that worked, and it kept breaking down, and so anyway – and there were little dairy farms all round, and one day we were taking the children to see cows being milked, we were sitting up there on the rail watching the black and white calves come in and being fed from the milk can and so on, and walking back from there and seeing our little windmill silhouetted against the sunset, suddenly it all came together – the magpies that had swooped me and my cousins when I was little, and were still – well, not the same magpies, but they were swooping our daughter and the kids next door at that stage, because Rosemary was walking home through the park and the maggies were nesting in the park and swooping her, swooping the kids opposite, riding their bikes around and so on. So maggies were sort of up-front in my mind. And so it sort of all came together into *Windmill at Magpie Creek*. But I'd already written another story, I'd written *The picnic dog*, because our little dog had got run over. Our little fox terrier Piccolo. When Stephen was only a baby. And I'd taken Stephen to town to get his photo taken to send my father who was ill in hospital in Melbourne and had never seen our baby, so I took him in to get his

photo taken and when we came back Piccy was missing and she didn't come home that night. And then somebody rang to say they'd run over her. And we missed her terribly. Then, when Stephen started growing up, I realised he didn't remember the little dog and the other two did, but it seemed the time to write something about Piccolo. So the story of Piccolo was based on our family. I gave our children's second names – which I've never done since – and I kept the dog's name and the dog was pretty well much as she was, only she was a lot smarter in the story. See, that's one of the nice things about stories – (laughs) you can change things from real life! So the windmill in *Windmill at Magpie Creek* was bigger, and the dog was smarter in *Picnic dog*, and the father in *Picnic dog* was much more grouchy than my husband ever is. (laughs) You know, you take reality and you just shift it around. I often tell people that's what imagination is, it's just shifting around the building blocks of real life.

In terms of practicalities, then, did you write longhand or by typewriter or – – –?

Oh, yes. I still do.

You still do?

For some things, yes, I could show you something I wrote the other day in longhand. But yes, yes, I always wrote longhand, and at that stage we had a little portable typewriter that we'd bought in Aden on our way to England in January 1954 after we'd just married. We bought this little portable typewriter. And Aden was a great shopping place in those days: all the liners used to stop there and it was a duty-free place. We bought this little Hermes, baby Hermes typewriter, and I did all my early writing on it and lots of the letters I used to write, and all my London School of Journalism courses and all those things. And so that's how all my manuscripts went off, typed on this little baby typewriter. And I didn't have a study or anything of my own then. Eventually we added to that house and we added a sun room which became my study, after I gave up work and started just being a writer full-time. Well, I didn't give up work; I had my job taken away from me.

So where did you write? Or would you write at specific times of the day, or what was the sort of structure?

Oh, well, I'd write anywhere. If there was a story, you know, I'd write anywhere. I'd write on the kitchen bench or I'd write in the car while I was waiting for the kids at the dentist or at sport or something, or I'd sit up in bed at night and write or sit up in bed in the morning after everybody had gone and write, or sit at the dining table and write or sit out in the garden and write. That's the beauty of a pencil and paper or pen and paper. I used to write with pencil first, but then I'd have my husband read it as copy editor and he begged me – because he's a teacher and he has to read so much bad writing – he begged me at least to write in ink. So I started writing in ink. And then I would read my stories aloud to the children, and they were my best audience, my best critics. And David. And so that was a very important part of our family life, reading aloud to the children, and it's very important in all my stories because I hear the words, I hear them, waiting to be written down. So I'm hearing the sentences, I'm hearing the flow and the cadence and the dialogue, and I believe that, if a story reads aloud well, it will read silently well. And, as it happens, all of my books except *Survival in our own land* are books that people do read aloud and share, you know, teachers or librarians or parents. And I think that's one reason why people find them easy, because they have a natural flow and a natural rhythm. And I still read aloud, you see. I didn't read this one (tapping sound) aloud –

That's the latest biography you're pointing to.

– yes. No, I didn't read that aloud, *King of the Wilderness*, and I didn't read *Survival in our own land* aloud. But all my own works, my own creative imaginative works, I've always read aloud and I still do. David's still very patient with me, he knows how important it is to me and he sits there and goes through the motions of listening and I just hope he's not going to fall asleep! But no, you know, because it is important. It's an important phase of the revision, because then you can hear the rough bits or the bits where it doesn't connect, or if I'm writing and I'm not sure of a word whether I've really got the right word, I do a little squiggle underline and then I might write two or three more words above it that might be just as good or better or – – –. But I don't stop then and use a dictionary: that comes at another stage. So when I read it aloud I come to that bit, or it might be a phrase that I think I haven't got right, I've just given it a squiggly underline, then, when I read aloud, then I see this is a part that needs thinking about more.

Can you talk a bit about where your inspiration and your stories come from?

Well, they come from everywhere. I mean, it comes from everyday life. Just all the things that happen around us and the people you meet, the places you go. Because every place has got a story and every person is a story. And words have got stories in them, you know, just a word can start you off. 'Molasses' was the one that started me off on *Tiger's milk*, you know, such a beautiful word and such gorgeous stuff, so thick and shining and got its own motion and its sense of fluidity, hasn't it, and I used to make tiger's milk, and I used to make it and I used to think, 'Oh, there's got to be a story in molasses.' And I suddenly realised what it was one day, and again that sprang from my childhood from being frightened of lots of things, in that instance bulls. My mother's parents used to live up at Broken Hill at one stage, and I can remember going up in the train to Broken Hill. And I can remember my sister leaning out the window and saying, 'Savage American bulls!' And oh, being scared and leaning back and winding up the window. Probably were cows, I don't know, but – – –! And then we got to stay with my grandparents and they had a hotel in Broken Hill, and there was a bathroom – I suppose it was built out the back of the hotel as they often were, you know, with galvanised iron. It was that very fine, ribbed galvanised iron, I see it still, and this great big bath standing there. And then, when the plug was let out, the plug was pulled out and the water made this terrifying noise and going down, down, down two floors, I suppose, or one floor, at any rate. And I can remember being terribly scared. And I have that association of fear, of being afraid. Then I was afraid of the gorilla in the Adelaide Museum. I was afraid of the jetty when I was a little girl, I used to hate going out on the Brighton jetty. There were a lot of things that I was afraid of, I was scared of people and I was scared of dogs, and I can see that's come through in a terrific lot of my stories – not consciously, you know, but that's where I see a situation. I see something quite contemporary, it's something now, I'm not delving back into my childhood to write a story. That's the subconscious part, that's the compost that I've lived through that nourishes whatever the current episode or anecdote or situation is that makes you think, 'Ah, there's a story in that!' And then, after I've written it, sometimes not for years after, did I realise why I was able to write that story, why I saw the story in that particular situation or person, and why I was able to write it. And where the feelings

came from, because the feelings are what are important. I mean, you can write a story with your head, but if it hasn't got feelings in it, forget it. The feelings are what nourish the story and make it come alive – make the words come alive. I seem to write stories that make people cry.

I can vouch for that – been doing a lot of crying lately, reading books.

It's a strange thing. I *have* written some funny stories. I've written funny stories when *I've* been sad. All my funny stories have been written when I have been very sad.

Can you give an example of that?

Well, *The great Ballagundi damper bake* I wrote in that first year at Wattle Park, when I was – I was approached to join the staff at Wattle Park by Beryl Turner who used to run the children's bookshop part of the WEA bookshop, which was a very good bookshop back in the – what? – '70s, at the University[7], it was. It became the University Book Room. And she was a New Zealand librarian with a lot of experience, and she had been employed – her husband was a lecturer in English at the university – and she was employed to set up this children's bookshop. And it was an excellent bookshop – she really knew books. And so I used to do quite a lot of my buying there for the St Peter's Girls' School, and when I had Prince Alfred College that wasn't available and I used to buy from Rigby's, as it was then, and Wigg's, and Beck's, which was the Muirs' bookshop. But by the time I came to St Peter's Girls' WEA was there with this knowledgeable librarian who really did stock good books, and there were more books, of course, being written by then – Oxford University Press, and so on, were bringing out beautiful books for children. I always aspired to be an Oxford author, but that didn't happen. Anyway. Sorry, what were we talking about?

You were talking about *The great Ballagundi damper bake*.

Oh, *The great Ballagundi damper bake*, yes. So when I was still at St Peter's Girls' I wrote *The picnic dog* and *Windmill at Magpie Creek*, and I always remember *Windmill at Magpie Creek* I wrote in six weeks, and I sent it off to – I'd had so many

[7] The University of Adelaide (later renamed Adelaide University).

knockbacks for *The picnic dog*, and I didn't think it was worth trying anywhere here with *Windmill at Magpie Creek*, but I had sent another story, *The birthday tooth*, which I'd written when Rosemary lost her first tooth and I saw, you know, the story there is in losing your first tooth. So I'd sent that to – well, it was called Brockhampton Press in those days, at Leicester in England, and they had liked it – really had liked it, and said that they didn't want to publish it but did I have any other stories I wanted to write. And I wrote back and I said this idea about the windmill and so on, and they said, 'Well, write it and send it to us.' So that was just the trigger and it poured out, because it had been mulling away there for a long time. And so it all came together and I wrote it and sent it to them. And the most remarkable thing happened – it's never happened quite like that since – it happened on a day I was at the library and the baby was home being looked after by someone, and someone from the office came down to the library, which was in the basement of the school, and she said, 'Mrs Mattingley, there's a 'phone call from home. You'd better come and take it in the office.' And I thought, 'Oh, what's happened?', and I ran up the stairs. Anyway, it was this babysitter saying, 'Oh, Mrs Mattingley, a telegram's come. It's come from England. What shall I do?' And I said, 'Well, open it, of course, and read it for me.' So she read it out, and it was Brockhampton Press accepting the story, which was just amazing, looking back on it. And so I just flew down those stairs and I think it was Grade Four in there and they wanted to know what had happened, 'Was everything all right, Mrs Mattingley?' (sound of distant telephone ringing) So I said, 'Yes, yes, I've just had a story accepted, it's going to be made into a book!' So next week when they came to the library, 'Where's your book, Mrs Mattingley?' (laughter) It took two years to come out. But, oh, I've had others that have taken much longer since then.

Was that the first thing of yours you saw in print?

No, because then – by that stage I sent off *The picnic dog* – oh, what, about the seventh time. I don't know if it was the seventh or the eighth now – it got rejected seven times, so it must have been the eighth time. I sent it off to Hamish Hamilton, who were publishing series in England then. They had three series, Gazelle, Antelope and Reindeer. Gazelle was the lowest reading age and Antelope was the middle and then Reindeer was the more advanced reading age. And I had never

wanted to have any of my books in a series; I wanted them to be published in their own right. And also the publisher there at Hamish Hamilton was the librarian who'd succeeded me at Prince Alfred College, Julia McRae, and so I didn't want to send my stuff off to be rejected by Julia McRae, so I hadn't sent anything to Hamish Hamilton. In any case, I'd always send *The picnic dog* as a picture book – I still believe it would have been a good picture book – and so I had been sending it to picture book publishers. World's Work was doing beautiful books in those days, and Bodley Head and so on. Anyway, it didn't get anywhere there. And it took a long time for a manuscript to go to England and come back and sit in a publisher's too hard basket for three months. Anyway, so it was a long process for *The picnic dog*, and finally I thought, 'Oh, well. I'll try it for this series. And she won't remember me, anyway.' So I sent it off and she liked it, and there was enough Australian about it for her to really pick up and love it. And so she loved it, and so after that I published several things with Hamish Hamilton. But *Windmill at Magpie Creek* had already been accepted, but *The picnic dog* was accepted some time after, but Hamish Hamilton used an illustrator who was much quicker than Brockhampton's illustrator. They chose Gavin Rowe, who was a very, very thorough illustrator and researched very carefully, and the one from Hamish Hamilton did, too. And I often tell children – it was rather funny; my children used to think it was funny – I had to do projects about my own book and collect pictures and write descriptions of things that were in the stories for English illustrators, you see. But Gavin Rowe was a very good researcher and he was interested in Australia anyway, and so he had done – he was already 'in tune', and I loved his illustrations for *Windmill at Magpie Creek*, they're still some of my favourites. But the illustrator for *The picnic dog*, she was much faster and she just concentrated on people – people illustrations and people-and-dog illustrations, and I had a fox terrier in the story but they don't know what they are in England so it had to be a Jack Russell, and they had a much tighter production schedule, so the book came out – *Picnic dog* came out first, in 1970, and then *Windmill at Magpie Creek* came out in 1971.

I'm going to have to stop you there, we're about to run out of tape again.

Right.

VS: END OF TAPE 2 SIDE B: TAPE 3 SIDE A

This is the second interview with Christobel Mattingley being recorded by Karen George for the State Library of South Australia's Honoured Women's Oral History Project. The interview is taking place on the 24th July 2001 at Stonyfell in South Australia.

After we turned the tape off last week we were just chatting about a few things, and one of the things you mentioned, I'd asked you about your reaction to seeing your first book in print, and you commented something about a problem with *Windmill at Magpie Creek*.

Oh, that's right, yes. My first reaction was dismay. It was an English publisher so it was quite a while before I saw the first copy. And I found they'd inserted 'The' in the title, so it had become ***The*** *Windmill at Magpie Creek*, which was never my intention at all. So that was rather a disappointment, to put it mildly.

Apart from that, what was it like to finally see something, because you'd been rejected quite a number of times with *The picnic dog*?

Yes, it was good. But there's a funny thing about when you see your book in print, see work in print – well, it is for me – I never want to read it. (laughs) It's just somehow gone a distance from me by then. Well, in any case, it has, time-wise, because it usually takes about a year for a book to go through the production process, and by that time your living and your life has proceeded to some other activities and engagements and so it is behind you. And that's one of the difficult things about being a writer. People are always discovering you where you were, not where you are, and I find that – well, it's not *difficult*, but it is a facet of being a writer. People always are referring to something that for you may be a long time ago in your mental process, in your emotions and in your just day-to-day living.

So do you feel, then, that the books are closely tied with what was happening at the time you were writing them, as well?

Well, you're totally involved in them when you are writing them – well, I am – and you don't leave them when you've written the last word. I mean, you've finished it. I am still in that story, very much so. I'm still in the Deny King story, *King of the Wilderness*, which I worked on – on and off – for ten years. I *lived* that book, I lived that man's life. And in fact Judy Tierney rang me this morning, the ABC presenter who is going to launch it in Hobart next week, and she said to me, 'Oh, when you read it you feel as if you're living it.' And I said, 'Well, Judy, I'm glad you say that because I lived that life for ten years, and when I used to wake up in the middle of

the night I was at Melaleuca – I was living it.' So that's what you really have to do to make the thing come alive.

Another thing on a related subject, we talked and we didn't quite finish. You mentioned that sometimes when you're writing your most humorous books you're actually personally quite sad.

Yes.

You were going to talk about that with one particular book.

Yes, yes. Well, for example, I made that discovery when I wrote *The great Ballagundi damper bake*. As I think I mentioned in the last interview, I'd been at St Peter's Girls' School for several years setting up the junior school library, and I had three hundred little girls whom I loved, and it was a very happy, active place, and I used to read all the books to make sure I was getting the right books to the right children, and so on. And when I was asked to go to Wattle Park Teachers' College, as it was then, to work with students on children's literature, when I got there I found somebody else had been appointed at the same time and she said she was the only person who was qualified to talk about children's literature and that was her sphere. And I found myself relegated to a very back room in the library, which in those days was an old transportable at the back of the old Wattle Park House in Kensington Road. It was the backest of the (laughs) back of the college – it literally was, right on the boundary fence, in this poky little tiny little room, and all I was doing was shuffling horrible little grey order slips all day long and checking them against the catalogue. It was the most soul-destroying work. I mean, there wasn't even money to buy half the books listed on these little slips. And so, after having been among living, breathing, laughing, active children, to find myself doing this when I really thought I was going to be helping student teachers to learn about children's books and what they meant to children – because I had taken the job on that understanding, because at that school, at St Peter's Girls' School, I could see the abysmal ignorance there was about children's literature and its role in helping children to grow. So that was really why I thought, 'Well, if I get among young student teachers who are enthusiastic and looking forward to working with children, I can make a difference.' Well, it wasn't to be. And I just missed the children so much that – I didn't realise it

– but that was why I wrote five stories in that year. I actually wrote five books in that first year I was at Wattle Park, and they all got published.

Which ones were they? To test your memory. (laughs)

Yes, that does test my memory a bit. But at the same time our youngest son had started school, and I didn't go to work – well, I wasn't working full-time at Wattle Park either, but I was working more time there than I'd worked at the school. But once he went to school – and it's impossible to work longer hours out of the home – but he was just starting to learn to read, and it was seeing the world through his eyes and the excitement he was having in discovering this wonderful new world opening up through books that influenced the way I wrote, too. One of the ones I wrote was *Show and tell* in that year. And another one I wrote – and this gets me back to the point, circuitously, but all my stories are circuitous – one of the few good things (laughs) that year was a club that Graham Jenkin ran. Graham Jenkin – I think I mentioned him last time, that he was Captain of Boats when I went to Prince Alfred College to set up the library there, and he was a nice fellow. And when I got to Wattle Park I found he was one of the staff at Wattle Park, as a teacher of Australian History. And he was very kind – he's such a kind, genuine person, Graham – and he sort of took me under his wing and invited me to come along to his Tea and Damper Club, which he used to run on Tuesdays at lunchtime in the creek bed at the back of the old house in Wynyard Grove, which was really a parking lot for the college, and the house was used for some study purposes. And so, at lunchtimes, we used to troop over there on Tuesdays and sit in the creek under the great big redgums with the students, and Graham'd play his guitar and they'd sing bush songs and so on, and have a little campfire, and it was fun. And then they decided to have a damper competition, and each week a student or two would undertake to make the damper. And then afterwards it would be taken around the college for people to sample, and we had to vote on it. And that was how I got the idea for *The great Ballagundi damper bake*. And it turned out a funny story, and really it was me reacting against the repression of that college, and the repression of the system.

And then another what I think of as my funny books is *McGruer and the goat*, and that happened, really, again, partly through my career as a librarian. I was asked to speak at a library conference in Tasmania, a children's and schools division in

Tasmania, but then, two years later, when the library conference came back to – was held in Adelaide here, things had moved on in the library scene and technology was starting to reach out its long tentacles (laughs) into the book world, and I went along. I always used to go to LAA[8] conferences because I still knew a lot of people and had a lot of friends from all over Australia. Anyway, that time I felt really out of it. I only heard one session in which books were talked of with love and respect and enthusiasm and joy, and all the rest were all these very dreary talks about technology and all the sort of technicalities of book circulation and librarianship, and there was none of the old spirit that had permeated the State Library of Victoria in my student days, you know, about the wealth of knowledge and the glories of literature and all that, which was the spirit of librarianship in the true tradition. You know, it had all become totally differently slanted. And I really did feel very much on the outer among my former colleagues.

And I went down to our little cottage at Willunga, the one with the windmill, that inspired *Windmill at Magpie Creek* and *The mulberry tree*, and sitting there in the rocking chair on the old slate floor I suddenly realised there was a story that had come to me when I was in New Zealand, on doing a library tour in New Zealand, I'd spoken at a New Zealand library conference down in Dunedin in about 197-, 1980, it might have been, and after that I did a month's tour of schools and libraries through both islands of New Zealand. And towards the end of it I started to get pretty lonely. And I came to a little town called Napier up in the north of New Zealand, on the North Island, on the north-east, and I found, to my amazement, that that little town had been destroyed by earthquake at almost to the day on which I must have been conceived. And my mother had always had a thing about New Zealand, she didn't like New Zealand. My father was offered several good jobs in New Zealand and my mother would never go. She always said, 'If you go I'm staying here with the girls.' And it was quite a weird thing to go to this little town and make that discovery and suddenly understand my mother and see this little town whose chronology was parallel with my own. The buildings, the style of it, everything about it was '30s. It was an amazing little place, for me.

[8] Library Association of Australia.

Anyway, there was a big aquarium there which all the locals talked about and kept urging me to go to, and I don't like creatures kept in captivity in any way, but because it was expected of me one afternoon, when I was free, I decided, well, I'd better go and have a look at this aquarium. And there, in the aquarium, I came across this octopus in a tank, and the poor thing, it was in a tank that wasn't as big as this dining room table, and there it was all hunched up in the corner while people went past and said, (in squeaky voice) 'Oo, aah! Look at that! Oh, isn't he horrible!', and all those horrible sort of remarks, and you could tell this creature could understand. And he sat – and he wasn't cowering, but he was all withdrawn into the corner and just staring those great big octopus eyes, and I felt desperately sorry for that creature. And it had a little plaque on the (laughs) bottom of the tank: 'This tank presented by McGruer and Sons, hardware merchants, Napier'. (laughter) And it seemed to me the ultimate irony. Anyway, I loved the sea-horses, there was a tank of sea-horses and they were all together, and it was different for them. And they were dancing. I wrote a poem about the sea-horses. And then I went along to the dolphin pool, and the dolphins were so sensitive, they seemed to know, and they came up and talked to me and comforted me, and I wrote a poem about them, too.

And I'd seen a lot of goats in New Zealand – people keep goats such a lot, and they have little goat-houses, little triangular goat-houses, that there are – a big gateway, the long drives that just disappear up into the mountains and you never see any sign of habitation, perhaps a little plume of smoke coming over the hill. So they intrigued me. And the mountains, of course, were beautiful, glorious. I loved New Zealand, I really loved New Zealand.

And so – I don't know, it's the alchemy. You don't know what it is that puts all the story together, but there I was sitting in the rocking chair in Mulberry Cottage, and suddenly this absurd story sprang to mind, and I really wrote it because – well, I had felt angry at that library conference! (laughs)

Animals do play a big part in a lot of your books.

They do, don't they? Yes.

Do you want to talk about that a bit?

Well, I hadn't realised that, except once when I was giving a talk at a school, and I generally spread my books out, stand them up, for the children to see, because I take

them all because I don't know which ones I'll want to talk about, it'll depend a bit on them. And so one child put up his hand and said, 'Why do all your books have the name of an animal or a bird in them?' And I looked at them and I [thought], 'He's right!' I'd never noticed that, I'd never noticed it. But it just goes back to what I always say to children: you write best about what interests you. And, of course, nature's always been my passion, and so, although they're not specifically about birds or animals – and if the story isn't about them – I mean, I haven't done a *Magpie Island*, sort of anthropomorphising magpies, like Colin Thiele did – well, the only anthropomorphic thing, of course, is *McGruer and the goat*, but that's tongue-in-cheek. The thing is, of course, they are important in my life. You saw the other day, we were watching the birds out of the window here and the birds are always part of my life and animals too. So it's natural that the characters in the stories, I guess, feel that way.

I've noted also there's a bit about losing animals, too, that loss as well. Is that something – loss seems to be another thing that appears quite regularly?

Again, I think it probably goes back to that thing of having been a twin and the sense of loss was very deep in me, but was subconsciously there, although I've built my life without being conscious of it. But I think that's perhaps why I empathise with loss in other people's lives. I mean, I think that now that I understand about having been a twin, but I didn't know about having been a twin for thirty-five years or something. And, yes, I probably did know I was a twin when I went to Napier, that would have been – yes, I did know then. But again, that made it all the more strange to come to that little town.

Are there other themes that you're aware that you like to write about, things that you draw on in your work?

Well, no, not really, because, you see, I don't choose (laughs) what I'm going to write about; it chooses me.

Tell me about that process.

Well, I don't wake up in the morning and think, 'Well, it's a long time since I've written a story about dogs or cats or dolphins.' I mean, I never wake up in the morning and think, 'What am I going to write about now?' I never wake up and think, 'What'll I do next?' There's always so many things waiting to be done

anyway! But the stories just come, you see, the stories come; I don't summon them up. I don't make them up; they arrive, and then I work on them. Once they've arrived, well, then I do work on them, but they decide for themselves if they're something for me to do. Quite often people are kind and they say, 'Why don't you write about this?' or – you know, they tell me an anecdote or an incident: 'You could write a book about that'. But I can't. It's not my story and it's not – it hasn't got a resonance in me. It has to have some sort of resonance in me, and that's – I don't know whether I said it last time, but sometimes, you're not thinking about writing at all and something happens or somebody says something or you see something and you think, 'Oh, there's a story in that.' And I don't know what the story is, and I don't know then that I can write it. I may never write it. Or sometimes it won't be a story itself, it will be part of a story. But I think it's that sort of resonance thing. It touches on something that is subconscious, deeply-embedded in your memory – your subconscious memory, not your conscious memory at all – and that's why it's interesting to me to look back at books.

People say, 'Where did you get the idea for this, where did you get the idea for that?' And half the time I don't know at all. I mean, something just triggered me and I thought, 'Ah! I can write about that.' But I know now it's because there was something in my childhood that gave me the emotions that correspond and allow me to write with depth and a sort of subconscious understanding of what I'm doing, although I'm writing about something quite contemporary mostly. I mean, I'm not writing historical novels, and I'm not writing consciously about my own childhood, but it's the emotions of childhood which I experienced that inform and illuminate what I write now. And so I don't set out – – –.

People often think that when I go travelling I'm going travelling looking for stories, looking for 'copy', as people say sometimes. Well, nothing could be further from the truth. If I find a story when I'm travelling, if it jumps up and grabs me and says, 'Write me', well, that's a bonus, but it's not why I did it. It's not why I went to Japan, for example, when we went to Japan in 1981 – it wasn't because I was going to go and write a story in Japan; it was because we wanted to see our daughter. And so we went to see Rosemary because she won this postgraduate academic scholarship to do her master's degree in Japan, and so we wanted to see what her life was going to be like for the next three years so we could imagine her there.

And, as I think I mentioned last time, when I was growing up the war with Japan was on and it was very real to us because of my father's work on the Hawkesbury River and the midget Japanese submarines and so on, so naturally I'd always had a bit of antipathy towards Japan and atomic bomb and all. But as I grew up and tried to become a citizen of the world I tried to deal with all that and to be more open-minded and open-hearted, and when our daughter decided to do Japanese, well, we thought, 'Good on her' and we sent her to Japan for all of one university vacation, summer vacation, three months, so that she could experience Japan herself before she committed her next years of study to it. And she found the people so friendly and kind and had such an interesting time she did decide that she would go on with it. And so that was eventually, when she got the Mombusho Scholarship, that we decided that we should go and see what life was like for her. But I had not the faintest idea that I might write something when I was there.

But it was going to Nagasaki, which she didn't want to do – we were going to be there for Christmas and she said, 'Where do you want to be for Christmas?' And because Christmas is important to me as a Christian festival I wanted to be somewhere where Christianity was alive. And Nagasaki was the place where Christianity was introduced to Japan, so I suggested Nagasaki. She said, 'I've been there, I never want to go there again.' I said, 'Oh, all right. Well, you choose.' Hiroshima was the other place, ironically. It was the two places where Christianity had a hold in Japan that were bombed. Very extraordinary. Anyway, then suddenly we got to Japan and we found we were going to Nagasaki after all. She never explained why, but we did. And of course when I saw that museum there at the epicentre of the bomb, and saw the pathetic remnants that were in that museum, you know, just a little twisted pair of spectacles and a molten bottle and the charcoal shadows on a wall that was all that was left of incinerated people, a few things like that, not very much in that museum. She wouldn't go in again, she sat outside. But it was in the little park around that epicentre that I started writing a poem in my head, when I saw all the paper cranes in the trees, because people came and brought their strings of paper cranes in memory of friends or relatives they'd lost, and it was winter and the trees were just blossoming with these paper cranes, it was so beautiful. But of course they blow down in the wind and the gardeners would rake them up, and I found a pile of them behind a little wicket fence with the raked up

leaves and the Coke cans and Kodak packets and these beautiful paper cranes that had cost people so much labour and so much love and so much heartache, and I gathered up masses of them and stuffed them all into my big shoulder bag and started writing a poem about them in my head. Then we went into this museum, and then later on things we did through Nagasaki and finding the little tree, the beautiful little tree with the gardener at work on it. So when we got back that night to the Youth Hostel, I knew there was a story. It was my story. And I started to write it sitting in the Youth Hostel, on the bunk at the Youth Hostel. And it was such a surprise. I mean, I'd never, never in the world imagined myself writing a story about Japan. I didn't have anything to write on. My husband had an old exam book, surplus exam book that he'd collected after supervising exams, public exams, and he always used to use one of them for our sort of travel itinerary book with our notes in it, so he gave that to me, so that's what that's written in.

That's *The miracle tree*, is it?

Yes, *The miracle tree*, yes. And strange thing, we travelled after that for about a month with Rosemary, off the beaten track, and she's a great traveller, and she wanted to go to all sorts of places that tourists don't get to, and we quite often were obviously the first *gaijin* people they'd ever seen, specially me. People used to stare at me with my white hair, because Japanese women colour their hair even though they've gone white. And so anyway, when we finally got back to Tokyo, there was an article on the front page of one of the English language Tokyo dailies. A group of Japanese writers had got together and were petitioning the government to outlaw all atomic weapons so that Japan would never go through this, or anybody else in the world, would never go through this again. It was just in tune with the way I was writing, it was extraordinary.

So again, I mean looking back, of course it went right back to my childhood, and that first photo of the atomic explosion, the mushroom cloud. No, each story has a very long journey, and I don't try to understand the story's journey, you know, I just write it as it seems to me to be written, as it speaks itself to me. And then, when I've written it and if it's published, and then people read it and start asking questions, 'Where did you get the idea from?' – I don't know how many times I've been asked that question – well, then I start to wonder or know or realise how (quiet speech in

background) I start to realise then where it's come from so many decades ago in my childhood. (laughs)

When you're writing, say, a book like that that's about war and the impact of war, are you trying to say something as well as just a story?

I don't think I'm trying to say it; I'm saying it, because that is how it is. War is so hideous, war is just so hideous, it's so destructive, it's so pointless, it's so greedy, it debases people. I heard stories about Second World War and the war in Bosnia that people have shared with me because they had to tell someone – strangers, sometimes – I wouldn't ever tell them to anybody, they're too terrible. The same with Aboriginal stories. But war is just abhorrent to me, so I guess that is what comes through in the story. I'm not deliberately – I mean, I'm not didactic by design. If the work comes over as didactic, which one person once said about one of my books, which quite surprised me – – –.

I don't think it does. I just feel that there is that sense of giving some real insight into the impact of war on ordinary people and children.

Well, when we took our children to Europe the first time, in 1974, Christopher was – well, Stephen had his [ninth] birthday while we were away and so Christopher must have been about [thirteen] and Rosemary would have been [fifteen] – – –. Anyway, we went through France, and my husband had been through France in – – –. (end of tape)

VS: END OF TAPE 3 SIDE A: TAPE 3 SIDE B

LS: Christopher was – well, Stephen had his [ninth] birthday while we were away and so Christopher must have been about [thirteen] and Rosemary would have been [fifteen] – – –. Anyway, we went through France, and my husband and I had been through France in 1953-54, when we were first married and we used to go camping in Europe in the school holidays, and the signs of war were still appalling in France. France seemed to be slower to recover from the effects of war. Well, it's a big country. And it was nothing, you know, to see shattered buildings and bullet marks in walls and all that sort of stuff. And of course, in France, there is mile upon mile upon mile of war cemeteries. They just stretch for miles over the most beautiful, fair and fertile ground of France. It's just all sown with the bodies of men who died in the First World War and the Second. It just rolls on, for mile after mile, fields of

little white crosses. It's the most appalling sight. And when we went there with our own children it just seemed even more tragic and wicked, when we were there with our own two sons. I mean, I know what war did to my husband, David, he was only twenty-two and he was a bomber pilot shot up over Germany and bringing his 'plane back. And I know – and he still has nightmares, you see. There's not many nights that I don't have to wake him up. So I know what war does to people. And the tragic waste of all those young lives, it's appalling, just appalling.

And so that was in that trip that I started writing *The angel with a mouth organ*, when I met Carl Hollander and we'd been to Anne Frank's house in Amsterdam and I'd already met Carl Hollander at the House of Lords in London. He was over there with his author friend – oh, Paul Biegel. Anyway. And he invited me to come and see him in Amsterdam. Well, we weren't going to go to Holland on that trip because David and I had been there and we wanted to go to Hungary that trip because I had Hungarian friends who'd escaped from the War, and I was very, very (pause) – well, I very much wanted to see Hungary. And so we were just going to skip past Holland. But Carl really wanted to see us again, see me again, and so we went to Holland and that was when we took the children to Anne Frank's house, and then that night I met up – David and I met up with Carl, and he asked what we'd been doing that day and I told him how we'd taken the children to Anne Frank's house, and at that stage I thought I might write an article about Anne Frank and the books she'd been able to read while she was incarcerated in that house – well, virtually incarcerated; in hiding. And when I mentioned Anne Frank it was as if I'd pulled a plug out of Carl Hollander. He just poured forth his story of what it was like growing up as a little boy in Holland during the War, and as he was telling it I could see the story and I could see the illustrations of it and they were black and white and grey and red. I don't often see the illustrations for a story. And I said to him, 'Carl, if I write about this, will you illustrate it?' And he said, 'No, Christobel, I couldn't. It was too terrible, I wouldn't want to do that. Anyway, I don't think it's a story for children.' Well, anyway, all the rest of that trip – and we travelled quite extensively through Europe – – –: We did go to Hungary and that in fact became part of *No gun for Asmir*, that was how I could write about Hungary, escaping through Hungary, and that was an extremely moving experience, because Hungary was then very firmly under communist domination and the people were very apprehensive and it

was quite a scary place to be. Anyway. But in the end I went back to Carl Hollander – David and the children went to a rowing or sailing camp or something, they did something for the children, music camps and things – and I just went back to see Carl before we left Europe, and I stayed in his studio. And we talked again about the story, and he was quite definite: no, he couldn't illustrate it, and he didn't think it was appropriate. And I'd actually already started writing it in the back of my little notebook, and I was basing it around a barrel organ because barrel organs are so important in Amsterdam, and we had *loved* the barrel organs when we were there the first time we went there in the time of the bulb season many years before in the '50s. And I just loved those barrel organs. And I started this story about a little boy and a barrel organ and a birthday, and I was working it around that. And no, he didn't want to do it. And so I said, 'All right, well, it's your story; I won't do it.' And I didn't write any more. And then, when I went back a couple of years later[9] and stayed in Munich at the International Youth Library where I had the stipendiate – well, on that trip, on that first trip, when I met Carl, strangers would sort of talk to you, but they wouldn't talk much about the War, on buses and trams and trains and things. And then, on the second trip, when I came back in '76, only two years later, it sort of had changed. People were opening up, and perfect strangers used to tell me what had happened to them during the War. It was quite uncanny. I was always sort of going around in a gooseflesh state because people would share these stories with me, and a couple of people I got to know quite well. Well, one was a professor at Göttingen University, and he took me – he had been a refugee child from East Germany – and he took me right to the border where the great wire fence goes across the landscape, and it was just wild, unpopulated landscape, farmland and almost desolate, and there was one cherry tree there, growing up against this great, terrible wire fence. And the moon, the full moon, was coming out. I've never forgotten it, the stillness and the isolation and the despair of that landscape. And he told me about how he had escaped as a tiny child with his mother and little brother. And so people were sort of telling me stories all the time. Anyway, in Munich, again in 1976-77 – now, David brought the children over in the summer holidays, because it was Christmas over there, and so they came over to join me for six weeks while I

[9] 1976-77.

was there for three months – and buying the gingerbread rocking-horse in the market, in the *Christkindlmarkt* for the children, and they didn't want to eat it, started me off on *The magic saddle* and other things, because I'd had a rocking-horse as a child and so that sort of gave me the idea for that, I could see afterwards.

And then *Lexl and the lion party* happened when I saw – Munich is full of lions because the lion is the symbol of Bavaria, and so there are lions in all shapes and forms and colours and images all around the place and I loved them. And on the very first night I was there, before David and the children came, I was taken to the opera by my landlady and her son, who were opera addicts, and afterwards this beautiful young man, who later became a Roman Catholic priest, put me under his great big black umbrella and took me out into the snow which was gently falling on this November night and led me to the gates, from the opera house to the gates of the *Residenz* and showed me the lions on the gateposts and the little fellows on the shields, and told me that if I rubbed their noses I would have good luck all the time I was in Munich. Led me along, and I rubbed their noses. And then, of course, after that I started seeing lions everywhere. But it wasn't until nearly towards the end of the time I was going, I took a tram into a different part of Munich to go and visit the children's library there. I'd met the librarian and she'd invited me to come and see her library, which was decidedly inferior (laughs) to any Australian children's library. But, anyway, I was on this tram going into a different suburb, and it was along the Isar, the river that runs through Munich, and it was winter and the icicles were hanging off the trees along the river, it was *magic*, and I'd never lived in snow before and it really was magic. It does, just does something, it brings a fairy-tale quality into the landscape, into life. And there, as we rounded a corner, was this monument with these great lions with their little caps of snow sitting on top of them. And immediately I knew I had a story about a lion, and that was how I came to write *Lexl and the lion party*. And it wasn't until years later that I realised that – well, (a) I thought it was because I'd always loved the story of Androcles and the lion, which my father used to read to me patiently, many, many times. But it wasn't until years after the book was published that I was up speaking at a Children's Book Council conference in Sydney at Abbotsleigh – which was the Anglican Church school at Wahroonga where I'd lived as a child, although I went to the Presbyterian one down at Pymble – and there was this huge conference there, it was a great hall full of

people, and *Lexl and the lion party* must have been pretty new then because I talked about it, and then somebody afterwards said, 'Christobel, I'll take you back to where you lived in Wahroonga,' and I said, 'Oh, I don't think I want to go.' And she said, 'Oh yes, come on! It's not far from here, I'll take you.' It was over the other side of the railway line. Anyway, we drove back, and as we were driving along we went around a corner and there, on the corner, was a small monument with a lion at the base. And I said, 'Stop, stop!' And we got out and had a look at it, and it was a monument to the first Marconi broadcast from Australia to England. It had come from this place. And the house on that corner was a pretty little old house with a lovely old garden and a big tennis court out the back, and I had written my first story about a silvereye's nest I'd found in the wire netting of that tennis court. And there was an old man who lived in that house with a black beret, and every morning – and a little white moustache – and every morning, as we walked to school, he would be there at the gate, greeting us girls as we walked past. And then, when we told our mother he'd been giving us sweets, my mother got very upset and told us we were never to go that way again. And we kids used to feel very embarrassed – we'd cross over the road and walk on the opposite side of the road and he'd call out 'hello' to us and so on, and we'd pretend not to hear. And then, in the end, we decided we'd go another way. Well, looking back on it, of course, I can see now, he was probably the man, and that was where that historic thing had happened. It was quite uncanny: that lion had fixed itself in my subconscious on this little monument, you see. It was just a fraction of the size of the one I saw in Munich, and there was a king up on top of the one in Munich, of course, but that was it. And the uncanny part was that, when Astra Lacis did the illustrations, the little grandfather in the story was the dead ringer of this man. It was really very strange. Anyway, to cut a long story short to get back to your point – (laughs) whatever it was! – – –.

You were talking about *The angel with a mouth organ* – war, basically, yes.

Yes. Well, then I tried my stories in Germany as picture books, and nobody wanted them there. They were into realism. Well, realism's what I write in Australia and people always used to say to me, 'Why don't you write fantasy?' Well, I don't; I write realism in Australia. But in Europe, in the snow, fantasy was everywhere, you see, but that wasn't what German publishers were interested in at that stage. No,

thank you. They didn't want *Lexl and the lion party* or *The magic saddle*. So I brought them back with me and didn't do anything with them for a while, I thought, 'Ah, well,' you know, 'that's that.'

And then, for some reason, Margaret Hamilton, who was then at Hodder, who published a lot of my books, for some reason I decided I'd send them to her, because Australia was starting to get multicultural, very self-consciously multicultural, and sort of librarians were saying, you know, 'We should have more multicultural books,' and all this sort of – as if you can manufacture multicultural books. I mean, as if they'd be any good. So 'Oh, well, I'll try them with Margaret.' Anyway, she's not a good correspondent or communicator and so I didn't hear anything, which wasn't unusual. And then suddenly, months later, I came home one day and there, at a door that we seldom ever used except if we were just going out into the garden from the sitting room – it wasn't a door we used at all, much – I happened to find a large packet from Margaret Hamilton, and when I opened it it had these lovely illustrations for *Lexl and the lion party*, and the illustrator had just caught the night blue of the Munich sky, which is a wonderful blue, and she'd caught the colour of the snow, and the colour of the ice. She just caught all these colours that were perfect. And they were only rough drafts. But it was just *it*. And I rang her up straight away and I said, 'Oh, look, I've never seen any colour work by Astra Lacis before.' She used to do pen-and-ink drawings for the school magazine. 'These are perfect. How did she know that those are just the colours?' And Margaret Hamilton said to me, 'Oh, well, she was a refugee child in Germany during the War.' I said, 'Well, these are perfect.' So she said, 'Oh, well, I'd like you to meet her. Next time you come to Sydney I'll arrange for a meeting.' So the next time I was in Sydney was to do something for Penguin at Myer's – or it wasn't Myer's, it was Farmer's then – a children's holiday thing. And then Margaret arranged for Astra and I to meet – Astra and me to meet – at lunch. And I was so keen I got there a day early. I went and fronted up to the reception in the dining room at the Hilton and said, 'I'm a guest of Mrs Hamilton.' And they looked up, 'No Mrs Hamilton booked for today.' (laughs) 'Tomorrow, madam.' Anyway, when Astra and I met, again, it was just as if I'd pulled a plug out of her. I said, 'How did you know?' Away she went, she started telling me her story of what it had been like as a refugee child leaving Latvia

and fleeing and finally being interned in Bavaria, you see, the southern part of Germany.

And then she started to tell me the story of her father's search for his family. because he'd been separated from the family, and his search for them after the War when *thousands* of people were looking, Europe was *awash* with people looking for their loved ones and unable to go back to their homes in many instances, because it was all occupied by Russia. And so these – and she told me how he'd found the little fragment of glass and how it had been with him as a talisman ever since. And David and I had been to Ulm Cathedral when we were in Munich. On New Year's Day we'd gone out to Ulm, and it was the beginning of Epiphany – anyway, it was a big religious festival, and we approached Ulm and it had all been rebuilt, the cathedral, and you can see the spire for miles in the landscape, you know, as you're coming in the train for miles and miles and miles you can see this wonderful spire on the horizon – and then we walked along and we could hear the music coming out of this place, and we stepped inside the door, and as if you were being lifted up on angels' wings, the music was divine. So we'd been there, we'd had this experience of the power of that place. Then to find this was where Astra Lacis' father had found this treasured little fragment of glass was extraordinary, really extraordinary. So she sat there telling me all this with the tears running down her face, and I sat there with the tears running down my face and Margaret sat there eating, and I said, 'If I write this story, would you illustrate it?' And she said, 'Yes.' And I said to Margaret, 'Would you publish it?' And she said, 'Yes.'

So I came home, and I was telling David all about it, and I was thinking, 'Oh, I should have asked her this and I should have asked her that and I wish I'd asked her this and I wish I'd asked her that. I'll have to ring her up, and – – –.' Anyway, we went down to Mulberry Cottage, and I can remember I sat up in bed in the children's room, which looked out onto the almond field, in an old bed that used to be in my home when I was a child and it was a bed that had come from my mother's home when she was young, and I sat up in this bed and the story just poured out of me. I didn't have to ask anybody anything. And I came home and I typed it up and I sent it off to Margaret Hamilton and she – tears poured out of her when she read it and she accepted it straight away. And then Astra (pause) began to think about illustrating it, but then her husband got very ill – not her husband, her father. Her

father was very ill. And I was up in Sydney doing some work at a library, Minto Public Library, and I was staying with the librarian, Sue Parks, and I was sleeping in Sue's study. And early one morning – and I was going to see Astra that day – and the 'phone rang really early and it was still dark, and it woke me, and I was groping round this room looking for the 'phone in the dark. Anyway, it was Astra, who rang to say her father had just died. (pause) So I thought then, 'Oh, well, she won't want to do the book now.' But she was very brave. She decided she would go ahead and do the book, and it was a sort of therapy for her, really. And I thought she did it so beautifully.

And so many people, when that book first came out, so many people used to say of the illustrations of the camps, 'That was the camp my parents were in.' And so many people recognized – you know, she was so true to the way she depicted it. And of course it's Astra's story and it's Carl Hollander's story and it's a whole lot of people's stories, it isn't anybody's story – you know, it's not one person's story, it's just an amalgam of things. I made up the fact that the father had lost his arm and Astra hated that. If you have a look at the pictures you will see that she's never – she could never depict the father without an arm. If you look at the pictures you'll see that he's always got people grouped around him so that it's not obvious that he doesn't have an arm. So I loved the illustrations she did for that book.

Would you like to comment on the fact – you said that in the beginning someone said, 'That's not a book for children.' Is that what you're talking about, the realism that the stories you're telling are quite real and quite, as you said, in the last interview, can make people cry? Do you want to talk about that in relation to children's literature?

Well, I mean, children do go through terrible things. Truly horrendous, shocking things. And they're subjected to all sorts of horror and violence, manufactured horror and depravity on television and through videos and all that sort of thing, but at the same time – and people don't complain too much about that, and yet some people complain when it's in a book, which I think is totally irrelevant, I mean illogical, when stories like this one – and other ones like *How Hitler stole Pink Rabbit* and ones like that – you know, are truly based on what children have had to go through. So I think it's having two standards, being very double-standard about that sort of thing.

Have you had that reaction, then, that people have responded – – –?

Well, not directed at these books, but in general people say, 'Oh,' you know, 'that's too hard for children or children shouldn't have to know about that, let them be children.' But from the response I've had from *No gun for Asmir*, I mean, the response has just been overwhelming, and there's hardly been a person – child or adult – who hasn't said, 'It's made me realise how lucky we are to live here in Australia.' And the children say, 'Oh, I don't know how Asmir got on without his father like that, it must have been terrible for him,' or 'I can just imagine if that were my little brother' or 'my big brother' – people have put themselves into that situation through that story, and they say, 'Oh, we've seen it all on the television and we've read about it in the paper, but it's reading the story that's made it seem real to us, helped us understand.' In fact, I was speaking to an eighty year-old lady the other day, and she said, 'Someone lent me one of your books, the one about the little boy,' and I said, 'Oh, yes?' I threw up a few titles: 'No, no, it wasn't that.' 'Oh,' I said, '*No gun for Asmir*.' 'Oh, yes, that one. Oh,' she said, 'it was very good.' And she said, 'I never understood it really, you know, I've seen it on the television but it never meant much to me. But oh,' she said, 'I can understand now – – –.' It really has touched people's hearts. That's the power of a story. It can get inside people's hearts and minds much more than a television image or something like that can. I mean, they can be horrendous, they can stay with you forever, but I don't think so long as you're not doing it for the sake of horror, shock and sales, or any of those reasons, so long as you're doing it with empathy and respect for the person or persons whose story has inspired you, I think it's totally legitimate.

But what I was going to tell you about Astra was that I kept in touch with Astra for a very long time. I always used to see her when I went to Sydney, and at that stage I was Authors' Representative on the PLR[10] Committee, so I used to go to Sydney two or three times a year, and Astra lived fairly near the airport, and I'd always try to make time to see her either coming or going. Anyway, at that stage there was the Canberra CAE[11], as it was then, the Lu Rees Archives and all that, in

[10] Public Lending Right.

[11] College of Advanced Education.

children's literature, they were doing a bibliography of me and they wanted an illustration of me. They were using some from the book, but they also wondered if they could have an illustration, and perhaps instead of a photo could they have a drawing? And I thought, 'Oh, Astra could do that. I wonder if Astra would.' So I asked her and she said she would. Anyway, I went out there one morning and Astra started to do a drawing of me, and it was at the time when I was doing *Survival in our own land* and I'd been on it for years, and I was deeply traumatised by that book, and I was very fragile inside, though I appeared to be holding together to everybody else. People didn't realise how profoundly affected I was by that book. And, as I sat there posing for Astra, I was deliberately – well, sort of praying and giving thanks, and I was doing an alphabetical prayer of artists and composers. I was going through, 'Thank you, God, for giving us ...' And 'Thank you, God, for giving us Beethoven. Thank you, God, for giving us Chopin. Thank you, God for giving us Dvorjak.' I was going through alphabetically, using my mind and also trying to – and time after time I'd hear Astra sighing and she'd rip a page off and throw it on the ground. And then after a while she just put down her pencil and she said, 'Christobel, I can't do you. I can't do it.' And I said, 'What's the matter, Astra?' She said, 'Look at these.' And she was seeing me as I was inside. It was quite uncanny. They were the most haunted faces. She actually could see how I was feeling. She couldn't see me sitting there on the outside; she just kept – it was all that would come out of her pencil. She gave them to me. I don't know what I've done with them, I was trying to think of them the other day, where they are.

I will just have to stop you there so you don't get cut off.

END OF TAPE 3 SIDE B: TAPE 4 SIDE A

This is the second tape of the second interview with Christobel Mattingley being recorded for the Honoured Women's Oral History Project of the State Library of South Australia. The interview is taking place on the 24th June 2001 at Stonyfell.

July.

Sorry, July! Gone back a month. July 2001 at Stonyfell in South Australia. So you were talking a little bit about that relationship with one of the illustrators. That for me, I guess, is an interesting part of the whole – particularly for, more, the picture books where the illustrations are so important to the story. Can you talk a little bit about what kind of relationships you've had with illustrators, and how much say I guess you have in how they turn out?

Yes. Well, it varies according to the publisher. The selection of the illustrator is the publisher's prerogative, though sometimes I've made suggestions, as indeed I did for *The magic saddle*. I asked for Patricia Mullins because I knew Patricia and I knew that she loved rocking horses and collects them, and I asked for Patricia for *Duck boy* because I also knew – because I used to visit her a lot when I went to Melbourne – that she had an old Muscovy duck, Mother Duck, out in the back garden of her tiny little house at Fitzroy, and so I knew she loved ducks and she would do it well. But Angus and Robertson – well, Patricia was a very successful artist and she had a long waiting time and they wanted to get the book out, and they'd tried three other artists, who were all hopeless, and I kept saying, 'I don't want them, I don't want them.' So in the end Patricia did it. And I just love the cover of *Duck boy*, it's one of the covers I love most of all my books, she just caught the mother duck and the little ducklings. So in early days I didn't have any say at all about publishers, about illustrators, and of course I was working with illustrators in England, and I think I might have said to you last time my children thought it was funny, because I had to do projects for my illustrators in England and send them pictures of magpies and whatever.

But then, when I started to be published in Australia, I did start to make contact with some of the illustrators, but again it depended on the editor, very much so. When Anne Ingram, who was a publisher at Collins, was doing *Black dog*, she did choose a South Australian illustrator, and it was the first time I'd ever had a South Australian illustrator. But she forbade me to have anything to do with him. It was Craig Smith, (laughs) and she absolutely forbade me to have anything to do with him because she didn't want me to influence him. Well, when I saw the first rough drawings I was horrified, because that story is about a little girl and a librarian, and Craig had portrayed the archetypal stereotyped librarian with a bun and – little old lady with bun and glasses. And I was appalled. And a library that looked pretty dull. So I was appalled, and I sneaked off and I saw Craig and sort of said, you know, 'This won't do. All librarians will hate us both forever. This book will never sell.' And I said the same thing to Anne Ingram. He redid them, and [was Highly Commended in the Australian Book Publishers' Awards in 1980] – I think it was his first picture book. And again I was rather disappointed in Anne, because it was cheaper to do black and white illustrations, and books with my name on them

already sold – his name wasn't known – and she knew she could bring out a black and white book and it would sell. And I always felt very disappointed with that. (laughs) It's since come out in a Penguin, in a Puffin, and it was one of the first of the Aussie Nibble books, and it's still in black and white. Craig Smith re-illustrated it, and I just had a fax from Kay Ronai, the editor, the other day, and she said it's their best-selling Aussie Nibble.

That's *The first friend*, is it?

Yes, it's now called *First friend*.

It's a different title.

Yes. So that was rather funny. After that, Pamela Allen brought out a book called *Black dog*, so there was always a certain amount of confusion about *Black dog*. But I was there first. (laughs) So that was Craig. Oh, sorry, go on.

Oh, if you're continuing on the illustrators, that's fine.

Oh, I was just going to go on about other illustrators.

Yes, that's good, yes, do so, yes.

Yes, well, I've had a lot of illustrators, some more successful than others. I really hated the illustrations for the first edition of *Tiger's milk* – I thought they were a disaster. And when – at that stage the book was being printed up in Brisbane, and Brisbane was inundated with extraordinary floods, and Angus and Robertson rang me up in some concern saying, 'Oh, Christobel, we're awfully sorry. Your book's in the floods,' and it was going to be launched here in Adelaide sort of not *in* Writers' Week but during Writers' Week, and I thought, 'Oh, good, well, now we'll have a chance, we'll get a better illustrator.' And then they rang up a few days later, 'Oh, it's all right, it was up on the fourth floor of the building.' (laughter) Then they brought it out a second time with a different cover, which I also hated – they had mauve curtains, which I didn't think was really very appealing to boys – and then the third time they brought it out with Anne Spudvilas, and she did a fantastic job on it. So the paperback it's in now was Anne Spudvilas.

Now, Anne Spudvillis was the illustrator who did *The race*. Now, *The race* was waiting in the wings for a very long time. It was nineteen and a half years from the time I wrote that story until it got published, and that had sat in the publishers' too

hard baskets for many, many, many, many years because it was about a subject that they thought wouldn't appeal, nobody would want to read a story about a boy with hearing loss. But again, that was a story that grew out of my childhood because my father was deaf, and when an editor at Ashton Scholastic, as it was then, rang me up and asked me for a story for an anthology they were going to do, an anthology about children with disabilities – normally I would run a mile rather than write a story to order or to a given topic, but as soon as she said it I thought, 'Yes, I can do that. I can write about a child with a hearing loss.' And I'd had an incident involving a child with a hearing loss that had already given me an idea for a story. So I said, 'Yes, yes, I'll do that.' And there were constraints on, it had to be a thousand words, and so on, and it turned out I could write that story very easily. And when I was writing it I thought, 'Oh,' you know, 'it's a bit of a pity for this story to end up in an anthology, just lost in an anthology.' Well, anyway, I tried it out with several teachers who were interested in my work, and the children finally guessed that the boy had a hearing loss and wasn't just inattentive. And then another teacher, who actually worked with deaf children. And so I had checked it out. I don't always check out my stories like that before I send them away. That's the exception, but in this case I thought I would. Anyway, off it went. And then I got another 'phone call from this editor – oh, look, the two rosellas are out there now.

Oh, beautiful.

And there's a whole swarm of lorikeets in the gum blossom across the road. Anyway, he said, 'Oh, look, Christobel, I'm afraid we can't use your story.' And I said, 'Oh, why not?' And he said, 'Oh, well, it puts teachers in such a bad light.' The first teacher didn't recognize that the child had a problem. And, you know, 'Teachers won't like that and teachers won't buy our books and they won't buy our books here in Australia or New Zealand or Canada or England' because of my story. So I said, 'Oh, well, that's all right.' I was rather pleased, really, I thought it really ought to be a picture book. So I started to send it off to people hoping they'd be interested in it as a picture book. And one publisher, who shall be nameless, wrote back and said, well, I hadn't submitted it in time to be published for the International Year of the Disabled, as if there weren't going to be children with hearing losses

long after that year had gone! (laughs) And so it went on. And then I got involved with *Survival in our own land* and nothing of mine got done at all.

And then, towards the end of that, I think it must have been – or it may have been after I'd finished that book, I can't remember now – Meg Doyle rang up from Scholastic. She'd just been appointed, it was her first week as an editor at Scholastic, and I'd known Meg slightly, and I knew her brother better, and I used to see them and the family sometimes when I went to Sydney, and Meg had always been interested in my work. So she rang me to say she'd really like one of my books on her list, and what was I writing now. And I said, 'I'm not writing anything now, I'm just recovering from getting over this enormous marathon, the Aboriginal book, and I don't ever know whether I'll write again, I'm so exhausted, burnt out.' She said, 'Oh, well, you must have something, something tucked away in your cupboard.' And I said, 'Oh. Oh, well, yes, as a matter of fact, I have.' And I told her the story of this thing that I wrote at request of Scholastic in the long ago. And I told her the rigmarole about it and she said, 'Oh well, that was all a long time ago and he's gone now. And so I'd like to have a look at it.' So I sent it off, she rang up soon as she'd read it, loved it, wanted to do it. But then it took another couple of years because, well, (a) they wanted to try and tie it in with a foreign publisher and do a bigger print run which was more viable, so it sort of loitered about on US publishers' desks for a long time to no avail, and then finally they decided they'd go it alone. And there was the usual hunt for an illustrator, and Meg Doyle had noticed Anne Spudvilas' work on covers – Anne had only ever done covers before – and she approached her and asked if she'd be interested in illustrating it. And she was. I mean, she wasn't fast, but I've never worried about that, I never put pressure on illustrators. I think they need the time they need, and I don't like publishers to put pressures on illustrators, I think it's most unfair. So yes, nineteen and a half years later the book came out. Some people said it was the best book I'd ever written. (laughs)

You did receive a commendation or something in –

Yes, it was an Honour Book [in the Children's Book Council 1996 Awards].

– the Australian Human Rights Awards.

Yes, a High Commendation. Yes, it did that in 1995. And Anne also got the Crichton Award for the first picture book. So two illustrators have – oh no, no, no, that wasn't what Craig got. He got – no, he got a Book Publishers' Award for *Black dog*.

I was going to bring that book up, actually, because of the fact that it had won that, been commended for the Australian Human Rights Awards, because it seems to, I guess, symbolise what *I* see in your writing – you can tell me if I'm wrong – that there seems to be a joint thing between your concern for social justice and human rights and your writing for children. Would you like to speak about that?

Well, it's my belief – the rosellas are in the lavender now, I've never seen them do that before. They're going to prune it for me. (laughter) – it's my belief that, if you're a truly creative writer – go easy, fella! Look at him! – if you're a truly creative writer, what you are comes out in what you write. I mean, nothing comes from nothing, nothing ever has, you know. What you write about has to come from somewhere. I mean, I only write things that I want to write. I never write anything to order, and sometimes publishers said to me, 'Now you can write something you really want to write,' and I look at them, I think, 'Well, I want to write everything I've written – I wouldn't have written it otherwise. Why would I write it if I didn't want to write it? Save that tree, and save everybody else's time in the process.' So I've only ever written what I feel strongly about, and I feel strongly enough so that a story erupts from it. So that was how I came to write that one, when I was asked and I had already seen – met a family who had a little girl with a hearing loss and whose father had worked out this way of giving her a signal so she could compete in races. So it was – they're all spontaneous, the stories are quite spontaneous, because I do feel strongly about things.

Do you want to talk a little bit about some of the things you do feel strongly about?

Oh, well, I feel terribly strongly about social injustice and the greed and the selfishness there is in the world, and the blindness to the misery and the anguish that there is in the world, and how people are unwilling to step out of their comfort zones because of other people's sadness. I mean, that's a generalisation; a lot of people do, there are a lot of people doing an awful lot of very good things, and there are all sorts of wonderful organisations that are trying to make the world a better place, and I

support a terrific lot of them! (laughs) If you could only see the pile of newsletters I get. So I'm committed to making the world a better place, and I realise how blessed I've been. I've had a *golden* life, compared with most people, and I want to pass some of that on and make the world more bearable, make lives more bearable for people who've got disabilities and disadvantages of a kind that most of us can hardly even imagine in the sort of comfortable life we have here in Australia, in the middle class of which I'm a part. So that matters to me, that in the end, when I've gone, I will have done what God wanted me to do here on earth. And I believe he gave me a gift as a writer, and maybe losing my little twin sister was part of that, maybe that feeling of needing to reach out to people. And (pause) being obedient, and using the gift he's given me, even though it comes at a great price. People don't realise the cost.

Would you like to talk about that side of it?

(long pause) Don't think I can, really. Not at this moment, anyway.

That's all right.

No. People look on it very superficially, you know. They think it's a nice hobby and that you are lucky and they would write a book if they only had the time, and all that. (laughs)

That's one of the subjects of the, I guess, the Honoured Women's series, is about women who are in those fields where they are contributing, and perhaps some of those conflicts. So perhaps you could talk about some of this.

Well, the vocation. I consider writing is my vocation, and it's something that you do. I mean, *Survival in our own land* was by far the worst and most crucifying book I've ever done and I just knew I had to hold in there and go on with it, otherwise the Aboriginal people would never get their book. And I just knew I just had to suffer all their pain to be able to write about it, and I had to suffer all the pain that was being heaped on me by people who didn't understand, and the alienation and the anger that people were directing at me because of their own guilt and their own consciences and their own unwillingness to face up to the truth that 'White Australia has a Black history', as the slogan was for one National Aborigines Week – there never was a better slogan. And people, some people, are starting to come to terms with that now, through Reconciliation. But when I was doing that book there was

just no understanding whatever of that, and no willingness to understand – no willingness to listen, no willingness to look. That book did an *enormous* amount to open people's eyes and – I mean, some of those photos, those images, are just so appalling. I used to sit in the archives going through these two terrible great boxes of stuff that was just in a great big jumble. Seems to be my lot to go through archival boxes of jumble, like I did for *King of the Wilderness*. How many of them I did that had never been sorted or dealt with in any way, or understood, and I just used to sit there, you know. I could hardly see for the tears, just looking at these haunted eyes looking out at me from these photographs. And the dignity that people managed to retain even in the most humiliating circumstances in which they were photographed and in the way they were treated, and used as scientific specimens or menial labour or prostitutes or whatever, you know. And [the] anger I used to feel for those people, the powerlessness I used to feel for them and the frustration, you know. Nobody would listen and nobody would hear, and nobody would understand, and (pause) even the letters I used to write to the paper got twisted and misrepresented, and – oh, you know, the opprobrium that was loaded onto me. Oh, you know, they were just incredible years.

Did you stop writing your children's literature in the period you were writing *Survival*?

Oh, heavens, yes. I never wrote anything. The only thing I wrote was that one short story, and that was published in *Dreamtime* by the Viking Press. It was an anthology by children's writers. And I was offended by the title they gave it, *Dreamtime anthology* – I thought it was rather insensitive. But anyway, I mean, the only story that I could possibly have had in me then was Aboriginal, it was about an Aboriginal youth who had applied for a position with me as an assistant. Part of my contract at the beginning was to train Aboriginal people as researchers, but there was Aboriginal politics in that appointment, and this boy didn't get it the first time round, although I would have been willing to have taken him on and several others. Although it was not exactly the quick way to get the work done, because they were just totally unskilled and not very (pause) – not very suited to the work, which was extremely difficult emotionally. Anyway, a young woman was appointed and she was going through all sorts of traumas in her own life, and after a while she tried to

commit suicide, which was terrible. And there were some people who were going to say that it was the way I'd treated her. It wasn't, and she knew that, and she tried to scotch that story. I have since found out what it was in her own circumstances. Anyway, but that meant that the position was readvertised. When that girl – I started with her at the Museum, because that was going to be the easiest way for her in, through the images rather than through the text in the archives because that's got to be very carefully read and understood as to how you manage the documents, and so on. I mean, how you are going to find things in the documents. I thought, well, the pictures were the easiest way to start. So we started with the collection at the Museum which is very substantial, and it freaked her out. Although she was quite an urbanised person, there were things there that she knew she shouldn't be seeing and I shouldn't have been seeing them either, and so I always worked ahead of her, and anything that I thought was inappropriate I just put on one side, just put face down so she didn't even have to be aware of it. One of the amazing things that I found there, the Museum has a very big, extensive collection – in fact, all the collection, I suppose, of the Taplin material. Taplin was the missionary who started Point McLeay, and there was a lot of material for Point McLeay from its inception. And one of the photos I showed her, I said, 'Look at this, Agnes, isn't this quite a charming photo?' And she looked at it and she said, 'That's my grandfather.' He and his sibling were twins, and their family had only ever had half that photograph, the half with her grandfather. They had had one photo in that family and they'd torn it in half and shared it. And that was how deprived Aboriginal people were of the photos that were taken of them. They were the subject, but they never got them back, they were never given them. And so, after that, you know, if ever I came across photographs that I could trace to living people, I always had them copied – and the same with documents – and made sure people got what was relevant to their histories. But anyway, it all became too much for her, and so they readvertised the position. And, to my grief, this lad came back again from up in the Flinders with two even less likely lads, and they were interviewed. And anyway, because of Aboriginal politics, he didn't get it again, and I subsequently learnt that he – no, I've got it wrong. No, he was in the first round of interviews, that's right. Anyway, he was in the first round of interviews. And when he learnt he didn't get it he went home and whether he got drunk or not I don't know, I suppose it might be part of the

story, but he put his fist through a plate glass door, cut the tendons and all that. Anyway, I found out that he was in Adelaide having medical treatment and so on and went to see him in hospital, and used to take him around with me when I was doing some of this research for a while, and the dear kid – he was on a pension thing – and one day there came this lovely card that he'd written on with his left hand thanking me. Anyway, I wrote a story about him. That was the only thing I wrote the whole of those eight years. I sent a copy to him. When it was published in the book I sent it. I took it, I took it to him. I went up there and I found him. But I've lost touch with him, I don't know where he is now. I tried to keep in touch with him and encourage him to do things with his life, but I don't know what's happened to him now.

Did you miss that aspect of your writing during those years, what you gained from – – –?

Oh, heavens, no, there wasn't time to miss anything. There was just so much to do for that book. There was just so much to do. With all those photos, I looked at *thousands* of photos, there was all that stuff in the archives, and a lot of it was, you know, in handwriting, in old, old handwriting, tatty old letters and all that, you know. And there was the oral history to be collated. First of all, I wasn't supposed to be collecting, it was supposed to be done by Aboriginal people, and I had to organise all the tape recording equipment. I mean, that wasn't me, but I had to do it, I had to go and check out all the different sorts of tape recorders there were, and by the time the committee would make up their mind about it, well, then, that's sort of been out of stock or not available and all of that, and I had to get travelling cases made for them and I had to track around and try and get cheap tapes at discounts, plead a sob story that this was for a good project and dadadada, and all that – it took me *months* to get all that whole thing set up. We only ever got one tape back from the whole lot. Never got any of the tape recorders back. And then, after a year and there was nothing, and then the committee said to me, 'Well, you'd better start doing it.' And in the first place I hadn't been allowed, and then I was told, 'It's time you got on with it.'

Getting back to the link between what you believe in and the fact that you said that you write because of what your beliefs are, how much does the Christian side of your upbringing come into your work, do you think?

Well, not deliberately. Not overtly – though it did in *The sack*, to a certain extent, because that started off because of the grocery trolley at our church, that was what triggered it off. I went off one day – David usually buys the stuff and puts it in. We always give Weetbix and powdered milk because we think if people have a good breakfast at least they've started the day right. So regardless of whether they're saying they want soup or tuna or whatever, that's what we (laughs) always give. But one day I was doing the shopping – which was rare, because David usually does it, to save me. I don't like supermarkets – anyway, I was in a different supermarket, an even bigger, more overwhelming one, and as I was wandering around I thought, 'I wonder what some mother would like to find in her grocery parcel.' It was just when school was going back in February and I was thinking, 'Now, if I were a mother who had to rely on grocery parcels, what would I like to find so I could give my kids a treat?', you see. So I went round looking for the most cheese sticks in a packet and the most chocolate biscuits in a packet and – you know, best buy of this, this and this, this, that would be treats for kids. And this was when I was still coming out of *Survival in our own land*, and was really thinking I would never write again because I had been through such severe depression and such severe trauma. And I knew that, until I got rid of all that anger and stuff, that I could never write again, I would be no use as a writer. Anyway – and I'd done a lot of things to try to get rid of that. I'd been to Caux in Switzerland, an MRA[12] place, and I'd been to Taizé [in France] and I'd done all sorts of things to try to lay that burden down. – – –. (end of tape)

VS: END OF TAPE 4 SIDE A: TAPE 4 SIDE B

LS: Anyway, that February day I was going down to our cottage to pick the almonds, and I was by myself, and that night I woke up in the middle of the night and the story of *The sack* had started in my head. I knew the title and I knew that first paragraph, and it was as if God was just saying to me, 'It's all right, you're not finished yet, I've still got work for you to do.' And I realised then, well, you know, I was a child of the Depression and my mother's stories – not that she harped on about it, but she had a few little stories, the story of the basket of goodies that came from

[12] Morel Re-Armament.

the country every week and just the way she lived, you know, so frugally and making do and turning old things into new all the time in the dressmaking and the knitting and all that, so that it had left its mark indelibly on her and on me, too, you see. I mean, I never throw away a bread crust or anything at all. Nothing gets thrown out in this kitchen until it's just to the last stages of compost – and the same with clothes and that sort of thing. I'm wearing things that are as old as the hills. And I guess I have a sort of – well, you know, people say, 'Why don't you go away on a good holiday?' And it just seems to me if I spent the money on a hundred dollars a night or something – which you've got to spend these days, to go anywhere – you know, just think of all the people that could live for a year on a hundred dollars! So I guess it's deeply-ingrained in me. And that child, Shane, in *The sack*, that was his first encounter, perhaps, with caring Christianity, and finding a place of refuge in a church, which can be a place of great refuge and great solace. It's a great shame that so many of them are being shut these days because of vandalism. I'm always glad when I find a church open.

Someone like Shane, can you talk a bit about how your characters evolve, I guess, where they come from.

I don't know. I don't know. I don't plan them, they just happen. I'm always looking at people, I watch people and I observe and I listen. When people used to say to me, 'Where do you get your ideas from?', I used to think to myself, 'Are you blind? Are you deaf? Can't you see the stories that are all around us, every place you go, every person you meet?' I'm stubbing my toes on stories all the time. I can't understand why people can't see the stories that are there. But I don't manufacture them. I'm doing this Nestlé workshop thing later on, next week, and they send out lists of author notes from other authors of how they conduct their workshop and how you construct a character and all that, how you construct a theme and how you construct a this and that. Oh, dear, I don't do any of that! Just happens.

Off-tape last week, we talked a bit about the fact that a lot of your characters are boys, and that you don't know particularly why that is – – –.

No. Well, as I said, we had two boys and a girl and I'm married to a husband, so there were three males in our house and two females. Our daughter was very

important to me, she was the first one who believed in me as a writer. She was a great reader from an early age, as I was as a child, and she was the one who benefited from the library at St Peter's Girls' School. It was because of her that I took on doing that. And when I started to try to write and was getting rejections, she was the one who used to say, 'Oh, you keep trying, Mum. Your stories are just as good as those in our library.' She was the one who said that, whereas David, who's been stalwart ever since, but he used to say, 'I don't know how you think you're good enough to be a writer.' He said, 'I don't know how you think' – well, that said something about him rather than about me, didn't it, but he said, 'I don't know how you think you can be.' Well, it's just a matter of believing in yourself, too. And again, believing that you've been given a gift. And I believe everyone's been given a gift, and people get surprised when I say that. Some people don't think they have a gift at all, and everyone has a gift of some kind or another, and it's up to us all to use them, and that's what's going to make the world a better place, when we all use the gift we've been given and we use it conscientiously and unselfishly. And I try to use my gift unselfishly. I mean, *Survival in our own land* I only got paid a typist's salary, seventeen thousand dollars, for a couple of years for that book. I've worked for years on that book without being paid. If I hadn't done it there wouldn't ever have been that book. And the same with the three Asmir books, I've never taken a penny for those because the grief and the pain of those people, how can I be making money out of that? So David's been very, very generous and he goes along with that, and so I always say David's supported the Australian publishing industry for twenty-five – well, it's thirty years now, really. (laughs) You don't earn enough from your writing to really make a living – not as much as I would have been paid if I'd just stayed as a librarian and got paid holidays and paid sick leave and superannuation and all the rest of the perks.

Is that part of it, do you think, being able to be a successful woman writer, that the support network that's beneath you is part of it?

I think I'm lucky to have that network, but I think I would have done it regardless. I would have totally, I wouldn't have given up. I'm not a person who gives up on things. And so I just carry on, no matter what the circumstances are.

You talked off-tape last week, too, that in the days when you were starting out there really wasn't anyone you could turn to.

No, there was no-one. There was no-one when I started. Colin Thiele was published, I don't think Max Fatchen had started to be published then – I mean, he had his column in the paper. Colin Thiele was known and loved, but I didn't know him personally and I wouldn't have approached him . There wasn't anybody to ask, nobody at all. When Barbara Ker-Wilson came to live in Adelaide, I can't think how I got to know her. But she approached me to be a publisher's reader for Angus and Robertson, and so that was when I was at Wattle Park [Teachers' College], I think, then. That was in the years at Wattle Park. And I used to go in once a week. Angus and Robertson had a little office in East Terrace, in an old house in East Terrace, and I used to sit in this little front porch area – I didn't have an office, I just had a chair in the front sort of porch – and the week's mailbag would be emptied out at my feet (laughs) and all these terrible, terrible stories! And all the time I was there there were only a couple that sort of came anywhere near being publishable, and one that I showed to Barbara she said, 'Oh, I've already seen that one, she's submitted this story a second time.' So that didn't get a goer. It subsequently got published by somebody else over in Western Australia. And the other one was – oh, the other two were the two sisters, Sally Odgers and – well, Farrell was their name then, she calls herself Sally Farrell-Odgers or Odgers-Farrell or something now. The two of them, they were two sisters, and they wrote some stories about their life on a farm in Devonport or around Devonport in Tasmania, and I knew that country and I knew that those stories rang true and they were written with integrity, and so I brought them to Barbara's attention. And they've gone on – or Sally's gone on to be quite a well-published writer. But it was just seeing the sort of stuff that is never going to make it to a publisher. And I still get people submit stuff to me and I really don't like that at all, because – well, (a) it's a tremendous additional burden, it takes up time and you've got to write back and try not to hurt people's feelings and you've got to pay to post the stuff back. It's just something I can do without and mostly, if I have the opportunity, I simply say, 'I'm sorry, but I simply can't read other people's work.' And it's not what I say in the end that's going to make a difference anyway, it's what the publisher thinks. And publishers are idiosyncratic. I mean, as my experience shows, what one publisher will dismiss or reject then another publisher will think it's marvellous. So you see it just depends on the mood of the publisher when they read the story!

In fact, I had a card yesterday from someone who'd met me at a Merit Certificates ceremony at Government House some years ago when I used to give out certificates to people who'd got merits in English, and she'd subsequently married and gone to live in Tasmania, and she didn't know I had any Tasmanian connections but she wrote this little story about an area of Tasmania I happen to know, and quite well, and she'd sent it to me without any postage and wanted my comments on it, and so I made the effort and answered it within a couple of months, and gave her some general sort of advice but I didn't edit the manuscript in any sense, but I just made some general comments and gave her some background to publishing and dealing with publishers. And that was hours of my time. And then I took the trouble to seek out her letter – none of which I ever throw away, they're all filed, they all go to the National Library eventually. So I looked for it and found it and sent her an invitation to the launch of Deny King's book because I thought, well, you know, she might learn something here. Anyway, yesterday I got a card from her – very full of herself about – – –. Oh, she'd written to Max Fatchen for advice, too, and he'd also been encouraging and now – she hasn't done anything about the suggestions that we both made, and she'd never heard of this person I'd written a biography of, but she and her husband will graciously come along! (laughter) I thought, 'Thank you.'

You talked about something earlier – I think the first time we met – about some people's attitudes towards children's books – 'Oh, when are you going to write a real book?' and all that kind of thing. Have you faced that kind of conflict from people?

Oh, constantly. Constantly. Oh, I've had it from the beginning. 'When are you going to write a proper book?' Well, sometimes, it depends on the people, I said, 'Well, aren't children proper people?' What they really mean is, 'When are you going to write a fat book?', you know. Or they'd say, 'But you always write such thin books.' As if a story has to be fat to be valid. I mean, a story is a story in its own right. It doesn't have a set number of words when it begins or when it ends. It needs the number of words it needs, it needs the number of pages it needs. And that's why a picture book is a certain constraint. I mean, people think it's easy to write picture books. Everybody thinks they can write a picture book, everybody, just everybody. They know they can't do the pictures. (laughs) They always say to me, 'Oh, I've seen your new picture book. Of course, I haven't read the story, I've just

looked at the pictures,' or else they say, 'Oh,' – when they know I've written a picture book, they say, 'Did you do the pictures?' and I say, 'No, I haven't.' 'Oh,' they say, 'oh, well, I could write a story too, but I know I couldn't do the pictures.' Everybody knows they can't do the pictures, but they all think they can do the story. Well, I mean, teachers have said that to me: 'Oh, well, I could have written that little story.' All right, well, why haven't you? I mean, all right, well, nothing's to stop you going ahead and doing it if you want to. Maybe they could have, I don't know. But it's no use putting me down because it's a little book, because on the other hand I get hundreds of letters from people who've read little books that have really spoken to them, and have *really* spoken to them. I still get them from some of my old books that are out of print. *The picnic dog*, you know, it still speaks to people. So yes, so I got that constantly, 'When are you going to write a proper book?' And so when I wrote *New patches for old*, Rosemary, our daughter, said, 'Oh, well, they can't say that to you any more, Mum, "Why don't you write a fat book?", because you've written a fat book now. This is your fat book.' (laughter) And it was, it was really quite chunky. So people are very limited in their perceptions.

And also the other thing that I feel really – I really dislike, is – well, understandably – well, I've already said to you, you know, people find you where you are in the book they have just read, well, that can't be helped, that can't be helped. That's all right, they've just read that book and if I wrote it ten years ago well, then, so be it. It's good the book's still being read. But you've got to jump right back into trying to think about what it is that has engaged them. But the other thing is that I hate it when people just use it as small talk: 'Oh, what are you writing now?' They don't really care. Or 'What's the title of your new book?' I mean, they're not going to remember it anyway. Or else, 'Oh, well, I'm writing a book too. I'm writing my family history.' I just cringe when people tell me they're writing their family history. Then they go on, you know. That's the end of the conversation as far as they're concerned. They've started it, that's all they want to talk about. Well, that's all right, that's what interests them, but please spare me. I don't really want to hear about Great Aunt Bertha any more. (laughs)

Talking about children's literature and taking you back to – I think you were talking about St Peter's Girls' School and you wanted to bring in the books that suited the children, that kind of thing, and the power of – I think you said

something like the power of literature to help a child to grow or something to that effect.

Oh, indeed.

Do you want to speak about that a little bit?

Well, I just think books have an immense influence on our lives, and the number of people who've – I mean, I've had some extraordinary stories told to me by people who've read one of my books, and when I was in Victoria many, many years ago speaking at schools along the river round Kerang, I was at a school at Kerang for a couple of days, and the librarian sent into me before school, before anybody else had the chance to meet me, she sent in a little boy whose birthday it was for me to sign his book, which was *Windmill at Magpie Creek*. And this little boy said – I said to him – and I used to ask this question in those days and I don't any more – I used to say to him, you know, 'How old are you? And what does your dad do?' And this little kid said to me, 'My dad's dead.' And he looked at me and he said, 'This book helped me to be brave when my dad died.' And then, at the end of those couple of days, I gave an evening session, and this little kid was one of the first ones that arrived. People drove for sixty miles, you know, to come to that. And this little kid came with a present for me, and he said, 'Here you are,' and he ran away. And in Kerang at that time there was a backyard industry manufacturing Aboriginal artefacts for markets overseas, cutting down the beautiful big river redgums where these migrant people – I almost sound like Pauline Hanson, but people who were not even first generation – oh, they were first generation, they certainly weren't second generation Australians – had built a palatial sort of home and in a tin shed out the back had genuine Aboriginal artefacts – I don't know where they got them, and it gave me frights when I saw some of them that shouldn't have been there, shouldn't have been people looking at them – and they had a terrible little enclosure of animals – you know, poor little things, wallabies in these little pens – and then they had big chainsaws and things there chewing up this beautiful redgum into fake boomerangs and things. And because of the dust that flies out (laughs) – I mean, it was really so funny; I ought to write a short story about it – they all had pantihose over their heads! It was bizarre. Clouds of redgum dust all flying out and these hapless boomerangs falling out the other end. And somebody had taken me there because

they knew of my interest in Aboriginal things, they thought it would be lovely for me! And I was just appalled at this place and at these things. And then they were painting them, then they were going to go off. Oh, it was shocking. Anyway, this dear little boy, he'd been to this place and he'd bought me a bullroarer, a painted bullroarer on a string. 'Here you are,' he said – because there's a bullroarer in that story, you see, the little boy, Tim, uses to keep the magpies off. I mean, you know. That's the power of a book, isn't it?

And another story, *Tiger's milk*, our children used to go to kindergarten down here in Newland Park in Lockwood Road at Erindale, and the kindergarten teacher – – –. By the time our third one came along the kindergarten teacher was an older lady, and I was on that committee and a lot of people didn't want this older lady. And I said, 'Oh, why not? Give her a go,' you know, 'she's probably got a lot of wisdom and experience.' Anyway, she was a lovely lady. Her name was Miss Lillywhite. And she did, she did have a lot of wisdom and warmth, and what I didn't know was that – at this time I was just emerging as a writer, and she was following my career, my emergence, with considerable interest. And finally she wrote me a letter after *Tiger's milk* was published, to say that she had a young – I suppose he was a great-nephew who suffered badly from asthma, and this kid had one aspiration, it was to play in the school football team. Well, anyway, he was so often so sick with his asthma and away from school and all that there was never a likelihood. And one time when he was away from school with his asthma she gave him *Tiger's milk* as a present, so he read this book and loved it and read it and read it, then started begging his mother to make tiger's milk. So the mother started making tiger's milk, the kid started drinking it, in the end he got rid of his asthma and he actually got in the school football team, and she wrote to tell me that story. I mean, it's just amazing, isn't it? And the letters I've had for Asmir, the *Asmir* books. I mean, they've just been amazing. People have been sending money, people have been collecting books and toys and, you know. People are basically good; most people are basically good. And books can affirm people, and books can encourage them and books can give them the words that express the feelings they don't know how to express.

I can remember another time when I was up at a camp and it was up in North Queensland, and I was invited to go on this school camp. I'd been working at the school for a couple of days and they were going on the camp out in the bush, and

there was a very grumpy old sort of janitor-caretaker fellow at this school. And nobody liked him much. Anyway, he was coming on the camp to do the rough stuff, I suppose. And I was giving sessions to the kids because they were just sitting round under the trees and that, and he always used to sort of hang around the back. And one time I was telling them about *New patches for old* and how this girl had felt so out of place and unhappy. And the girl at St Peter's Girls', who actually gave me the idea for that character – what a prickly, spiky little critter she was, now, nobody liked her, difficult to get on with, she was, because she was so unhappy. And anyway, at the end of this camp this chap came up to me. He said, 'Thank you for what you've been saying.' He said, 'You've put into words things I never could express.' He said, 'I want to buy that book and give it to my daughter.' He actually became the janitor in *Ghost sitter*. So he gave me something back, you see.

Is that part of, I guess, the reward for what you do, the way that people respond and what they gain?

Well, I mean, that's something money can't buy, isn't it? So you do know that you do touch people's lives, and you do change people's lives, and it is for the better. Well, my books are, at any rate. I mean, I don't think I've ever influenced anybody in a way that was negative. So that is the reward for being a writer. It's not financial. And it's not – you know, it's not in the realms of fame and celebrity and all that, because I'm not. I'm not famous. Well, that's all right. But the people who know my books and have loved them, then that validates the whole thing. And people – I mean, it makes me squirm when people will introduce me as a famous author because I'm not, and, you know, 'You will have read some of her books,' and the other person looks suitably blank (laughs) and tries not to. That's totally unnecessary, I don't need all that. But to know – and I get enough, I still get enough letters from people. In fact, there was something on Friday from Scholastic. A reader in New Zealand enquiring of my address so that she could write to thank me for one of the books I had written, and I think it's probably *The race*. I've had some very touching letters from mothers of children with disabilities because of *The race*. So I have been very blessed.

Well, that might be a good point to leave it today, because we're about to run out of tape again, and we'll see whether – I'd like to possibly come back for another session. We'll just talk about that.

END OF TAPE 4 SIDE B: TAPE 5 SIDE A

This is the third interview with Christobel Mattingley being recorded by Karen George for the State Library of South Australia's Honoured Women's Oral History Project. The interview is taking place on the 21st August 2001 at Stonyfell in South Australia.

So we had a little bit of a break and you've been off to Tasmania to launch *King of the Wilderness*, so we'll probably have to take you back a little bit to some of the books you've written in the past. And I wanted today to perhaps talk a little bit about *No gun for Asmir* and *Asmir in Vienna* and *Escape from Sarajevo*, in that we'd sort of talked a bit last time about the way that you write about things you feel strongly about, and I thought this was almost I suppose the epitome of something that would relate to that discussion.

Yes, certainly did.

Perhaps you can talk about how that really began.

Well, it began quite unexpectedly. A lot of my books, like *King of the Wilderness*, began quite unexpectedly. They were not books I expected to write. We were going to Vienna to visit our son, who had been working there for some years as the Public Affairs Manager for Central and Eastern Europe for General Motors, and we were going there to celebrate my husband's seventieth birthday, because that was where so much of European history centred, around Vienna, and my husband always taught European history. So that was the idea, it was going to be a big celebration for Dad. But before we left, we were becoming increasingly worried about the war that had broken out in the Balkans in 1990 – this was in 1992 – and the invasion of Bosnia by Serbia. And our son, Christopher, was even more concerned than we were because he had several journalists in the field there, and he had spoken to them, and he could see the writing on the wall, and he had urged them to get out while they could and that he would help them. One of these was Melita Karalic, and she actually was a Sarajevan but based in Belgrade working on a Bosnian newspaper, and the other one was actually based in Sarajevo – Milan, Milan Borojevic.

Well, just after we arrived in April of 1992, things were getting really bad, and Melita, unknown to Chris, had been urging her sister to get out of Sarajevo with her children and her mother, their mother, and this in fact had happened and Mirsada and Asmir and Eldar and the grandmother, Hatidza, had escaped on the last mercy flight out of Sarajevo. And that happened because that mercy flight was sponsored by

Melita's newspaper, and Melita happened to walk into the office one morning and hear this was about to happen. So she rang up Mirsada in Sarajevo and told her of it, and told her it was her last chance, and Mirsada thought they had no chance because the pick-up for the 'plane was due to leave in half an hour. So they just scrambled together some things and ran, they had to run three kilometres to this bus station, and their car had been bombed the night before on their way home from the hospital where they'd taken Eldar because he was ill and the doctor wouldn't come and do a house call because it was too dangerous, so they'd had to go to the hospital. And then Muris, the husband, was already at work, and so they had no chance of consulting with him, but anyway he did hear about what was happening and he managed to get to the bus station to see them before they left. And then the bus did finally get away, and they were kept in the bus for eight hours at the airport before they were allowed to board the 'plane.

Then, when they finally got to Belgrade and Melita and her Serbian husband Miroslav met them – I always think Miroslav's really the hero of these stories because he was Serbian and he risked and gave up his life as a journalist, as a prominent journalist in Belgrade, to help his wife and her Bosnian family – so Melita and Miroslav took in the little family into their two-bedroomed apartment that was already housing fourteen refugees. Well, it soon became very apparent in Belgrade at the kindergarten where Asmir went, and at the hospital where they had to take Eldar, that they were recognized as Bosnians and there was a great hostility towards them. And Chris, our son in Vienna, kept urging Melita to get out while she could before the borders closed between Hungary, which was the intervening country, and Austria. So at that stage Chris, of course, hadn't realised there were all the other complications, but then Miroslav decided this was what he had to do, and so he managed to get some black market petrol, which was very bad quality petrol, and loaded all this little family into his tiny little car – the cars over there are very small – and loaded them all in one stinking hot Sunday, or one stinking hot Saturday, it was, and set off. And of course had endless trouble with the bad petrol but, mercifully, they got across the first Hungarian border and then they didn't know, by the time they got to the other one, whether they would get through.

And in the meantime Chris had word that they were coming, and so he'd said to us, 'Well, we'd better move out of my apartment' – his apartment – 'so that they've

got somewhere to come to.' So he took leave, quite at short notice, and instead of David having his seventieth birthday in Vienna he in fact (laughs) had it out in the Austrian countryside, the beautiful, peaceful Austrian countryside. So we left the apartment and I'd scrambled round and tried to find a few toys and things and books to leave for the children, and then – but we still didn't know whether they'd get through, and Chris kept ringing his colleague, Matthias, his Austrian, Viennese colleague in Vienna, to see if there was any news, any news. And then it was quite late on the Sunday, on David's birthday, and we were driving through this beautiful countryside, and the 'phone went in the car and it was Matthias to say that he'd just heard from Melita and they'd got into Austria, they'd crossed the border safely. I just wept. I didn't know these people at all, but I'd been travelling with them for two days, wondering how they were faring.

And in fact I used, in writing the story of *No gun for Asmir*, I used a lot of experience we had had in '74 – 1974, when we took our children to Europe for the first time, and I had met a couple of Hungarian librarians who had fled their country in the uprisings in '58 and had shared some of their stories with me. And I liked these two men very much, and I was very keen to visit Hungary and see the sort of country that they had left, and the civilisation they had left. So on that trip with our three children we set off to visit Hungary, which was not a country which was very open at that stage, and it was quite difficult to arrange. And it was still under Russian occupation, and the people were still oppressed and controlled in ways that we could hardly believe, and how anxious they were in their associations with foreigners. Not that they weren't very friendly and kind – but of course we didn't speak any Hungarian, and it was only German that got us through in one place where I'd tried eight people before I found anyone who even spoke German; we were out in a country town called Esztergom – anyway, but the fear, the palpable fear in Hungary at that time and the difficulties of travelling and the inspections by the police of the trains and how they went along shining torches under the seats and sniffer dogs and all this stuff, and hunting underneath the carriages for people who might have been trying to escape into Austria and so on, it made a deep impression on me. And of course also the Hungarian countryside and the fact that there were, in this oppressed country, the beauties of nature still there, the deer and the cornfields and the great, golden moon rising. So a lot of that came through when I came to

write Asmir's story. I knew something of the fear that they must have felt travelling through that country, that beautiful country.

What made you think to write the story? I mean, you'd experienced it, but – – –?

Well, it happened – – –. Chris stayed away for three weeks to give them time to settle into Vienna, and at the end he had to come back to work, and he said to me, 'Mum, I only know Melita,' he said, 'We'd better get to know the rest of the family.' And by that time his friend Matthias had got to know the whole family and was enchanted with them, and especially with the children, and so much so that he and his wife decided to do what Chris had done, they moved out of their apartment and he went to stay with his sister, and she took their children to her parents, so that *their* apartment was available for Asmir's family for a month. And so Chris invited them, on that first weekend we were home, he invited them to Sunday evening meal, and when we got back we found they'd left the apartment absolutely sparkling. I mean, I'd left it clean, but (laughs) I hadn't left it sparkling. But as their way of saying 'thank you' they'd cleaned the chandeliers, they'd polished the parquetry floor, they'd taken down all the double-glazed windows – you know, the windows are double-glazed there for insulation and so on – they'd taken them all down and cleaned and polished them and rehung them – a dangerous job, because the apartment was several floors up in a big old building that had once been a nobleman's palace. So the work they had done to make it ready for us to come back to was just so touching, it was the only thing they could do to say 'thank you'.

So they came that Sunday evening, and I'd practised my little words of – well, I had no Bosnian, but Asmir had practised a few little words of English, you know, 'I am Asmir,' and after those were exhausted he didn't have any German and I didn't have any Bosnian, Eldar was like a bagful of monkeys, he was so lively and extrovert – still is – and he wasn't the least affected. He was rocking in the rocking chair and banging away on the grand piano and he was happy, because in a sense he'd come home to somewhere that he knew. But Asmir was the saddest little boy I had ever seen. He was so solemn, he was so serious, so self-contained and so old, just old beyond his years, because he'd tried to take on the responsibilities of his father. He'd tried to be his father for his little brother and for his mother and for grandmother, he'd tried to be the man of the family, and it was just tragic, this

withdrawn little boy. And so I got some paper off Chris's desk and all the coloured pens I could find there and gave them to Asmir and he sat at the end of the kitchen bench and he drew and he drew and he drew. But he didn't use any of the coloured pens, he only used the black, and all that he did was to cover sheet after sheet with mazes, big black mazes, obviously trying to find his way out. I found that just so moving.

Well, then, as it happened, the next day we were supposed to be going to Prague and I'd got all packed and was ready, and Chris said to me, 'Mum, I hope you're going to take some dresses with you,' because I usually use slacks a lot when I travel. And I said, 'Yes, I've got a dress in,' and he said, 'Oh, no, I mean to wear in the daytime.' I had a dress to wear out to dinner at night because I knew his friends would be taking us out. So I went to iron a dress. And the Lord must have a great sense of humour, and he must have smiled when I said to him, 'Oh, Lord, I'm just tired of all this racketing about,' because we'd driven about for three weeks. 'I just want to be in one place for a while, I just want to settle down. I don't really want to go.' And anyway, I finished ironing the dress and I folded it up, and I was bending over putting it in the case and my back went. Anyway, Chris had appointments in Prague and so I clambered down to the car somehow and got in, and when we got to Prague three and a half hours later I could hardly walk. Anyway, it was agony. Prague was so beautiful and his friend, Milan, was so hospitable and so proud of his city and showed us so many wonderful things, but he was very anxious about me because he'd had back trouble too and he could see the agony I was in. And I even thought of going to a Prague clinic or a Prague spa, and Chris said to me, 'Mum, don't be mad, you don't speak the language or anything else. Come back to Vienna and we'll get you fixed up.' So he rang his friend, Matthias, who'd also had aunt and mother with back trouble, and he booked me in to see a leading back specialist in Vienna, Herr Professor Doktor Sunder Plassmann. (laughs) So anyway, to cut a long story short, we went straight there. We didn't even go to the apartment, and within a half an hour of walking in that – oh, hobbling into that doctor's surgery I was in hospital. And there I was, you see. (laughs) For six weeks I was certainly in one place!

Anyway, I couldn't get Asmir out of my mind, and after the operation – oh, for a couple of days I was totally spaced out, and then I woke in the middle of the night on

about the third night, and I woke up clear as a bell, and I knew I had to write Asmir's story, and I knew the title and I knew the first paragraph. It was quite uncanny. I got quite worried because I thought, 'This is ridiculous. How can I write a story about Bosnian refugees? I don't know about Bosnia, I don't know about Muslims,' all this stuff. Anyway, I told Chris and he spoke to Melita and Melita spoke to Miroslav and, being journalists, they realised the importance of the story being told. Now, they knew nothing about my work whatever as a writer, and they'd only met me once, but still they trusted me. They came to see me in the hospital and they brought me some Bosnian apples that I've written about in the book, and they encouraged me to go ahead and they said they'd help me all they could.

Well, there were a lot of things I didn't know, and a lot of questions I really felt it was too crass to ask them. I really didn't want to stir up any more pain or any more terrible memories for them, but I was giving them each chapter as I wrote it. I wrote it, by the way, standing up beside the hospital bed, because I wasn't allowed to sit down for six weeks. I could lie flat on my back or I could stand up. And I had to write on a slope. So I'd prop – Chris brought in a writing board and some paper, and I would prop this writing board up on the bedside table, prop it up with my dictionary and my prayerbook and my Bible, and I would write there. But you know how many interruptions you get in hospital, and sometimes it just is nearly impossible – you'd get about eight interruptions, you know, before you got one line down. So it was very slow. But in the meantime Melita was encouraging me, and when she read what I'd written she used to say, in disbelief, 'It's as if you *are* Asmir. That's just what Asmir said. That's how he felt, that's what he did. It's as if you were there.' So I did have a great empathy with that little boy.

Well, after six weeks, eventually, and after fending off another operation which the doctor wanted to give me – give me! (laughs) He had the dollar signs in his eyes, that man! David stood signing travellers' cheques until his arm dropped off – anyway, I was sent down to convalesce at a spa down in the southern part of Austria at a place called Warmbad Villach which had hot springs which were known in Roman times. It's a historic place; you can still see the rut marks in the rocky hillsides on the mountain where the Roman chariots used to come over. And how they must have loved those hot springs when they got there after jolting all that way in their chariots! So that was actually where I finished writing it. I wanted to finish

it while I was still there in Austria. I didn't want to have to come home and face all that there would be to face when I came home after four and a half months and to try to carry on with it. And by that time I was allowed to sit up, so I had a little balcony which looked across to the mountains and where I could see the eagles circling, and I used to sit wedged up with cushions and pillows on the chair on that balcony, writing. And I was getting near the end of my time there and I didn't know how I was going to finish, because Muris was still in Sarajevo, the family had had one call from someone who simply said, 'Muris is alive,' and hung up. And, well, when did that person see Muris? He might have been alive ten days ago or two weeks ago when that person saw. So the family were still in tremendous stress about Muris and whether he had survived, whether they would ever see him again. So it would have been totally unrealistic to have written a happy ending to that story. And so, on the last-but-one day there, it was an extraordinary experience. I'd been there all through August and it was hot, hot, and people sunbathing around, you know, it was a spa where people went for health cures. And then, on the 1st September, I went down to breakfast in the same sort of clothes I'd been wearing the whole time because (laughs) I didn't have any others anyway, and everybody whom I'd been seeing for weeks was suddenly there in their autumn clothes. Everybody else but me knew, and they had a change of clothes for the beginning of autumn. And it *was* the beginning of autumn. There was a real nip in the air and there was snow up on the mountains, and as I walked along a big *allée*, a big avenue of chestnut trees which I'd been watching, they had suddenly, overnight, started to turn, and the squirrels were there gathering the nuts. And as I walked along there – it's extraordinary, really; I mean, there's no explanation for it – but I knew then how I had to finish the book. And it was just with this affirmation of Asmir's denial and refusal of war, and that he would do something positive and good with his life, whether or not he ever saw his father again.

Well, I came home and I had to get a new computer and I wasn't half as well as I thought I was, but anyway I pressed on and I word-processed the thing and I sent it off to Penguin, and they were already – they'd been havering around about whether they would take *The sack* or not, and they'd been dithering for a couple of months over *The sack*, which I'd written at the beginning of the year. And then I sent this and it spoke to them immediately and they decided they would fast-track the book,

which they did, and got it out in ten months. Which was amazing. And, unbeknownst to me, they asked Elizabeth Honey to illustrate it, which was also interesting because Elizabeth had illustrated some of my earlier books but she had given up illustrating so that she could concentrate on writing her own. But, interestingly enough, she and her husband had taken their children to Europe, and I'd given them Chris's address, and she'd looked up Chris in Vienna and Chris had looked after them for a whole day and taken them all around, and showed them his apartment, and all this. He showed them the *Schenswurdig Keiten* of Vienna. And Penguin, for some reason, approached Elizabeth to do the illustrations, and for some reason – because she'd been there, she'd seen Chris and knew Vienna, and also because her son, Gig, was the same age at that time as Asmir – so she felt very moved by the story and she agreed to do the illustrations. So I sent her lots of photos and stuff, and that was how she came to do the illustrations.

Was it different for you to write a story that was based on an actual occurrence, rather than something that had been an imaginary story?

Yes, it is insofar as you are dealing with living people and it's their life, and although of course I had to fictionalise some of it – there was no other way I could do it because I wasn't there and I wasn't Asmir, so some of the episodes in the story are ones I made up while I was lying there in the hospital bed, thinking of what they might be doing, you know, the places they might be going and the things they might be seeing, like going to the cathedral and the thunderstorms in Vienna, which are so sudden and intense and dramatic. The first time we went to Vienna just after the War, David and I, we got caught in a *massive* thunderstorm and people gave us shelter, you know, we were sheltering in a doorway and people invited us in. And that, and – yes, the powerful effect of that cathedral, Stefansdam, amazing place. And also the horses, the horse-drawn carriages, of course, which are such a feature of Vienna and which are so beautiful, and which we could never afford to ride in. But the funny part was, when we went back a couple of years later to do Muris's story, on the very last night we were there, the last evening, we were sort of strolling around and we came to the Dom where the horses and the carriages all wait to be hired, and there, at the head of the line, was this pair of horses I had written about in *No gun for Asmir*. And David looked at me and he said, 'Well, I think this is it,

don't you?' And we got into that carriage, and I told the man about the book, and he told me the names of the horses, and we sat there riding around Vienna in the soft evening light with the bells ringing and it was just magic. It was as if it was sort of an epiphany for the whole thing. It was quite extraordinary. Though I never actually did that; I mean, I never – well, I was in hospital, I couldn't have taken those children for a ride. But, you know, that was one of the things I made up and that's one of the things that people often ask me about, you know, was I the person who took the children for a ride? Well, I was in my mind, in my heart, I was, and that's why I think it comes across so powerfully.

At the end of that – I think it's the end of that book, you talk about the way that that book actually did assist in a way to get Muris out.

Oh, it did, yes.

Can you talk about how that happened?

That happened because – well, Melita, being a journalist, she had all sorts of ways of keeping contact with Sarajevo, which I can never tell, unfortunately, some of them because it was just so amazing and they involved such high-ranking people, and that was how she smuggled the book in to Muris, and I can never say who took that book in. But I just smile every time I think what he was carrying without knowing that he was carrying it. Anyway, when Muris got the book he just wept. He doesn't speak – at that stage he spoke no English but he could see his son's photograph. That was the photograph that Miroslav took, that one on the first book, and he could see his name and he went through looking for the names of the family, and he studied those photos at the front. And he showed it to people, but he would never let it out of his possession. He was a bit like Asmir, you know, *terribly* possessive of it. Asmir was terribly put out when I sent him an advance copy – of the two advance copies that I got I sent one to Asmir, and then, when I got the rest of my entitlement of advance copies I sent them off to Melita and Mirsada, and Asmir was terribly put out because he thought it was *his book*! He didn't realise that there were going to be other copies. Anyway, so that was when one got sent off to Muris. And people offered to translate it for him, but he wouldn't let it out of his possession. Being a lawyer, he was very aware of my copyright, and he was fearful that it might be infringed by someone, so he never let anyone have it or let it be copied or translated, but he did

take it to the state bibliographic centre and had its details copied down, so that when the war was over it could go, be collected for there.

Anyway, but he did take it with him wherever he went when he was applying for permission to leave Sarajevo. And the book was translated very rapidly into German, it was accepted into German by a German publisher I knew who had never taken any of my other books. But this one just touched him – he also had a son about Asmir's age – and he took it, and his wife, whom I also knew, translated it, and it got out very, very quickly. And when I was campaigning to get Muris out I asked all my publishers to write to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and Penguin Australia did, Penguin UK did – because they took the book also – and this publisher at Ellermann Verlag in Munich, and it was the Ellermann Verlag letter that carried the most weight. And he even planned to walk into Bosnia and to smuggle Muris out by back ways over the mountains, walking, if they didn't succeed. Anyway, in the long run, eventually the book did make a difference to Muris's application, and this publisher at Ellermann had said he wanted Muris out to help with promotion for the book, and all this. In the event, Muris never did any of that; he was too psychologically fragile to confront anything of that nature. But it was enough to swing the balance, and in the end he did get out – well, after a very agonising wait for quite a while, some weeks in Zagreb, where it didn't look as if he was going to be allowed any further.

But when he finally did get out Chris rang us in the middle of the night. He was at the family's apartment and Muris had just arrived. They'd been sweating over him getting out of Croatia and Chris had some plan to go down and get him out and – oh, various ways they were planning to try and get him through. Anyway, it happened. And with help from Matthias. And there he was. So Chris rang and you could hear the happy sounds in the background and they all came on and spoke – or Melita did and Mirsada, and they wanted me – – –. (end of tape)

VS: END OF TAPE 5 SIDE A: TAPE 5 SIDE B

LS: And with help from Matthias. And there he was. So Chris rang and you could hear the happy sounds in the background and they all came on and spoke – or Melita did and Mirsada, and they wanted me to come straight away to tell Muris's story. Well, I had the shingles at this stage, I'd had the shingles for a week, and when I

went to see my doctor and say I was going, she said, 'Oh, you mustn't go. You really mustn't go. Do you have to go?' And I said, 'Well, no – nobody's paying me to go.' I mean, the publisher wanted me to write the book but they weren't paying me to go, nobody was paying me to go, I didn't have to go, but I felt compelled. And she said, 'Well, you really shouldn't.' Well, as it turned out the insurance company wouldn't insure me and I found out afterwards why, you know. I really was very ill for a year. Anyway, but we went. We went within four days of getting that 'phone call and two of them were the weekend, so we pulled all the stops out to get flights and finish affairs here and do everything. And I knew I had to because when *No gun for Asmir* came out I was just *swamped* with letters. Oh, just the letters never stopped coming. People were so touched by that story, so moved. And so many people said to me – and adults as well as children; I had, well, almost as many letters from adults as I did from children – that they had been watching all this Bosnian conflict on the television and, terrible and all as it was, nobody had ever understood it. Can anybody ever understand the Balkans? But they had never related to it until it was the story of *a* family, and then everybody thought, 'There but for the grace of God, that could have been us in the same sort of situation.' And so many children wrote, 'I just think Asmir could have been my brother, my little brother or my big brother,' or 'I can't imagine how' – there's the rosellas back – 'I can't imagine how I could be if I was worrying about my father and never knowing whether I could see him.' And so many people wrote, 'It makes us realise how lucky we are to live in Australia.' The book touched people amazingly, and people sent money for the family and they sent presents and they sent books and toys for the children and it was just amazing how people – and letters and letters and letters for me to send on to them. And everybody was saying to me, 'When are you going to write *Muris escapes*?' And I said, 'Oh, when he does, perhaps.' Anyway, so we went.

And I never forget meeting Muris. It was a holiday there, as it turned out, a religious holiday, and the family had arranged to do a picnic out at Matthias's place – he was living in the country then and we were all going to go out there for a picnic to celebrate Muris's arrival, and we were all going to travel together in the cars because, of course, Mirsada didn't have a car or anything like that. So we drove across from Chris's apartment to meet them. By that time we were late, and they

were all down on the footpath waiting for us. And there they all were and the boys had grown up a bit, and Mirsada and Melita and Miroslav and Hatidza were there, and there was this old man sort of hanging around on the edge in shabby, baggy clothes. And I thought, 'What's this old fellow doing here? What's he got to do with it?' And then it suddenly struck me: 'This is Muris!' Because I'd only ever seen the one photo of him as a much, much younger man, and although I knew that he'd been gravely affected it just didn't – this little hunched-up figure of a man in his sagging clothes and his sort of bent head. And so I realised it was Muris and I went and he hugged me and he hugged me. I'll never forget that embrace. He just hugged me and he hugged me and he kept just saying these two little words in English: 'Thank you, thank you, thank you.'

Anyway, we went out to Matthias's beautiful place in the country and we were sitting there under the chestnut trees and the children were having a lovely time with Matthias's children and so on, riding bikes and so on, and Muris was guarding them and picking them up when they fell and watching over them, but every so often he'd just go off by himself and squat down on his haunches and just stare into the distance smoking with this terrible haunted look on his face. And at one stage – I was taking a lot of photographs because I wanted to record the day – and I knew I had to take a photo of him looking like that, and I felt horrible doing it; I felt really terrible invading his privacy taking that photograph. But I just knew I had to have that haunted look while I wrote about him, and that was the book, that was the photo that was used for the cover of his book in the end.

Well, I started – he spoke no English and of course I spoke no Bosnian. Melita was the go-between, as before, and she would come with him, we'd set up an interview and they'd come to Chris's apartment and I'd have the tape recorder going, but at the same time I never trust tape recorders and I'd always be scribbling too. And what happened, as so often happens in oral history, is he started telling me about some of the things that had happened last and I really thought they were the things that had happened first, and when I started writing I started writing from that sort of angle. And then, as the story progressed, I realised that they weren't, and I had to do a lot of restructuring all the time I was writing that because the memories just came out piecemeal. And they didn't come out easily, and sometimes the interviews were cancelled, and I wasn't well anyway, and it was very hard, working

through the whole story and putting it into a chronology and a sequence. And at the same time, at that stage, I was trying to combine the story of what was going on in Vienna with the story of what was happening in Sarajevo. I thought it was one book. Well, after I'd got to about chapter seventeen, or something – fifteen? Anyway, quite a number – I realised this book was going to blow out and it was just impossible. And so I spoke to Erica Irving, who was my editor at Penguin Puffin, and she was wonderful to me through those awful months, because the building where Chris's apartment was was being renovated as well. Oh, and they used to start at seven o'clock in the morning, had these jackhammers and – oh, drills, and – oh, it was hideous. And the days I was well enough I used to force myself to walk up the hill to where there was a beautiful big park called Turkenschanz Park, a very historic park. It was where the Turks – the last camp of the Turks, when they tried to invade Vienna. And I used to walk up there if I was well enough and just sit beside a big lake where there were ducks and ducklings, and I used to sit under a willow tree in the shade because it was very hot and write there. I used to think that was my office. But it was so hellish at Christopher's apartment with the noise.

So anyway, as before, of course, I was feeding each chapter to Melita and, as before, it would provoke new memories and they would tell me different things that I hadn't known or hadn't imagined or couldn't have thought of, and so I'd have to rewrite as had happened with *No gun for Asmir*. And then I realised this really had to be two books. It was Muris's story in Sarajevo and it was the family's story in Vienna. And so I discussed this with Erica Irving and she agreed, and so then I decided the thing to do while I was there was to concentrate on Muris's story. I already knew Asmir's story, really, because we'd been in contact with the family all those two years, and he'd written and I'd written and they'd written, and we'd had lots of 'phone calls and I always took notes of all the 'phone calls, of everything they said. And I knew it was called *Asmir in Vienna*, because that was what the children and all the people, especially the children, used to ask about when they wrote, you know: 'How's Asmir doing at school?' 'Does he speak German yet?' 'Has he got any friends?' These were the three questions that came through and through and through. And 'Is his father dead or alive?' So I knew what readers were waiting for in Asmir's story.

And the other thing that the family did, which was incredibly generous, they allowed me to use his letters. And of course I couldn't read them, Melita translated them all for me, and they allowed them to be used. And so they were telling the story. So we actually deferred our departure from Vienna twice because Muris pulled out of a couple of the interviews, and I knew I had to finish it. And he was still so traumatised. And so in the end we came back quite late in September. We'd been there since May. And I knew I had to go on with his story. And of course – (sighs) so I battled on with it and we were in this house that I'd hated, that we'd moved to when we left our big house after I'd had the spinal surgery. We'd moved to a smaller house in Wattle Park and I hated that little house, I was terribly unhappy there, and my study wasn't nearly big enough for the work I had to do. So we went down to Port Willunga where we've got another little house and I used to – I wrote a lot of that book down there. And then that was the book Penguin wanted first.

But then, having finished it in about November, I went back to do *Asmir in Vienna*, to finish the Asmir story, and really it was one of the hardest stories I've ever written or finished, because in a way I'd already told the story and I had to turn around and tell it again from a different perspective. And when I finally finished it in March Penguin didn't want it. (laughs) I couldn't believe it! They didn't want it! And they'd had all these letters from children, you know, *thousands* – or I'd had them – thousands, literally thousands of letters. Penguin were very good. In the end – I used to do a circular letter updating the family's situation and Penguin would print it out, two-page letter, and send me a batch of them that I could send off. And I always wrote some personal thing on them too, but that was a huge help, otherwise I never could have managed. But anyway, then I had to have a little campaign to persuade Penguin that this book needed to be published, that children were waiting for it.

When I wrote Muris's story, I really thought I was writing an adult book and I really thought Penguin would publish it as an adult book, and I feel very distressed – I'm still distressed and angry, really – that they did not, or that they did not do it as a dual edition, which they have done with other authors, children's authors. They've done them as dual editions, in a Puffin and also as an adult Penguin. But they just never seemed to see the point of this. And I was so concerned at the sadness of Muris's story. I didn't want young children coming to this and thinking this was the

next thing after Asmir. I wanted the Asmir story told from his point of view; I didn't see small children – I mean, they couldn't have related to it. And even slightly older children, I didn't want them reading it. Anyway, that's what Penguin decided to do, so they brought out *Escape from Sarajevo*. They didn't like – oh, we had a lot of discussion about the title. Anyway, so that was the one that was decided upon. And then there was this tussle to get *Asmir in Vienna* published. Which it was, eventually. (laughs) And I don't know how many times it was reprinted. Neither of the other two have reprinted as much as *No gun for Asmir*. That's in its fifteenth[13] printing now, and it's just gone into a Portuguese edition. It was in the German very early, and then was taken up by Mondadori in Italy, who publish the Pope, and I was thrilled with the cover they gave it. They gave it a beautiful cover, the same photograph but with shiny red letters. My only book with shiny letters on it. And then it was taken up by a big publisher in Spain who then, subsequently, put it into Catalan and Basque. And now it's going into Portuguese. Funnily enough, it was never taken by America. They lapped up *Zlata's diary* and I thought this book would also speak to America, especially after Asmir and his family were taken in as refugees in America, but when we went to USA in 1996 I spent a week in New York trying to interest publishers in it, but in the event nothing ever came of it. But perhaps it was just as well, I think, looking back on it, because it meant the family have their privacy in USA now, so they're never going to be sort of pointed at as the people in that book.

What's it like for you to know that with that book you really did make a difference in Muris's life, to actually have that happen?

Well, it's very humbling. I mean, as I think I've said to you, I do look on writing as my vocation. I do feel that it's God-given and the Holy Spirit moves me and shows me the stories he wants me to write, and gives me the words and the understanding to write them. I mean, I'm sure it was Spirit-led, the empathy I felt for Asmir, and the anguish I felt for Muris from having worked so much with refugees in my earliest stages of my life. Looking back, I can see how I was being prepared to do those books. I didn't know it at the time, I never knew those experiences were there

[13] In its seventeenth printing at 18th November 2002 – CM.

to help me understand eventually when I came to write these books. But that's how I look on it now, I think that was just God's way of using me and one of the reasons why he put me here. So I never say I'm proud about any of my books because I'm not. I'm humble, I'm humble because I am so thankful that something that I have done has been able to help other people and touch so many hearts and minds. As Melita wrote in the little foreword, or what I used as a foreword, for *No gun for Asmir*, she said – this was at the time when the Camp David talks were going on for peace in Bosnia – and she said, 'If this book touches a hundred hearts and minds it will have done more good than all the Camp David talks.' Well, of course, it's touched thousands, countless thousands, and I think it must have, you know, when you see what Australia's doing to refugees now, you wonder – perhaps I should send some copies to Philip Ruddock! (laughs)

Good idea. So your writing is your writing, but it's more than that, you put a lot more of yourself into it than – in a sense, it fits in with the community service element. Do you want to talk a bit about that side of it, that it's more than just writing a book, it's all that comes after it and beyond it, really?

Well, you are what you write or you write what you are, really. People often think that writing for children is the first step in becoming a writer. In fact, one of the daughters of Deny King said to me the other day at the launch, when I was carrying some stuff in a Penguin bag, which I take around everywhere, of course, it's a very convenient bag, and I am a Penguin author anyway – not that that book was, but – which I'm sure they're regretting now – – –. (laughs) Having turned it down twice. Anyway, Mary said to me, Mary King said to me, 'Oh, well, now you're a proper author, Christobel,' and I thought, 'Yes, Mary.' I was published in 1970 first. So it's a funny attitude that people have, that children's books are not proper books and that they don't count. But people used to ask me when I was going to write a 'proper book' and, as I used to say, 'Well, aren't children proper people?' But the point is you write the way you are, and I guess in lots of ways I'm a child at heart still and I still relate very strongly to children and I really come alive when children are around. I love children. And so that's where I see the stories, because children's emotions are often so transparent and their concerns are so real. Some adults think they're trivial, but they're not trivial at all; they're big in the life of a child. And I can still see that, where their concerns are big for them. So I think I'm very lucky,

and it doesn't bother me at all that I am principally a writer for children, but it does bother me that people have that sort of strange attitude, that from having written a children's book you will then progress to write something 'more important, more serious', more easy for them to recognize as a proper book. But again, with picture books, people always think that a picture book's the easiest thing in the world to write; well, in fact, it really isn't. And nobody knows how long it takes, a picture book, can take. I've got a picture book[14] with Penguin now they contracted me for on the 17th May 1994 and it still hasn't been published[15].

So, you know, it's not that you go up by steps and levels; it's if you're a writer of true integrity, writing with your heart as well as your mind, then you write about the things you care about. But I don't do it deliberately, I don't do it to push a barrel or espouse a cause, I write because I care about something and it interests me. I mean, it's no use writing about thing you're not interested in. And so that's where I see the story. So that's why I wrote something like *The battle of the galah trees* when I saw that tree cut down, down here in Burnside, and that's where – you know, then when I see a little boy like Asmir, so traumatised and so sad, it touches your heart, you have to write about it. When I saw the carvings, the rock carvings, the Aboriginal rock carvings at Devonport up on the headland by the lighthouse there, and wandering around there in the gloaming, thinking about the Aboriginal people who used to live there and hunt and gather along that beautiful coastline and sit up on that headland and do those carvings that nobody has really yet deciphered, the mystery and the wonder of it all, as it would seem to a little boy who would find them. That's when I wrote *Daniel's secret*. So it's (pause) well, I think I said in the beginning, I realised I've had a golden life, I've really been blessed with such a good home and parents and such opportunities for education, and such a happy marriage and wonderful loving family of my own, and so I've got to pay it back somehow, to make the world a better place for other people, if I can. And if I can do that by stories – and everyone relates to stories – if I can do that through stories that elevate people – – –. Someone said to me just a day or two ago that *King of the Wilderness* was a very edifying book, and she hoped that a lot of young people would read it because it

[14] *Poppy Peeker*.

would bring out the best in young people. Now, I mean, that wasn't a deliberate decision. I mean, it never is a deliberate decision to 'improve' people. (laughs)

Is there a hope there that they will be influenced by some of the ideas and the feelings?

Well, I always think we are influenced by what goes on around us, by what we read, by what we see. I always think that disclaimer that a lot of authors – well, I don't know that you see it so much now, but you used to see it on a lot of books of fiction, you know: 'The characters in this story and the setting bear no relation to any known living persons' or anything. I think rubbish! How can they not? I mean, we're all great big sponges, we soak up all these things whether we know it or not. And that becomes the fabric of our writing. So to say that it bears no relation to anybody is really not true, because our imagination feeds on the world around us, doesn't it? It doesn't come out of a vacuum.

When you take your books around to schools and to children and talk about them, what kind of things do you talk about, on that side of it?

Well, I used to have a game I played with children about imagination and where we get our ideas from, using the metaphor of a witch's cauldron, but then there was the rise of things about – of disapproval about that sort of thing. Children could see that I was playing a game and they really entered into it. We used to have wonderful, hilarious, funny times, memorable times for them, I'm sure, judging by the feedback I would get. But I realised some years ago that that was not the way to go any more, and so I just made it much more direct and I simply usually start my sessions, unless they've asked me to talk about a particular book, talking about – answering two questions: 'Where do you get your ideas?' and 'How long does it take to write a book?' And really when you're answering one you're answering the other, and pointing out that it's really taken me all my life to write any one of my books. I couldn't have written any of them without what happened to me when I was quite young – as, I don't know whether I mentioned, Asmir was, you know, when I was seven and I heard the word 'refugees' for the first time on the wireless, as it was known then. I'd never heard that word before and when I asked my parents and they

[15] And still has not at 3rd November 2002 – CM.

told me it was about people fleeing for their lives and leaving everything behind, that frightened me so much – I was a very easily scared child – and I collected up my treasures and put them in my kindy case and kept them under my bed in case we had to do that too. Well, it never happened to us except that we did have major upheavals with moving from state to state with my father's job as an engineer, so I did know that sense of uprooting and dispossession and loss which carried through into – well, *New patches for old*, the migrant story, and the Asmir stories. So I had experienced it. So it's our experiences that inform and shape us and underlie the writing. I mean, all my books, I can honestly say, came out of some quite contemporaneous event or happening or something I saw or something I heard or just something in the everyday, the here and now. I've never deliberately gone back to write about my childhood, but I know now, I know that it was my childhood that is the source of the feelings which enable me to recognize a situation and to recognize that there's a story in it which I am able to write.

People often suggest stories to you: 'Oh, you could write a story about this or you could write – have you thought of that?' and it's very nice and kind of them, but unless it's something that somehow is resonant with my own subconscious and forgotten experiences I'd only be writing it with my head, and that's why I say, 'Thank you but no thank you.' I don't even say that, I just say, 'Thank you,' but I know I'll never write that story.

I'll just stop you there. We're about to run out of tape.

END OF TAPE 5 SIDE B: TAPE 6 SIDE A

This is the second tape of a third interview with Christobel Mattingley being recorded by Karen George for the State Library of South Australia's Honoured Women's Oral History Project. The interview is taking place on the 21st August 2001 at Stonyfell in South Australia.

Last time when we were just sitting around after the interview you said something really beautiful about the way you regarded your book as – I guess almost like a child in going out into the world on its own, or something. Can you remember what you said and talk about that, I suppose, once you leave a book behind and it goes off.

Yes, well, in a sense your books are your children. They are born of you and I'm happy to say that I'm glad I had each one of my forty-three book children. There's not one that I would disown. Because every one of them was born of love. I really

wanted to tell the story that I was writing. The story, the importance of the story, was uppermost to me, and so each story has its own integrity and its own validity. So in that regard I'm very fortunate. I know there are writers who write for money or write for various other reasons, and some at least now would like to disown some of their earlier works. But that, for me, that's not a problem. I'm glad I have written everything. But it is interesting how a book takes on a life of its own. It's like your child when it goes out into the world: it'll meet all sorts of people, many of whom you've never met, never heard of, never likely to, and it will make an impression on those people, and an impression that probably you'll never hear about. But in a certain number of cases you will get some feedback, and that, I think, is really one of the great rewards of being a writer, it's that knowledge that you are reaching out into the world, you are touching lives, you are touching hearts and minds and even changing lives by what you've written.

Can you give an example of that, perhaps?

I don't know whether I've said this one before about the little boy who read *Tiger's milk*.

Was it the story of an asthmatic boy?

Yes, the little asthmatic boy.

You did, yes, you did.

I think I might have said that.

Yes.

Well, you see, that was an example. That child got over his asthma and fulfilled his ambition to play in the school football team through reading *Tiger's milk* and his mother making him tiger's milk. The Asmir stories have helped people identify with refugees, as did *The angel with a mouth organ*. That book really powerfully affected people, as did *The miracle tree*, and has aroused an awareness of the horrors of nuclear warfare in a lot of people and let to some amazing encounters for me with Japanese people and others. And in fact I think I might have told you about the Japanese translator here, Munetaka Umehara, who translated the book into Japanese for the Japanese school here. It's never been taken by a mainstream Japanese publisher, but he then did it in calligraphy and sent it to an exhibition in Japan,

which I didn't know about. But then, when he came and presented me with his calligraphy edition, which is beautiful, just beautiful, on hand-made rice paper, I felt the only thing I could give him in return was the very last copy I possessed of the hard cover edition of *The miracle tree*, which is the most beautiful book I've ever had, it was most beautifully produced with gold blocking and french-fold cover, and – oh, a truly exquisite book, and beautiful end papers based on the design of hand-made Japanese paper with little pine trees on it. A beautiful book. So I'd been hoarding this one last copy of it, knowing that one day there'd be somebody that I felt I had to give it to. Well, I wanted to give it to Munetaka Umehara. And that was some months ago. And recently I received a letter from him telling me the next stage in the saga. He keeps introducing this book into different areas of Japan, and he actually sent that precious book, which was precious to him, to a museum that has just been opened in Japan to honour the people who died through the atomic blast. I mean, that is really incredible, isn't it.

And recently – last year, I think it was – a centre for peace in Uzbekistan wrote to me – Uzbekistan! And I thought it must have been some hoax or something, but it was such a sincere, genuine letter that I sent them the Asmir books and I've sent them *Survival in our own land* and I've had letters back from them. I'm sure, you know, that that museum for peace really exists in Uzbekistan. So, you see, you don't know where your books are going to end up and who's going to come across them and who will read them at a critical moment in their lives, perhaps. So that's one of the prayers I have each day, that whatever I've written will somehow be a blessing to someone, and that it will help someone in their life, wherever they may be. And, as I say, only a fraction of the stories filter back to you. I'm sure there are many, many more stories out there.

I mean, there were dozens, hundreds of stories when *Survival in our own land* came out, of the way it affected people, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. In fact, I only had a 'phone call on Sunday morning at five past eight from an Aboriginal man I've really lost touch with, and he was the first Aboriginal person to give me material for that book. And he was in jail at the time and I went to see him in jail a couple of times, and then – he was a powerful writer – and he had a very sad story. And, anyway, after he got out of jail I took him up to Canberra with me for the launch of *Survival in our own land* in Canberra, and had some amazing experiences with him

there, and he told me some horrendous things about his life and jail and so on. And I took him with me into schools, and he had a most powerful effect on the children, on the teenagers, on the Year Twelves. Anyway, I lost touch with him – it's very hard to keep in touch with Aboriginal people – and for the last nearly eighteen months I've been trying to track him down, I've been asking all over and I sent off a copy of Boori Pryor's book *Maybe tomorrow* which I bought for him and got Boori to inscribe because I hoped it might inspire Gundy to take up his writing again. I knew the grog had got him. And anyway, on Sunday morning – and the book had come back 'address unknown', it had come back several times to me. And it was out there. And I was in the shower, thinking, 'Now, tomorrow I'm going to make another attempt at getting Gundi's book away. I'll ring up somebody and see if I can just find another way of sending it,' and I was just thinking that and he rang. That's happened before. Aboriginal people have an uncanny way. Anyway. So he's now living down at Noarlunga Downs and I've sent the book off yesterday. So it is amazing, it's just amazing, the way things happen. Every book's got dozens of stories like that.

Do you have a favourite amongst your children's books?

Yes, I do have some that –

I'm sure you've been asked that question a hundred times!

– oh, yes, I'm asked it at every session – and it's true, you shouldn't have favourites among your children, but some of those books have come from deeper within me than others, and I still love *Windmill at Magpie Creek* because it was my very first story ever accepted, and I wrote it about a place that I love very much at Willunga. And so I still love that book. And I love *The angel with a mouth organ*, which I also wrote down at our little old farmhouse in Willunga, and *The miracle tree*. That was a special gift, that book, I never thought I'd write a story in Japan. And of course I love the Asmir books because I love Asmir. And – well, I wouldn't say *Survival in our own land* is my favourite book because it's such an agony of a book, but at the same time I think it's the book that I feel – although I'd never call it 'my' book – I guess in a way it's the book that I have the greatest sense of attachment to because it's brought me close to Aboriginal people and many Aboriginal people have accepted me because of that book. And I feel that's probably the biggest

contribution I have made to my country, by doing that book. (long pause, sound of birdsong) I've had a tremendous lot of responses already to *King of the Wilderness* and it's only twenty-one days old, that book! (laughs)

Having its twenty-first birthday. (laughter)

And it was reprinted when it was in its – on the fourteenth day after publication. Again, I've had a wonderful lot of responses to that, in that people who knew Deny King, whose biography it is, have thanked me for evoking him so well, so wondrously, although I only knew the man for five days myself, and that of course was a great anxiety to me the whole time I was writing it, I would think, 'People who knew Deny much better than I do,' you know, 'what are they going to think of it? Have I done him justice?' But a number of people who've been deeply moved by the book, and either who knew Deny or who didn't know Deny, have been powerfully moved by the book, have found it a very powerful book. So I am grateful for that, too. And if it does encourage young people to fulfill their own pattern, to seek their own pattern in life and fulfill it, then the book has done a great thing.

Can we perhaps talk about the Australia Day honour which is – why we're doing this interview, I guess, is that you were an honoured woman in 1996. Do you remember your reaction to hearing about that?

Yes, I burst into tears when I got the letter. Yes, yes. I was deeply touched by that honour, that recognition of my work, because, as I've said, people tend to put you down as a writer for children, not to take you seriously, and I have experienced that right from the beginning; and also because the majority of my books in fact have never won awards. Some have, but I haven't figured prominently in the Children's Book Council awards, for example. I've often been shortlisted, but I have had very few outright awards in that regard. And in other things, too, my books have been shortlisted and have been highly commended and been honour books and so on, but I've never actually been recognized as the pre-eminent writer. And yet I believe I have a significant body of work which has contributed in a very important way to children and the people who work with children – parents and teachers and librarians – to judge by the sort of letters I get from teachers and librarians and parents who appreciate what my books have brought and given to the children in their care. So in

that regard I know that my work is appreciated, but it's rarely been recognized. And so in 1990 I was given an Advance Australia award, an award I'd never heard of, but which was sufficiently important to be awarded by the Governor at Government House, and so that was a surprise and heartening, and was heartwarming. And then, in 1995, I was invited to become a Doctor of the University of South Australia, which at that stage was a very new award. The University had only given a couple of doctorates till then, and I was one of four people in 1995 who was offered one. They'd only given a couple the previous year. So again, that was tremendously heartening, to think that my work was being recognized in an academic situation, by an academic institution. They do have a big Children's Literature course and a big Aboriginal Studies course there. But that affirmed me, although a lot of people said to me, 'That was an easy way to get a doctorate.'

When I was doing *Survival in our own land* someone who read it at one stage was Brian Dickey – he read it for the publisher and came to see me about it, and he said to me, 'Christobel, you've done a doctoral thesis without any assistance, without any supervision or without any assistance.' But at that stage nobody at that university was prepared to acknowledge that or even grant me an ordinary degree in Aboriginal Studies. I'd started doing that degree and I'd had to put it on one side because of all the other things, and then I went on to do the book which they then prescribed as a textbook, (laughs) but they never even offered me a degree. So it was a sort – rather a vindication to be offered that doctorate. And then, when the Order of Australia letter came, that truly touched me. Again, that it was a recognition that my work had made a contribution to Australian society and Australian community and had shaped attitudes and influenced opinions and moved, helped a lot of Australians to see issues and situations which – well, in the case of Aboriginal things, hadn't been very obvious. I mean, so much of that stuff was shut away and we weren't told about it, but it always seemed so amazing to me as I got deeper and deeper into doing that book that most of my best Aboriginal friends were women – or the women friends, were ones who'd been living probably not very far away from me as I was growing up in such very different circumstances and so many of them institutionalised. So in that regard I do consider that book has been seminal in Australian – in the whole Reconciliation thing. And it was ahead of its time.

A lot of my books have been ahead of their time and that's why they haven't been published, a lot of them. They've waited in the wings for so long, the early books I was writing, you know, were basically about conservation. I think I might have mentioned one never got published because publishers just said, 'It's not interesting, nobody's interested in this.' I mean, it wasn't conservation in those words spelled out, it was people's concern for the environment, children's concern for the environment. But publishers saw it as having no relevance or interest whatever. And the same with *The race*, the one about the little boy with the hearing loss. That took nineteen and a half years before that came out, because people saw no relevance in a child with a disability. The same with *Tucker's mob*, because it was about an Aboriginal family. That took thirteen and a half years, because people thought there was no (laughs) – there was no market value in a book about Aboriginal people, a children's book. Publishers thought that. So in that regard, I mean, I've always followed my heart and I've written the things, and even if they're not accepted by publishers I have been true to myself. One publisher once said to me, 'Christobel, I'd like you to write the book you want to write.' And I looked at him and I said, 'But that's what I've always done. I've never written books because someone's suggested that would fill a market gap, or this would be a good earner or,' you know, 'we need books about this, this or this.' I'm sorry, that's not why I write.

Can you tell me a bit about the events surrounding the award of the Order of Australia?

Well, you receive the letter about six months in advance of the announcement of a set of awards, which are done twice-yearly, and you have the opportunity to accept it or refuse it. And some people do refuse them for various reasons. But I didn't see any reason to refuse that. I knew that a lot of people would be very happy for me, as indeed they were. I mean, I received nearly three hundred letters and messages of congratulations.

Did you ever learn how you became nominated?

Yes, I did, and later on somebody wanted to nominate her for an award and approached me, but I felt I couldn't do it. Much as I admire the work she has done in the community I felt it wasn't appropriate to support her application because it might have looked as if there was a bit of back-scratching going on, but I didn't

know until a long time after who it was. And I appreciate the work that she put into it, because it's a lot of work to do one of those applications. I have thought about doing it for a couple of Aboriginal people I know, but until I got *King of the Wilderness* off my plate there was no way I could embark on something as lengthy and requiring so much interaction with other people – you know, contacting people and expecting people to provide written statements, and so on. People will say they'll do it, but so often they don't. I know that so well. So it was not something I felt I could do. But maybe one of these days I will. There are several outstanding Aboriginal people who could well be recognized in this way, and whom I think would not be affronted by such an award. Some people choose to take it as an affront, but I think that's not the spirit in which it's offered, anyway. So I think to accept it in the spirit it's offered is important. So I was very humbled and very thrilled and very deeply moved when I received that letter.

One of my other interviewees said you had to keep it secret for that period.

You do, yes, you do.

What was that like?

It's embargoed. That's very hard. So you don't say anything about it but you hug it to yourself and just know that it's going to happen, and mine came out in (pause) – oh, mine came out in the Queen's Birthday, in the mid-year announcement. That's right, yes. And then the award is presented several months later. There are two presentation ceremonies a year – or four, actually; they do two on consecutive days and then six months later they do another two. So my award was presented in the September, and that was when Di Laidlaw hosted this lunch at Parliament House – or it wasn't on that day, it was in the weeks around that time – to honour the women who had received awards in that particular announcement, and I didn't realise that we were going to have to sing for our lunch! (pause) But as the meal progressed, she started going round the table and asking people to describe a little bit about why they had received an award. And I was very touched, I was very moved, by the stories that people told of how they had worked in their little corner of the vineyard doing what they could to make life better for a certain group of people, whether it was Riding for the Disabled or drama or what it was, or the Estonian community, or – you know, just so many facets of our society were represented in that dozen or so

women sitting round the table, some of them in their cardigans. And that sounds a bit of a put-down, but do you know what I mean? They were quite humble, ordinary people who did not put themselves forward or did not aggrandise themselves in any way as so many people do in our society and try to make themselves celebrities or personalities. These were just very humble, ordinary people doing good in their own, quiet, unrecognized way – largely unrecognized way. Whom somebody else had noticed and had thought was worthy of recognition. And so, in some way or another, each of their names had been put forward and they had been honoured.

And as she progressed around the table and we heard these amazing stories of dedication, the dedication and love for fellow human beings, there were very few that were prompted by love of self. There were one or two, but they were mainly ones, they were mainly women who were trying to make the world a better place insofar as lay within their power, and so it struck me then – and I had done a lot of oral history, see, with the Aboriginal book and the women artists film script and other things that I've done, and I knew the value of oral history. I knew most of these people – or none of these people, really, most of them, would not – or none of them would ever write down their own story in such a way that it could be published. That wasn't their gift. And that wasn't how they saw their mission or their vocation. You know, it was more practical in terms of doing something. And that was why it came to me then – well, these women should be recorded in an oral history project. And so when it came to my turn at the table – and I think I was the last person – I did my little speech by saying just this, and Diana Laidlaw was most impressed and said, 'Oh, what a good idea!' And everybody round the table murmured their assent. And then I went on to tell a little bit about my work as a writer, and then – lo and behold! – months later I got this letter from Diana Laidlaw saying she'd thought about it and was deciding to implement the suggestion. So I was very happy, because there are a lot of unsung heroines in our society and this acknowledges them.

Had you ever in your life been involved with the Women's Movement, with women?

No, not really. I never really needed to. I really had such enlightened parents. There was only my sister and me in our family, there were no boys, but my mother was a very spunky woman who'd been denied a career of her own through family

circumstances – she was the oldest and she had to come home and look after her siblings when her mother became ill and when the youngest was born, and my mother had a lot of musical talent and really could have made a career, I'm sure, in light opera and that sort of thing. She had a lovely voice. But anyway, she became a wonderful mother and a very good housekeeper and cook, and a very hospitable person – our home was always open to all sorts of people – and she supported my father most loyally. And wherever Dad's job called him, well then, we all packed up and went, except to New Zealand, where she wouldn't go. I think I might have mentioned that. But she was very fulfilled in her role as a mother and a wife and a hostess. She made our clothes and she did all those things, and she worked indefatigably for all sorts of charities and for the church. And – – –. (tape ends)

VS: END OF TAPE 6 SIDE A: TAPE 6 SIDE B

LS: And she dissuaded my father from his thought that I would make a very good secretary and persuaded him that I should go to university. So my mother contributed a lot to me in that way, and my father was a very good, gentle, honourable man – courteous and thoughtful. There was not a hint of chauvinism in my father, not a hint of it. And then I was fortunate enough to go to The Friends' School in Tasmania, co-educational school, where again chauvinism simply wasn't – there wasn't a whiff of it there, and girls were just as respected as boys and given just equal opportunities, and there was no discrimination or differentiation one way or the other. And I never encountered discrimination or differentiation in any way. As I sought to go on in my career and as a librarian and so on, I never, never, never encountered it. And my husband was so generous, you see. He supported me so wholeheartedly when I aspired to become a writer, and – I don't know whether 'aspired' is the right word, really; I mean, it was just what I had to do. I just had to write. And I wanted to be published, because books were all-important in my life. And he supported me. And then, when the opportunity came for me to have a Literature Board Fellowship, which meant I gave up work – well, any case, anyway, I'd already got the sack from (laughs) Murray Park College, as I think I told you. After winning that award[16] for them they decided they'd appoint two library shelvers

[16] ???

instead of a reader services librarian. Which meant, of course, they ended up with a lot more shelving to do because people were taking the wrong books off the shelf; they weren't being educated, as I was (laughs) – which is what my job was, to educate readers. Anyway, so when it became apparent after I'd had that fellowship that going back into librarianship probably wasn't an option for me now, he was so happy for me to become a full-time writer, although financially it was a disaster. You don't earn the money as a writer that you earn in a public servant job with paid holidays and sick leave and all the other perks that you get – superannuation and everything. You don't ever get any of that. Plus a lot of the other things you don't get when you're self-employed, you know, you don't get the fellowship and the camaraderie you do when you're working in an institution where you're identifying with something much bigger than yourself. And that might come to the point where – identifying with something much bigger than yourself has always been important to me, and at that stage I took up Community Aid Abroad and, again, with David's help, and he's the one who stuck with it and is now the father of Community Aid Abroad or grandfather of Community Aid Abroad in South Australia. But I passed on from that, having got it established I passed on to other things that I felt needed doing, whereas he stayed with it. But that was something I was very conscious of when I gave up work at Murray Park, no longer being part of something bigger. And so I think that was where, then, I began to be much more heavily – – –. Oh, my children were growing up a bit, and so I began to be much more heavily involved in some of the things that I espoused, like Community Aid Abroad.

Do you want to talk about some of those things, because I believe your award was also for community service – particularly to children's literature, but also for community service generally.

Yes, well, Community Aid Abroad. I mean, I started it in South Australia. I wrote the letter that got Community Aid Abroad in Melbourne interested. I just wanted to start a small home group, which is what my sister had in Victoria where Community Aid Abroad began, and I heard about hers and thought, 'What a good idea, and I'd like to start a home group here', with a small circle of friends and acquaintances that I knew would be like-minded and sympathetic to aid to developing third world countries, or underprivileged third-world countries. And so I can remember very well sitting up in bed one night on a scruffy little piece of paper writing this little

letter off to Community Aid Abroad in Melbourne asking how to go about setting up a little group here. And being amazed when I got a letter back, saying they'd been waiting for someone here in South Australia to get it going here, and to organise a public meeting to launch it. It wasn't what I thought of at all! (laughs) Anyways, so I took it up and ran with it, and they had a list of five or six names of people who had already sent donations from South Australia, and they asked me to contact all these people and organise a little meeting to see what the situation would be, how much support there'd be and what we could do and how we could go ahead and organise a public meeting. So David supported me in all that, and he became the first President and I became the Secretary. And I did it for years from my ironing bench in the kitchen at 18 Allendale Grove, Stonyfell, and organised the first meeting at the Burnside Town Hall, which was addressed by David Scott who was then the Director of Community Aid Abroad in Melbourne, he came across. And it went on from there. You know, people recognized the importance. There are many more organisations doing the sort of work that Community Aid Abroad does – now, there are, but there weren't then. It was something very, very new. And we organised the first book sale that was ever held, second-hand book sale that was ever held in South Australia. And the books came from everywhere. Twelve hundred pounds we earned, and that was back in 1963 or something. That was amazing. 1964, it must have been. Yes, and that was just amazing. And so that went on from there.

And I did that for several years, and then I decided – well, I was asked to go back into librarianship and that was when I set up the junior school library at St Peter's Girls', and from there I was asked to go to Wattle Park Teachers' College to lecture students about children's literature. Well, in the event, I got pushed sideways out of that and was consigned to the back room doing acquisitions, and that was when I burst out with the writing, as I think I've mentioned. So my time for Community Aid Abroad diminished and other people were taking it up then more, and there were many more groups in South Australia by then, so my involvement with it diminished. But then I became involved in other things, like especially Campaign [Against] Nuclear Energy and conservation issues which were beginning to be much more community-oriented then, and I was a very early member of Australian Conservation Foundation and Campaign Against Nuclear Energy and land rights, all

those sort of issues, issues as they arose. I sort of tended to – well, I gave my name to, I offer my name to campaigns, for what it's worth, my name for what it's worth, when people are trying to collect lists of people who support a particular thing, you know, in an advertisement and that sort of thing. I give a donation and add my name, and that sort of thing, because I think it's important.

And one other – then I became involved – I became a citizen member of the Burnside Public Library Committee. I had been quite active – I think I might have mentioned – in the first campaign to set up a library at all in Burnside, and I had supported that campaign strongly, and then the first library was built. And I was the person who campaigned to get a professional librarian appointed because they were just going to have somebody out of the Council and I knew it needed a professional librarian. Well, at that stage, one of the councillors or aldermen had daughters at St Peter's Girls' School and he had seen my work there, and he invited me to come on the Burnside Library Committee as a citizen member. So I was on that for a number of years and went all through the business of enlarging the library and so on, the campaign that had to be for that. Then I was asked to set up and chair the National Book Council South Australian branch, which I did for a number of years. And then I was asked – same time I was also Authors' Representative on the Public Lending Right Committee, which is a Commonwealth committee, which at that stage was meeting in Sydney and I represented authors Australia-wide on that. I did that for a number of years and had quite a bit of homework to do for that.

And then, of course, I got engulfed in *Survival in our own land* and saw the great need for educating people on Aboriginal issues, and then took up – – –. By that time I had already been travelling quite a lot for Arts Councils – I'd done my first Arts Council trip in 1975, I think it was, for [the Literature Board of the Australia Council], and they had chosen me to go into Aboriginal communities because they thought I would fit in there. I don't know why they thought that. But anyway, that was the time when Rosemary Wighton was still on the Literature Board – famous South Australian woman of letters – and so that confronted me very much with Aboriginal issues, although I was already aware of them, but it really confronted me with what my writing was offering to Aboriginal children, or could offer. And it gave me a new sort of focus, trying to educate other Australians about what's going on in these areas, where most people never penetrate. I mean, most people *never*

have an opportunity to go to an Aboriginal community, especially in those more remote areas. And I saw it as my duty to try to share some of my observations and what I had learnt and what people had shared with me and taught me. And then that led, in time, to *Survival in our own land*, and that was just all-consuming for eight years. I didn't focus on anything else at all except that book, absolutely, totally, on that book.

And as I was coming out of that book, I was aware of the struggle to try to preserve Nutcote, the home of May Gibbs, up in Sydney. Now, I'd been aware of it for some years, because when I went to Sydney on the Public Lending Right Committee I used to see friends – she was also a librarian, and she was very involved in this campaign in Sydney to save Nutcote, and I used to give her donations and stuff. But at that stage there was no way I could get involved. But when I was coming out of that phase of *Survival*, I knew I was still so depleted and exhausted and burnt-out and (sighs) unable to write, that it would be a long time – if ever – that I wrote again, I thought then. And I thought, 'Well, this is something I can do that's useful.' Because I had loved May Gibbs as a child, I had all the Bib and Bub – well, had some of the Bib and Bub comics, you know, they used to be in the *Sunday Mail* here in Adelaide and I used to love them. And then, when we went to Sydney – I didn't find this out until I started on the May Gibbs campaign – but it was extraordinary – and again, it's this pattern, you see in your life – I actually lived next to Nutcote when we first went to live in Sydney. That's unbelievable, isn't it? I probably – I *did*, I'm sure I can remember seeing this hat that May Gibbs used to wear out in her garden over the hedge. We stayed in a big boarding house called Wallaringa Mansions, which was in Neutral Bay, and it was a lovely old home in those days, with sweeping grounds running right down to the harbour, and we kids used to play in these lovely gardens and down on the waterfront, and there was a hedge between us and the next-door house, and that next-door house was Nutcote. And as near as I can be sure, I can remember a hat bobbing along on the other side of that hedge. But we never spoke to that lady or did anything to communicate. So that was extraordinary, when I found that out. Well, then, at any rate, this was in October of 1989, I think it must have been. We'd just come back from Europe, where I'd been trying to lay down the burden of *Survival* and find ways of (sighs) coming through the anger and the grief and the frustration and the sadness of that book, and I

came back and my friend in Sydney rang me or wrote or did something, anyway. She said, 'Oh, Christobel, the struggle's at the end, we're losing and the house is about to be bulldozed.' And I suddenly knew then, 'Well, this is something I can do. This is somewhere where my name may count, and this is something I can do – well, if I never write again, this is something I can do. I can give my name to this campaign.' And I rang up the chief organiser and, you know, it was like a shot in the arm for him because he'd been battling on for years, and I started writing letters to papers and *Sydney Morning Herald* and that sort of thing, and ringing up the ABC. And one of the things I did was to ring up the Children's Book Council here and ask if I could speak at a meeting. Now, I've been a paid-up member of the Children's Book Council for just about ever, but I haven't attended its meetings for I don't know how long – just about ever, too, I suppose. Doesn't seem like a terribly good thing to me to do! And so I asked if I could come along to this meeting. This was when Pegi Williams was still very deep in the organisation. And so Pegi said yes, yes, I could come and talk about it for a few minutes. And so I came and talked about it, and about the importance of preserving this precious house and garden and saving it from the developers who wanted to bulldoze the whole lot and put units all over it, and one of the people in the audience was a person called Jane Brummitt, whose family is connected to May Gibbs' family. And Jane had been anguishing for a long time over the fate of Nutcote, but had never sort of felt she had the courage to get up and say anything about it. Well, she was so amazed when I did, and she came and spoke to me, and after that she got the idea of holding a function here in her garden in Adelaide, and trying to get people here interested in it. And so we worked together on that, and I approached people I knew like Charles Southwood and he came and interviewed us in the garden, and from there it just snowballed. And I got on 'Australia all over' with Ian McNamara – I did two sessions with him – and one thing led to another. And I wrote articles and got them published in all sorts of newsletters and magazines and stuff, and the whole thing took off from there. And I contacted my friends in every state, you see, and got them going on it, in Western Australia and Victoria – Elizabeth Honey took it up and Anne James – and different people everywhere started espousing the cause. And we started campaigning with pollies and all this stuff, you see? And we started campaigning the North Sydney

Council and I went up there a couple of times and in the end we saved it! But again, once it was saved, I moved onto something else.

Well, by this time, Deny King had come into my life and Asmir had come into my life and so on, so I moved back to my writing because – well, Asmir's story, and of course I'd started the – well, the very first book, I think I might have told you that I thought when I finally laid down the anguish of *Survival*, which I had to stay with for several years to keep it in print, you see, because it had nobody to look after it – – –. It's an orphan book, that one. If I don't look after it that book will die, it will vanish off the face of the earth. So that book is with me to the end of my days. (pause) So all these other stories were coming on me, but then the first story that I actually ever wrote after *Survival* was *Daniel's secret* up there on the headland at Tiagarra at Devonport, and I'd had that story in the back of my mind for years and years and years, long before I even started on *Survival*, but I'd never written it. And suddenly we went back to Tasmania, as we do frequently because of David's connections, and I was there because I was visiting the lady Heather Reid, whose mother's story I'd done, which still isn't published[17], *Ruby of Trowutta*, and I was visiting her and she knew my passion for these sort of things and places, and we used to go and walk up there in the sunset. And that was when I suddenly felt the surge of being able to write again. And I wrote that – very soon after that – oh, weeks after that, that was when I woke up in the middle of the night down at Willunga with *The sack* in my head, writing in my head. So then I knew that I wasn't finished as a writer, there was still work to do. And then, of course, *Asmir* came just after that, and then all of that. So I sort of move in and out of writing and espousing causes very vigorously. But I'm always there behind things, conservation and Aboriginal affairs – well, they are the most important things to me, but I do support a tremendous lot of other things.

Do they sort of – are they connected, the writing and trying to make the world a better place, and the espousing of causes? Do they come from the same well, I suppose?

I suppose they do. I've never really analysed it at all. I'm not an analytical person. I respond with my heart to things. When I get a letter from *Médecins sans frontières*

or something like that, well, what can your heart do but respond? And so, in a sense, I'm a passive supporter of a lot of things; I don't get actively involved in everything. But I got actively involved in the Friends of the ABC, for example, a few years ago when they were trying to get their profile up and I spoke at a rally in Rundle Mall and I've done things like that. I've spoken at rallies for things, for conservation and for the Franklin. When saving the Franklin, for example, I was very active in that campaign and wore the Platypus costume on a day of 95 or -6 or -8 or something (laughs) all down Rundle Mall, and parading along to Victoria Square. That was a hot job. Because they were using street theatre to engage people's attention, and certainly did! And then I campaigned for the Franklin outside Parliament House and outside the Tasmanian Government Tourist Bureau because I thought it's really important for people like me, who are seen – well, in those days – as middle-class white people wearing Sportscraft clothes to be campaigning actively for those sorts of causes, and not just to be – not just – well, in inverted commas, as people called them, 'hippies', you know, the long-haired Greens that people like to denigrate – that the support was across the community, that people like me also believed in it, who looked like me believed in it. And that's why I go in a lot of rallies. I do a lot of marches, NAIDOC[18] Week and Hiroshima Day and those sorts of things. I walk because I think it's important for people like me to be seen walking. And – I mean, just ordinary-looking people, middle-aged, older, as now people – I mean, I don't think of myself as elderly, but I guess people do because I've got white hair. So those where I think just showing your presence, standing up and being counted for rallies at Parliament House for the old forests, and Campaign Against Nuclear Energy, and the Roxby Downs, some of those things. You know, that's where I go, I go a lot to those sort of things.

Do you want to say something about in general, I guess, the spirit of volunteerism and community service? You were talking about those women that you sat with, and is there something – I don't know – something common between those women that you've sat with, or something in South Australia that you see about – – –?

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[17] To be published in 2002 by Montpelier Press.

[18] National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee.

Yes, I guess there is. I recently was asked to give the keynote address for the Palliative Care Council Week in October, and they want to link it up to volunteers for this Year of the Volunteer. And I said I couldn't think about it till I'd finished *King of the Wilderness*, but my mind is just starting to turn towards that. And of course with Peter Costello asking us all to volunteer an hour a week it's very much in people's minds at the moment. And – oh, I got a letter today just from the Christian Blind Mission International asking me to volunteer to letterbox in my district. I mean, I've letterboxed a lot for pollies, I've given out 'how to vote' cards for the Democrats and letterboxed for them and I've done a lot of things like that, and I think – yes, those women at that lunch, and it's a custom that Di Laidlaw has continued, I'm sure, I know, giving these lunches, and I think that's a really important recognition to women, because there are still far fewer women receiving these Order of Australia awards than men – – –. I think it perhaps *is* because a lot of the volunteer work women do, in particular, *is* so low-profile and it *is* in this sort of caring role that has always been seen as a women's role. So it's not particularly recognized; it is taken for granted, perhaps. And there still is a certain angst about tall poppies, anyway. So women, many just quietly work away in an area where they know they can make a contribution, whether it's for disabled children or elderly people or people suffering from some particular form of illness, women are naturally suited to doing that sort of caring and that sort of selfless service to others, and I think a tremendous number of people do. And I do think that this is one of the weaknesses, now, in our society where more and more women go out to work, go out to paid employment, that this great reservoir of goodwill and energy and desire to be of service is depleted because – well, when women go out to work and then come home and run a home and a family, they've got more than enough to do, and so there isn't perhaps the same opportunity for those women to serve in a volunteer capacity. But I do think – I'd like to think a majority of women in our community are prepared to serve unselfishly in some area or another, and do in fact do just that, whether they're recognized or not. And I don't think they necessarily expect recognition. (pause) They see the need and they act upon it, as most women always have.

I'm just going to have to stop you there: we're about to run out of tape.

END OF TAPE 6 SIDE B: TAPE 7 SIDE A

This is the third tape of a third interview with Christobel Mattingley being recorded by Karen George for the State Library of South Australia's Honoured Women's Oral History Project. The interview is taking place on the 21st August 2001 at Stonyfell in South Australia.

So we've come back just to really sum up a little bit, and you wanted to tell a story of what you consider is your Centenary of Federation book, *Cockawun and Cockatoo*. So do you want to tell me about that one?

Yes. *Cockawun and Cockatoo* I always thought had a particular association with this year of the Centenary of Federation, because it started actually on the very spot where the first Parliament House was built in Canberra. It started in about 1925, when the site was being cleared for that building, when they were establishing Canberra as the capital of the Federation. And there was a very large old gum tree on that site which had to be chopped down, and after it was destroyed one of the workmen found in one of its hollow limbs a sulphur-crested cockatoo's nest which had two babies in it which weren't even fledged. And, being a kind man, he rescued those little nestlings and put them inside his jumper, and eventually, when he went back to Sydney, he gave them to his nephew who was then a boy of about ten or eleven, and the nephew reared these little birds. Now, that young boy's family left Sydney and moved back up the coast to Taree and the Central Highlands, and the boy's father bought a little farm up on the Great Dividing Range, at a place called the Bulga Plateau. It wasn't really a place, but an area, called the Bulga Plateau. And I was taken – I met George, who was that little boy, when he was a man in his seventies. I met him for the first time. I was up in Central New South Wales because I was pursuing a story, which I have never written about but always thought I would, about the Wingham Brush, which is a wonderful area of rainforest, the last coastal rainforest left on the whole of the New South Wales coast, just a little fragment of it, pocket of it, and over the years it's got totally degraded and invaded by exotic plants and weeds. And there was a small band of volunteers who was working to clear the invaders and to preserve the habitat of the flying foxes, because the flying foxes loved the great big old fig trees and so on that were in that patch of rainforest. A lot of the people in the town don't like the flying foxes. Flying foxes are not liked, generally, wherever they are, poor things, because so much of their habitat's been destroyed that they come looking for other food sources, which is

often in the form of fruit from planted trees. So flying foxes are pretty unpopular sort of animals, but they're truly fascinating and I love them and I really wanted to write about them ever since I first heard about that patch of rainforest. So I was up there to look at the rainforest, and this is how I met these volunteers, and I worked with them on my hands and knees, and one of them was this old fellow – or he seemed old to me then because it was (laughs) twenty years or more ago – who was in his seventies and his name was George Coleman. And as we talked about things that interested us I found that he was very interested in Aboriginal things, and he invited me to come back to his house and see some of the things he had collected. Well, he showed me some marvellous artefacts and books and photos, and then we went out into the garden, and out there, under a macadamia tree, was this sulphur-crested cockatoo. And I've always loved cockatoos, ever since I was a little girl. My grandpa had a sulphur-crested cockatoo, cheeky fellow he was – naughty fellow, too, as they often are: he used to nip the heads of Grandpa's carnations – but I loved old Cocky, and he was a very wise and wily and intelligent bird, with a tremendous sense of hearing. Great sense of hearing, cockies have got. So there was George's cocky, cracking macadamia nuts, no trouble at all to him – you know how hard to crack macadamia nuts are. Well, so I talked to Cocky and I'll swear he understood. He listened and he looked so wisely at me with his one eye – he only had one eye, poor thing. And so afterwards I said to George, 'How old's Cocky? How long have you had him? What's the story about him?' And George told me this amazing story about how he'd been rescued from a tree from the site of the first Parliament House in Canberra. And I thought, 'I'm looking at a piece of Australian history! This is just amazing! There's a story in it!' Well, next time we went back to Taree it was a year later, and George offered to take us up to the Bolga Plateau to show us the little farm and the beautiful waterfall and the bush all around. And sadly, because none of his family wanted this little farm or were interested in the bush or anything – well, not sadly; it was sad that they weren't – but the good part was that George had given this lovely land, this beautiful, pristine bush, he'd given it to the National Parks and Wildlife as a little conservation park. So we wandered through this magnificent rainforest bush and up to the Ellenborough Falls, or down to them, and saw the little old tumbling-down farmhouse, and George took me to a spot that had been a bora ground, an Aboriginal ground, and when we got there the stones had been moved

and George was very distressed. And then, later on, he wanted to show me another place, and we drove there and David stayed in the car but George and I walked across these bleak upland paddocks – it's right up on the Great Dividing Range and it was an Aboriginal highway, it was a trade route. And we came to an amazing place, in a little gully, where there's a sort of stone formation. And it wasn't a natural formation; it was a made one. And I don't often tell this story, and perhaps I shouldn't even be telling it on tape, but George bent down – and I couldn't believe it – he picked up a stone and rearranged it. And I thought, 'What on earth are you touching it for?' And I felt a cold wind pass over me – I'm coming out in gooseflesh as I even speak about it. He said nothing and I said nothing and we just turned away and we started to walk back. And this cold wind just seemed to go with me. Anyway, we got out of the gully and back up onto the high, level ground and we were walking back across this paddock, and George looked at me. He said, 'Did you feel that?' And I said, 'Yes.' And we both looked at each other and we went on walking and there was no more wind. But it was the most eerie and powerful experience. I've never forgotten it.

So anyway, I started to write that story straight away. I actually tape-recorded George in the car for some of his memories. He took us down to the coast to where he used to go camping with his family, and where he now – oh, he had a little shack place that he gave to his daughter, he took us there. We walked on that beach and looked at those headlands. And it was all so powerful to me I actually started writing that story then and there, and I wrote the first chapter. But when we got back to Adelaide my husband wasn't well; in fact, he was extremely ill. I was about to go off on the first big field trip for *Survival in our own land*, the biggest field trip I'd done, and I never did it in the end. And it was a Sunday and I took a look at him, I thought, 'I don't like the look of you, I don't think I'd better go away and leave you,' because at that stage none of our children were home, and the youngest, who was still living at home, was away for a couple of weeks, and the others had left home. I thought, 'I'm not going to go away and leave you by yourself.' So I rang up and cancelled that tour, and the next morning I rang the doctor and he saw David straight away and he was in intensive care within a half an hour, and there he was in the Royal Adelaide Hospital having a quadruple bypass within days. So if I'd gone on that trip he probably wouldn't have survived. Well, that put paid to writing any

more of that story, and by the time David recovered enough – and I was still working on *Survival in our own land* and, you know, that got worse and worse and there was no question of ever writing anything of my own – – –. So it just sat in the back of a filing cabinet for years and years and years and years. And when I did come out of *Survival in our own land* and I was – went to Melbourne, and I went out to Penguin for a visit and what they do is when you visit there they like to show you round the building and all the different areas of work, and so they took me into the design section, and there, on one of the designers' tables, was a book about a white cockatoo. And it was by Mary Pershall. What was it called? *Barney* something-or-other[19]. Anyway, and I nearly wept when I saw it. I thought, 'Well, that's the end of *my* cockatoo story.' And I didn't say anything and I just thought, 'Well, that's it.' And so I never looked at the thing again. I thought I might finish it when I came out of *Survival*, but that just didn't seem to be a question. Well, it was 1996, it was just after I got my AM, and we'd been across to the USA and we'd seen Asmir and his family, and we came back, and while we were away my mother had died, and she'd been in a wheelchair for the last three and a half years in a nursing home and so on, and caring for her, although she was in the nursing home, I used to go and visit her very frequently and have her home here and so on, and suddenly she was no longer there and suddenly there was this great big space in my life. And Erica Irving, the Penguin editor, the Puffin editor, with whom I had such a good relationship – sadly, she's gone to Allen and Unwin now – anyway, Erica said to me, 'What are you writing now, Christobel,' and I said, 'Oh, I'm not writing anything, Erica.' And she said, 'Well, you must have some story you want to do.' And I said, 'Oh, well, not really.' She said, 'Haven't you got something you want to finish?' And I said, 'Well, the only thing I haven't finished is a story about a cockatoo,' and I told her about the incident of visiting Penguin and seeing the other book there. 'Oh,' she said, 'that was years ago now. And,' she said, 'your story will be different, anyway. Get it out and see if you want to finish it. You finish it.' So I got it out and I read that first chapter and I was amazed at it, because I knew that I could never write like that now. But I knew what the rest of the story was and I knew I could write that. But the power of that first chapter I knew had come straight from that bush, and it

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was as well that I'd written it when I did. So I started and I finished it in six weeks. It was extraordinary. You know, I'd started it in 1984, and in 1996 I finished it between the middle of November, when we got back from USA, and Christmas. And Erica looked at it and took it, loved it straight away, and took it. So that was *Cockawun and Cockatoo*. I called the cocky Cockawun – George's cocky – and the other one Cockatoo. Well, Cockatoo disappeared fairly early in George's account, so he became or she became the wildling. But it was George's relationship with his cocky and the passage of the years that I tried to evoke in that story.

And I lost touch with George and in fact it turned out he had died, and Cocky had died too, but I got in contact with his daughter, who was a teacher, and she was delighted that the story had finally come into being, and she supplied the photos for the book, such as they were – not very much, because of course they were a pretty poor family and there hadn't been many photos – but I always thought I was glad I finished it, because I felt it was an incredibly important piece of Australian history, and it's true. I mean, some of it, of course, I made up: I made up George's visit to Canberra and Parliament House.

I was going to ask whether that was imaginary.

It was sort of a bit spoofy, it was a bit like *The great Ballagundi damper bake*, really, because I don't have a great deal of respect for politicians. (laughs) But I had worked in Canberra in the 1950s, and I used to go to Old Parliament House. I was Librarian in the Department of Immigration, and I used to walk across the paddocks, as they were then, between the office and the Old Parliament House, because – or Parliament House, as it was – because that was virtually the National Library of Australia, and that was the main library in Canberra, and when I had research questions that's where I used to go. And it was lovely to walk across there in the crisp Canberra sunshine and go into that beautiful building and across those great floors and in through those wonderful timber doors and the polished wood and the red leather and the beautiful bindings, I used to love it. And so I wanted it to be launched in Canberra, and eventually, after a lot of persuasion, the publisher decided, yes, that could be, and it actually was launched in the King's Hall of Parliament House, Canberra. So it was a sort of little contribution to Australian social history.

In looking over the career, as we've talked about your career in children's literature – oh, in literature generally, I guess – it's clear that *Survival* was one of the really difficult times. Is there a particular high, where it was a book or a time that was the best?

Well, I think probably the launch of *Survival* was the most amazing occasion in my life, because when it finally, finally got through all of the obstacles that had been put in front of it, and one of the last was that my name was – the printer got my name spelt wrong on it! (laughs) So the jacket had to go back and be redone. But no, the things that were put in the way of that book and the things that that book had to overcome and I had to overcome for that book were just amazing, just beyond belief. And so, when it finally did come out, and the launch was scheduled, John Bannon, the Premier at the time, had given it such a hard time – he was invited as a courtesy, and the date didn't suit him – well, Aboriginal people were so angry, they said, 'Well, we'll do it without him. We don't have to have him there,' and advised the Premier's office accordingly, and suddenly he found he was able to change his schedule after all and attend. I think it was the most uncomfortable three hours the man ever spent, hearing the truth about that book. And that had the most enormous crowd. It was in the hall of the old St James' Church at Hindmarsh, which Ken Hampton had got the use of for Aboriginal people, a *nunga* Anglican ministry, and it was in that hall, which could accommodate several hundred people – well, it was an overflow meeting and there were several hundred outside. There were over five hundred people at the launch of that book, mostly Aboriginal, a lot of non-Aboriginal white *goonya* well-wishers, but the predominant audience was Aborginal people who had just *waited* for that book and who just took that book to their hearts. So that, to me, was the culmination of a very, very long, agonising journey, and I don't think there could ever be a better moment in my life as a writer than there was – or better couple of hours than there were that day when – to see the joy, the rejoicing, with which that book was received by the people for whom I wrote it.

Well, I'd like to thank you very much for sharing all the time you have with me and talking about your books and your writing. It's been incredibly interesting and inspiring, and I'm very glad that you suggested the Honoured Women's Oral History Project. It has been a great experience for interviewers as well as interviewees, I think. So if there's anything else you want to add, I don't know, but we can leave it there.

I'm glad that Diana Laidlaw took up that suggestion. I'm glad that I was led to make it, and I was glad that she acted upon it, and I hope that it continues as each year brings forth more and more women who've made contributions in their own way to our society, and I know there's so many people doing that in all sorts of ways, and this Oral History Project's going to be a great resource in the future. So I really commend you all for the work you've done on it, and thank you for inviting me to be part of it.

Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW.