

INTERVIEW WITH MRS JEAN CHAPMAN
BY BOB KERR, RECORDED ON SATURDAY
23RD JULY 1988, AT WYONG, NEW
SOUTH WALES, FOR THE UNIVERSITY
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UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

OPEN FOUNDATION COURSE

1988

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Signed Jean Chapman

Date 17 Jul 88

Interviewer R Kerr

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW WITH MRS JEAN CHAPMAN

BY ROBERT KERR.

The interview with Mrs Jean Chapman mainly centres around recollections of her father ,the late Alexander Reginald Wilkie,who was a journalist in Newcastle prior to World War One and during the great depression,with particular emphasis on a trip undertaken by Mrs Chapman and her father to Legges Camp,on the Myall Lakes,in 1932.Mrs Chapman first talks about her ancestry,mentioning that her family had a grant of land,in the 13th or 14th century,near Edinburgh, Scotland.She also mentions that her ancestor,Sir David Wilkie,was court painter to Queen Victoria,and that a famous painting of Sir Davids funeral,was done by Turner.

Alexander Wilkie's father was the director of the Melbourne Zoological Gardens,and so he spent most of his younger days in the Zoological Gardens, Royal Park.After leaving school he worked for the Victorian Railways for a short time,but decided that he wanted to travel,and it was while he was in South Africa,that he got a job as a journalist,and so began his career. While working in South Africa,he met Mahatma Gandhi,whose career he was to follow to its conclusion.

Mr Wilkie returned to Australia and was employed by the Sydney Morning Herald and posted to Newcastle in about 1909,where he married and Jean was born.During this time Mr Wilkie did police rounds and also reported on the many shipwrecks off Nobbies.He would row out in a lifeboat to get first hand information on the drama taking place,then later interview the survivors in hospital.While in Newcastle at this time,Mr Wilkie and a group of fellow journalists went fishing in a rowboat,with a keg of beer,and by the time that they returned to shore,they had formed the Newcastle branch of the Australian Journalists Association.

In 1912, Mr Wilkie was recalled to Sydney for several years, where he became an acquaintance of Billie Hughes. Mr Wilkie was awarded the Gold Honour Badge by the Australian Journalists Association, and every year there is a luncheon held in his honour.

During the depression he moved back to Newcastle, where he worked as sub editor on the Newcastle Herald, and as a treat for his daughters, he took them on a visit to Legges Camp, on the Myall Lakes. The trip from Newcastle by mail car took all afternoon, and they were greeted by Mrs Legge, who settled them into the dignified guest house. Mr Legge later returned from a trip in his launch, and after dinner, he enthralled his guests with stories of famous people who visited the area. In the morning, Mr Legge took them in his launch, up the Boolambayte River and showed them many areas of interest, and later they visited a cottage at the foot of Alum Mountain, where they purchased pendants made from polished alum taken from the mountain. After a good night's sleep at the Legges' guest house, the family was taken, again by launch, down the Myall River to Tea Gardens, where they were picked up by the mail car and returned to Newcastle.

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RK This is an interview of Mrs Jean Chapman, interviewed by Bob Kerr, at Wyong NSW, on Saturday 23rd July 1988, for the University of Newcastle Open Foundation Course.

Mrs Chapman will be talking on her recollections of her father, the late Alexander Reginald Wilkie, while he was based in Newcastle as the Newcastle editor for the Sydney Morning Herald, prior to World War One, and later during the great depression.

RK I'll just ask you to start with, if you don't mind, just a bit of background about your parents, like, When did they come to Australia? Was your father born in Australia?

JC They were both born in Australia

RK What about their parents, where did they come from?

JC One grandfather was born at sea off Goa in India, that was my mothers father. My fathers father, I think he was born in Australia, I'm not sure on that, but they came from Scotland.

RK So you go back a long way.

JC We've got a family tree, the Wilkie, my fathers family tree, back to about 13 or 1400. I've got the family tree, where my fathers people came from, they had a grant of land at Raca bias, I don't think thats far from Linlithgow, near Edinburgh, and then thats how my famous ancestor, Sir David Wilkie, he was the court painter to Queen Victoria, came to be born and lived in Cults, near Linlithgow and Aber Glaslyn, not far from Edinburgh, and he travelled a lot because there was that famous painting by Turner, of his burial, was done at sea on a trip back from Albania. He travelled quite a lot although he died in his forties. So that both my parents were born in Australia. Both families came originally from Scotland, but one grandfather didn't live in India, he lived in England, his father was a sea captain and traded between London and India, Goa, and thats why he was born at sea off Goa.

RK Your mother was Albanian?

JC No, no my mother, most of her ancestors came from Scotland, but her father was born near Goa, his father came from London you see, and he traded. His mother was lady in waiting to the Persian Court. So that might be where you thought.... She was an Armenian, thats right.

RK Your father came from Melbourne?

JC Yes, his father was the director of the Melbourne Zoo, and he lived most of his life in the Zoological Gardens, Royal Park. And my mother came from Williamstown, both Victorians.

RK And he moved up to Sydney?

JC Yes, after he left school, he got a job in the Victorian Railways and he worked just near Spencer St Station, but he didn't stay at that very long, he wanted to see a bit of the world, so he went to South Africa at an early age, and thats where he started his career in journalism. He got a job on one of the South African newspapers

and that's where he got his original training, at Capetown, I've forgotten the name of the paper. At Capetown it was a famous editor who trained him, and while he was working on the newspapers in South Africa that he met Gandhi, Mahatma Gandhi. He was travelling on a train to... I'm not sure where he was going, he was talking to this gentleman in the carriage, and in the course of the conversation he found out it was Gandhi, but he wasn't a famous name then, and I guess it was his first worthwhile interview and it started him off. Then as a reporter he had to interview a lot of people but that was one he often spoke about.

RK That would be inspiring.

JC Yes, especially as he followed his career while he was reporting and on sub editors tables. After coming back from South Africa, he came to Sydney, and it was in Sydney that he got a job in the Sydney Morning Herald, and then they sent him up to Newcastle. That's why, when I was born, in 1911, he was working as a Sydney Morning Herald representative up in Newcastle

RK Did he already know your mother before he moved up to Newcastle?

JC I think he met her in Sydney, but they were married in Newcastle. His main job up there was reporting, he would do all the police rounds every day and I think she was working in Newcastle for a while, and then they were married at the Presbyterian Church in Union Street.

RK Was she a journalist?

JC No, she worked at Mark Foys in Sydney, she started in Melbourne, came up to Sydney, which was a big thing in her life, for somebody reared in those days in Williamstown. She was breaking away and starting off in a new state. They were married in Newcastle and lived in one of the semi-detached houses at the top of Scott St, the baths end, up towards the beach in Scott Street, and I think that terrace is still standing, it was, when I was up there last, the house where I was born, in Scott Street.

RK What number was it? Do you know?

JC No, I can't tell you the number, but I know the house when I see it because my father, whenever I was in Newcastle, would show me the house. It used to be painted pale blue lately, but it would not have been in those days. I would only be twelve months or not much more when he left Newcastle, he was called back to Sydney, where he worked, still as a sub editor, not as a sub editor, as a reporter in those days, and he did quite a number of electioneering campaigns. I remember one with Billy Hughes, when I was very young, and one with the then Prince of Wales, who was in Australia. Their trips in those days were done by train, and the press would travel in the same train with the politicians, and he met the Prince of Wales and he interviewed Billy Hughes a number of times, and he knew Billy Hughes pretty well because he had to entertain him in the Journalist Club on several occasions, and, of course we knew Billy Hughes by sight because we lived nearby in North Sydney. Billy Hughes lived then at Lindfield, at that time.

RK How was the travel in those days from Newcastle to Sydney? Was that by train or was it by boat?

JC By train mainly, you could go by boat, but we had no cars, and when you went by car you had to go over the vehicular ferry at the Hawkesbury, before the bridge was built and that was quite a story, the building of that, the Hawkesbury bridge, because you could see where the pylons were put down and they could never get deep enough or something held them up. But we had no car in those days, so we travelled by train. It wasn't until I started teaching

- that I bought a car. In those days you could manage without a car.
- RK We probably can now days too, a lot easier, but we don't. So, when your father was in Newcastle, apart from the police rounds, he rowed out, apparently, to the shipwrecks and that sort of thing?
- JC Yes, there were several shipwrecks off Nobbys, I, of course, was only a baby, but I've heard the story over the years, how there were several shipwrecks off, not far out from Nobbys, and he went out in small boats to see the actual trouble and then, later, I've heard the story how he'd go back and interview the people who were rescued and taken to the hospital in Newcastle and get his story through to Sydney. That was back in the days before I was born, when he did that, and in those days, I wasn't born, but the year that they started the nucleus of the A.J.A (Australian Journalists Association). A number of journalists went out in a boat, I believe that the idea of fishing lines and a days fishing. I believe they also had a keg of beer and they formed the nucleus of the Newcastle Branch and of course later when he came back to Sydney, he was always involved with the A.J.A in Sydney.
- RK Its possibly his idea to start it in Newcastle because he was involved with....
- JC I've got photos of the men that were involved in those early days, starting it, and he would be a foundation member of the A.J.A, which is seperate to the Journalist Club. There would be quite a handfull, well not many if they went in a fishing boat I suppose, who went out on that first day.
- RK They used to go out to the shipwrecks, most shipwrecks occur in bad weather, so they would be rowing out there in a little boat in bad weather?
- JC Yes, I suppose they had somebody who knew how to handle the boat to take them out. Yes, my mother never knew what time he would be home, especially if she heard there was a shipwreck and you never heard it on the radio like you do today. The same when he came back to Sydney, he was often on parliamentary, he would have to go to parliament house and sit through the sittings. Every morning, when I got up to go to school, I would tip toe around the house because he would come in, in the wee hours of the morning, but quite often I'd be tip toeing around the house and he hadn't come home at all. There would be an all night sitting.
- RK Yes, apparently in those days, when they would do something like that, an interview or something, the reporters would put the research into it. The reporters were geared to the politicians, where now, politics is more geared to the media.
- JC Yes, it was a different, quite a different aspect. He was still on jobs like that for a long time, and later, onto sub editing and worked on sub editors tables.
- RK What is a sub editor in charge of?
- JC They have to go through all the copy, the reporters copy, and condense it. They would have to know the widths of columns and the lines, and my father was noted for the way he got on, so very well with the compositors. Not may Journalists, in those days, and compositors, got on very well, they were usually at loggerheads, but he studied, so many lines to the inch, or whatever the measurements were, and the compositors, when he sent the copy down to them, they knew that they got on well, he studied that, and consequently he was liked by the compositors.

- RK He probably started off doing something like that in South Africa, did he?
- JC He may have, I think he mainly reported in South Africa though. His first editor in South Africa was a Boer and I can't remember his name, but he was a famous editor, but he had a very good grounding. In his later life he was noted for his work on the sub editors table, and they were the ones who chose the headings. My father was noted for his apt headings, something that just fitted the story. And then later, when he went back to Newcastle, that would be in 1930-31, the depression was on, and a lot of newspapers closed down, and, for a while, a new newspaper started called "The World", and he was on that. He was offered jobs on "Truth" and he wouldn't take them because of his three daughters. He was offered a job on.. I think it was the "Newcastle Herald" then when he went back and that was, I turned 21, while he was working through the depression on the "Newcastle Herald" because I know he wasn't home on my actual 21st birthday, but he came home every weekend and we celebrated at the weekend. That was just, back to Newcastle in those days was, because of the depression, and anybody who didn't live through that depression can't imagine. We talk about depressed times now, but that was the soup kitchens and it really was.
- RK How did your family fare?
- JC Well, he was working on the "Evening News" I think, before the depression, and then that closed down and this new paper "The World" started and he was on that and he managed and then back up to Newcastle for a while. But there were some periods when he had to live on his savings. He did have temporary jobs and weathered through the storms through those days and it didn't really affect us, except I knew they had to do a bit of penny saving and pinching to get through and that would be the time when I was finishing my teaching career, and my job, when it came through, we had an eight month delay in our appointment because of those hard times. A lot of married women teachers had been called back and we had to wait 8 months for our jobs. And then we got a fortnight on and a fortnight off, until things were over. One week with pay and one week without. I was pretty well off because my father had plenty of jobs, or temporary jobs until things got back to normal. Then he was back with the "Sydney Morning Herald" again and then my sister, who is a lot younger than I am decided she wanted to do it. My father never wanted us to get into journalism, but she left school and did a business course, and then went looking for a job and started in the newspapers and got a job because of her name, I feel sure, it might have been that because of the name. She had over 30 years on the "Womens Weekly", and she had some time off while she had her son. She became fiction editor on the "Womens Weekly", and she worked with Ita Buttrose, originally with Jean Williamson, who may, I'm not sure, she may have been the first editor of the "Womens Weekly", but my father had worked with her on the Herald, and later Roma went through quite a few editors until she finished up with Ita Buttrose. She was the only one that went in for journalism. I could never have done it. You've got to think in a second, you've got to act quickly, and the papers going to press, and women, even today, not many women go into journalism today, compared with men and you've got to work with them.
- RK Do you think there would be a bit of resistance? There would be no reason why women could'nt be good journalists.
- JC I'm sure they could, Ita Buttrose and Jane Singleton, those type of women are doing very fine jobs, but there is still some resistance, I think, perhaps not so much today. Not so many in numbers as the men and I couldn't face to work with opposition like

that.

- RK When your father was back in Newcastle, during the depression, how long was he there for?
- JC Maybe 2 or 3 years, on and off, it might have only been, perhaps 2 years, it may have been 3, 1932 I started teaching at the end of 1932, and things were better by then so it was only a short time when he was back there, and back to Sydney. And it was after that, that he won the Gold Honour Badge, which in those days was the highest award a journalist could win. I think today there are other awards. The Wakeland awards and other ones, but its still the Golden Honour Badge awarded by the A.J.A and they've got to be pretty good to get that. The 3 men who are honoured for the last 21 years, they are all Gold Badge winners, Alec Wilkie, Jack Payton and Sid Deimar. There is a luncheon held every year at the Journalist Club, which honours their names and a lecture is given for the young journalist cadets of today.
- RK When is that luncheon? Is it held at the same time?
- JC No, it varies. We just had one lately, sometime in June, only a short time ago.
- RK You know I'm going to get around to the trip from Newcastle up to Legges Camp.
- JC Yes. We did that in about '32, because my sister was just finishing up her school days and I had just finished my teachers college course and he wanted to have something before we went off into the world, and he arrange this trip to Legges Camp. In those days I don't suppose there were many coach tours, but the mail car went from Newcastle and delivered the mail on the way up to Buladelah.
- RK Was that just a car?
- JC Yes. Well, the time I went it was just a car, it probably grew into a van later, but in those days it was a car, and they may have taken newspapers too, because that may have been how my father heard, and he arranged this trip. We left on a Friday afternoon, and we travelled to Buladelah and then from Buladelah out to Legges Camp. We got there just about sunset and Mr Legge wasn't there. We met Mrs Legge and we went & put our things in the boarding house, which still stands there today, but its not so dignified a building as it was in those days. We had rooms with a water jug and basin and there was no electricity when we had our meal at night, they had lamps. After dinner that night, after we met Mr Legge, who insisted he was Mr Legge with an "E" he got out his fossils and stones. For a number of years all the professors and teachers from Sydney University had gone up there taking geology excursions and students and he had gathered stones and fossils. Dr Osborne was the geology man and Prof David, amongst others who I wouldn't remember, because I didn't know anything about geology I was the one who carried the stones for my sister, and when he showed us these, he went on talking, sitting on the floor around this great big lamp and this box, and he told us stories that he had heard from the likes of Professor David and Dr Osborne.
- RK What sort of stories?
- JC I can't remember now, but he knew the places to go and they also knew the likely places and so he knew exactly where to take us, when he arranged that night to take us. The next day he took us in his launch, and we went from Legges Camp up until we joined

the Boolambayte Creek and we went along the Boolabyate and he pulled in, I've been up there since in the big ferry that goes around Nelson Bay and it can't navigate the Boolambayte, so his little boat got us to places where you wouldn't go in the tourist boat today. We would climb up the top of a hill and he would see a stone, and with his geology hammer, he would give it one crack and there would be the most perfect fossil.

RK Did he set up the camp for geology people?

JC No, I don't think so, I think it was just probably just mainly for fishing and to find the good fishing spots you go off the beaten track and in those days it would have been definitely off the beaten track. I've since spoken to fishermen up there and found out that some of them, the early fishermen from the Wyong district went up there and stayed.

RK During the depression years?

JC Well, yes around about that time or earlier. It would have been mainly for people just camping in the outdoors and perhaps mainly fishermen I should think.

RK Would that have been something a bit rare in those days, having a recreational area in a place like that?

JC I don't think so, because my father had several of his own personal friends who went off hiking and they would go on long hikes and they would get to remote places, I think the people like that who like hiking and fishing, that were plenty of people who went to Legges Camp, even in those days, it was a very dignified guest house. He also told us how to go to one of the farm houses where the boys gathered the Alum from the foot of the Mt Alum Mountain and we watched them polish the alum up, as a matter of fact we bought pendants and I've still got my pendant today, of alum, that I got back in those days from this farm house. So there was a fair bit of geology and Mr Legge was such a man who was interested in those things, not only the fishing.

RK What sort of a man was he?

JC He was a very tall man and he was very good at telling a yarn, very good at spinning, well he kept us enthralled there until about 2 or 3 in the morning, and we only had a few hours sleep until we got up and went with him next day. He was a self made man, who learnt and knew quite a lot about geology and fossils, because he had sat and met all these men from Sydney.

RK He had good teachers

JC Yes, and he was the sort of man who was interested, especially where he had settled on the land.

RK Do you know if he was a local man, or had he moved from elsewhere?

JC I wouldn't know that, but I should think he was a local. Years later, since I've been married I've been up there, not just lately, probably when our children were young and Mrs Legge was still there, Mr Legge had passed on. I don't know whether there are any of the Legges still living there today, but Mrs Legge was there for a number of years after her husband died and they reared a family there, so he could be. Since then when I have been back, there is a camping ground there today and a little kiosk in the

place where we stayed and a branch, sort of post office branch there, but I don't know what goes on today. I think it's mainly the office where the caravan people and campers go to pay their fees.

RK The next morning, after the night, you went in Mr Legges boat, down the river?

JC Up, well I would say up because you went to Boolambayte away from the Tea Gardens area and we were all day, we took a picnic lunch and we were all day, finding stones and fossils and he was telling us, we had a university student with us, who was also staying at Legges Camp. And we spent the whole day in the area, up the Boolambayte Creek, we called into different spots, we would call in and out and then we went back and had our dinner at Legges Camp and the next morning he took us in his launch down to Tea Gardens and I think we had our lunch at Tea Garden Hotel and the mail car was there waiting to bring us back to Newcastle, and that in those days it was quite a trip to do.

RK A long trip?

JC Yes and quite an adventuresome trip too, from Newcastle, especially for people who didn't have motor transport.

RK What was your impression of the trip down the river to Tea Gardens?

JC That was interesting. It was beautiful, it was beautiful country and it was well, as I said before, off the beaten track, and we didn't have a car so, I don't think I had been to Tea Gardens before, all I can remember is the beautiful scene at the hotel, we had a cup of tea there

RK That is a beautiful trip down the river.

JC Yes, we have been there since, when our children were young, camping. We camped in Tea Gardens and my husband had his row boat and the camping ground was right opposite the water and they would go out and bring in quite a lot of flathead by going round and round the same route. David didn't like fishing, he worked the motor for them and as they trolled these flatheads. But I don't suppose it's so easy today. There are a lot more campers, more settlement.

RK Fishing was really a thriving industry there then.

JC Yes it was a great fishing place. We used to spend all our holidays camping and that was one spot where they did well, at the fishing.

RK What were the roads like into and out of Tea Gardens into Buladelah?

JC When we left the highway at Buladelah it was pretty rough, it was just a track, and back in the days when we went to Mr Legges Camp

it wasn't a sealed road, they were just unsealed roads and not the best, it didn't worry us, the mail man was used to the track and we had good weather the time we went, no they wouldn't have been, because in those days I remember driving from Sydney to Griffiths, when I was first married, we went through quite a lot of places just in between trees and unsealed roads where it's all sealed highways today.

RK I remember a few of those myself.

JC Yes, its not so long ago, No they werent, but I wasnt doing any driving in those days so it wasn't our worry.

RK Were there a lot of people or a lot of camps on the river and on the lake?

JC Yes, there were quite a few campers at Legges Camp when we went and Legges boarding house was full when we were there. Yes it was a popular place even then.

RK Where there a lot of people living there?

JC Not a lot, I mean its grown a lot since then, but quite a small settlement, yes. I suppose I would notice the diference now, I haven't been for a while.

RK I don't think the river itself has changed very much?

JC No.