

ELYNE MITCHELL (Skier, author, farmer)

INTERVIEW: 16 April 1980

INTERVIEWER: Klaus Hueneke or G.M. - Group Member

This is a recording of an address by Elyne Mitchell of Towong Hill on the Upper Murray near Khancoban. It is the 16 April 1980. Elyne is the author of a number of books on the Snowy Mountains as well as books dealing with brumbies and some other animals of the mountains which were specifically written for children. Initially there will be an introduction by myself, Klaus Hueneke, followed by some short notes from Elyne, further discussion and questions and during the evening there will be the showing of two films - one about skiing, an old black and white film, filmed around the 1930s including Seamans hut and the top of Kosciusko available from the National Library and a film on more modern day skiing - Super 8 which Elyne is going to bring with her.

KH: I want to record this as one of my oral history interviews. As you might have guessed the speaker is in our midst. She sneaked in along the side there - her name is Elyne Mitchell. I thought just initially to start the ball rolling I'd just say a little bit about a rough broad chronology of events in Elyne's life as I know them and there is a lot of aspects I don't about. That will just start things off, then Elyne might like to say a few words and then we can have open discussion. In about an hour's time or so I'll show a film - black and white film made in the 1930s - skiing around Seamans hut and up around Kosciusko - also includes some footage of a dog team. Elyne I think, knew the guy who had that dog team. Towards the end of the evening - Elyne has brought in a Super 8 film of skiing at Thredbo - a much more recent version of skiing which is in colour, so we might have a look at that as well.

Elyne comes to us tonight with her son John who has gone back to the airport from Towong Hill which is in the Upper Murray near Khancoban.

EM:

I'm not sure I should divulge when you were born although its very public in the last book - the book I've already shown you on the Snowy Mountains. It's on the dust cover of that - but in 1935 she married Tom Mitchell who was later a parliamentarian in the Victorian Parliament, but at the time was very much in the forefront of downhill skiing and was Australian champion in a number of events for quite a period of time during the 30s. She married Tom in 1935 and went to live at Towong. She lived at Towong for 45 years now - she is the daughter of General Sir Harry Chauvel who played a big part in the Light Horse Division during the war. Elyne has written a book about that which came out last year. In 1935 I don't think Elyne had seen the snow, although she may correct me on that, and she went from a rank beginner, like perhaps some of you, to a champion within a couple of years and took out a number of downhill championships, down Kosciusko way. A lot of the old Ski Yearbooks, if you ever get hold of them and most of the editions of the old Ski Yearbook are in the National Library. They start in 1928 - a lot of the yearbooks of the 30s and later on, have got articles by Elyne and Tom in them. I think in the late 30s she visited various ski resorts in Europe and America, just to brush up on her technique, acquiring a more international sort of standard. In 1941 she did a lot of exploration of the country which is now called Little Austria, which is the country that most of you looked down off Twynam and off the Saddle on the way to Carruthers, down to the Sentinel, off Watsons Crags off Mt. Townsend and down into Lady Northcote canyon. She was one of the first people to explore that country on downhill skis and it was usually a day trip from the Chalet across there, so they would get up bright and early, get across the Main Range, ski that country for most of the day and then head back to the Chalet. In 1942 she wrote Australias Alps which was her first book, there is a copy of it here - I managed to get hold of one which you might like to browse through - a very old book and a very rare book now.

EM

In 1949 - I'm going through this fairly quickly - she skied to Cascade hut - no it was earlier than that - yes that was '41. It was '49 when you did the jeep trip. 1941 she skied to Cascade hut, which most of you have walked to and they caught a brumby, then in 1948, she and Tom and several others did a jeep trip from Khancoban up into the Wheelers - Pretty Plain country, the Dargals country, right through the mountains via Mawsons huts, the Kerries over the Rolling Grounds, around Mt Tate and ended up at the Chalet. That was the first vehicular crossing of the Alps I think. Also particularly during the 50s and 60s she wrote a number of children's books and if you look at the list of books Elyne has written, a high percentage of them are children's books about brumbies, daughters of brumbies, sons of brumbies - also kingfishers and dingoes and other aspects of the mountains. She started skiing again - there seems to be a break there - but she certainly started skiing again at Thredbo in the late 50s, in a very, very different setting to what she had been used to in the 30s and 40s - with chair lifts and all sorts of things, including hot baths. I'll just finish now - to end on the book, the Snowy Mountains, which is her latest effort, which has just come from the presses, which incorporates a lot of her past exploits in the mountains and her knowledge of mountain history, interviews with people who are now long gone, as well as her own unique style of putting the english language together. Would you like to take over now.

EM: Well there is one thing - Little Austria - that is just one small area - that's the gully behind Mt Lee, roughly speaking. You can go off to Carruthers or Lee to get into Little Austria and the rest of it is really all known as the western face. Twynam West Spur actually has Watsons Crag off it and it's got some of the very best skiing, the north side of the Spur and it was the western face of Anderson - we went right down on to what we call Friars Alp - it was a tiny little nob at the end of the spur which had a tonsure of mountain ash around it and was bare on top so we called it Friar's

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Alp. Also the west face of Townsend came in there so Little Austria is just that one gully - one very steep gully. It's not very steep if it's filled with snow, if it's not filled with snow it's very narrow - it is extremely steep.

KH: So when did that name start?

EM: In 1934. Tom and George Day went up Mt. Lee, fell off the cornice, or the cornice broke and I think they came down towards the Snowy and then they went up again, they skied down into the Northcote Canyon and came up Little Austria. The first people to probably ski Little Austria were George Day and some friends and that was 1936 when we were in New Zealand with the first ski team and George fell - there wasn't a great deal of snow - and bounced down a Waterfall and was quite badly hurt. That is the danger of those gullies on the western face. I don't know if anyone else went down there again until we skied it in 1941.

KH: Did you ski with skins then?

EM: Yes. They had bindings that you could let go - instead of these absolute rigid bindings now you have except for the Marker - you have one touring binding - I think there is one other firm that does it. These were all rigid and you were held tightly to the ski - then there were Kandahar cables or Willstein(?) heel clip which had little hooks which held you firm when you skied down, but you could let them up so that your heel came right up so that you didn't blister your heel. I never used skins with these modern bindings. If I'm climbing now, I climb with them on my shoulder and hope that there's some footsteps on ahead. Though if it's steep then you are in trouble - I think the modern boots are so stiff that no way would you really climb with skins at all easily even with a lot of elastoplast on your heels I think you would be in trouble. We had seal skins and they will run a little tighter down hill. If you go up again they will go more or less straight.

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KH: You have since skied on the more modern Langlauf skis haven't you. Would you tackle that country on those if you were 30 years younger?

EM: No, John and I were out there in '73 which was a very light snow year and marvellous cross country weather and we went from Thredbo to Albina hut and had a very early lunch there and John wanted to get to Twynam. From home it doesn't look such a very long way but we went up onto Mt. Northcote, and then we skied down, taking photographs all the way - it was beautiful snow. About half way up Twynam it was beginning to ice up and I was realising it was going to be a long way back. It wasn't very late but I said to John it is going to be ghastly - it's going to be icy and we are not going to have any fun skiing back. In '73 John was still at school ... unfortunately we both had black and white in our cameras - it was sad because I had a lot of that country photographed in black and white before - we got some beautiful photographs so it was worth it. Then when we got above Little Austria it was the most marvellous snow and we skied down and you were really in troubles in that gully unless your're an absolute past master at doing Telemarks which neither of us could do. We were doing quite decent sort of stem christies in this beautiful snow down towards that gully but there was no way we would consider going down it. But the joke about it was - you having mentioned my birthday - that we met a man on the slopes above the Northcote Canyon, sitting in a lump of snow looking rather weary and he said he was going to build an igloo on the other side of Carruthers and John was fascinated because we found an igloo a few days before on Townsend - beautiful igloo which would have held four people quite comfortably and three of us got into it and we were amazed because we had never been in an igloo before. Anyway this chap said he was going to build an igloo - he asked us where we had been and John said "Well we have been nearly all the way up Twynam but mum's pushing sixty and she said we'd better go home". So back we went

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to Albina then. No way would I go down something like Little Austria on cross-country skis. But that year we did a lot of wandering on cross-country skis and we went to Townsend from Thredbo which is a long hike. We made a very big error of cutting round the traverse on the back of Müller's Peak, instead of going down onto Wilkinson Valley - we were edging on hard snow for ages and that was almost nearly the last straw. We had one guy with us who couldn't ski much downhill and he tumbled an awful lot of the way back, which held us up too.

KH: That was in 1973?

That was the first time you'd been to Albina?

EM: No, I'd been to Albina lots, but it was the first time I'd ever been out on the range on cross-country skis to go to Townsend the week before.

KH: Did you ski at Albina in the 50s?

EM: In '41.

KH: No, at Albina hut I meant.

EM: No I was busy producing a family for about 12 years then and so I missed out then. All that time when they built Albina. I didn't go to Albina hut until I went with John in 1973. I didn't stay in Albina hut, I'd seen the hut before then because we had skied from Thredbo to that area two or three times.

KH: I was surprised that you didn't get in contact with that group - there were a lot of Europeans ...

EM: Yes, we were foundation members of Albina but then with a family we couldn't get there. Until you have a family, you always think you will put them on your back or something like that, but you don't.

Until Thredbo opened and there were warm houses in which you could leave a small child there was very little skiing. We did ski the six mile at home which was hopeless and you couldn't get up to Round Mountain which is quite close to home. So really, until we could get to Dead Horse Gap

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we didn't ski much. I suppose John was three when Thredbo started and he was dragged up - the rest of them were slightly older and they could ski - actually John had a ski between my feet when he was three, but then he got too heavy and I had a crook knee for a long time and a fairly heavy child between your feet with a crook knee, skiing, is not very easy. One year he didn't get much skiing and after that he could ski himself.

GM: It wouldn't be very easy with good knees I think. You had the opportunity to observe the snow patterns and the extent of snow fall obviously over a fairly extensive period - have you seen any pattern develop such that the snows are getting less and there for shorter times or how was it back in the 40s compared to the snow in the 70s?

EM: This is a little hard to tell because sometimes it will fall bigger in one area - north is thicker than the south or something like that - but that year in 1941 in which we did an enormous amount of ski touring, I know for instance, once we had nine days in succession ski touring from the Chalet and we were absolutely wrecked. We thought it was a light snow year because it was very good weather and we considered it a light year. I took a photograph from Dead Horse Gap looking down the Thredbo Valley and it's full of snow - now whether it was just lucky that that happened to be a week when the Thredbo Valley was full of snow or what I just don't know, but it had more snow in it than we have seen most winters now. Those early winters when I was skiing there was a lot of snow - there have been years of enormous snow - 1960, '64, '68, '56 - four year cycles. I suspect there is a much longer cycle than that. Those years at Kiandra when they were there for gold, there were tremendously heavy snow years - one at least was very heavy. There are stories of very heavy snow, so it's probably much longer cycles. I had great ambitions to get hold of Clement Wragge's diaries and notebooks.

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and things that he must have made of Kosciusko, but apparently they were all burnt in Canada - I don't know how or why - so they just don't exist. I thought that Dennis Walker would be sure to have them and there would be quite a lot of interest ... apparently they don't exist.

KH: One of the questions I had in the back of my mind is how you came to write in the first place - focussing on your writing. Is it a background in your family? What gave you the self-assurance - whatever it is that starts a person to write down their own thoughts - for instance to start writing Australia's Alps when you were 28 or 29?

EM: I had done a certain amount of writing of articles before that. I had wanted to be a writer almost since I can remember. I do think one of the things that was responsible for that was that mother transcribed all dad's letters from World War I into an enormous book for us and she started that when I was about 6 or 7. I can remember I was busy writing a book when mother was and this book she had bound and carved and I managed to get hold of a piece of leather and bound mine too, that possibly interested me in it, but that can't be all because I can remember when I was at school, I was determined I was going to be a writer but it took a lot of time and hard work before I was and failures and goodness knows what.

KH: You tried publishers before you wrote Australia's Alps?

EM: I wrote with Tom, a long account, mostly of his skiing and that wasn't accepted by any publisher and then I had written about four or five articles. Australia's Alps - well nothing had been done like that, on that country except in the Year Books and it was so interesting exploring it all and another thing was in the Ruapengo club slalom in 1936 I got as a second prize, Geoffrey Winthrop's ^{Young's} book on High Hills which was about his mountaineering before World War I - he lost a leg in World War I - and though it's very flowery sort of writing now, to an adult anyway, it was written with enormous joy and it really made me look at mountains with different eyes after I'd read it. I can remember

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the first thing we did after I'd read that book - we went up the Dargals west peak from home, just walking - it was quite a scramble - and I found myself thinking of the words to describe it and so on. It was a wonderful day ... Winthrop-Young was completely instrumental in making me read mountaineering books - I've now got a large collection of mountaineering books and he would have been partly responsible for making me interested in writing about the mountains. As I say, I intended to write always and I suppose another thing was that I always had been very interested in action and adventure, so that all tied up together with the skiing - skiing was a great outlet in fact.

KH: Had you skied before you met Tom?

EM: No, and I hated it at the beginning. We went to Mt Buller when we were engaged - Mt Buller in Victoria - and it snowed for two solid weeks except one day when it was ice and then snowed again. It was very deep snow and Tom and a friend of his had this idea, you had to be brought up rough - they were not going to have this helpless clinging female about the place at all - so they were old Alpina bindings which had leather toe straps and leather binding which had two buckles and you never undid those, just the heel clip - but you'd think they'd tell me that - not on your life. So I undid everything and tried to put them on and do them up and then I fell over in very deep snow and they didn't tell me how to keep myself up either, which is really quite easy. It was a pretty hard bringing-up and I thought it was hell. The second last day we were there, he went to meet the NSW team that were coming to race in Victoria for the first time and he came up to say goodbye to me and said 'I hope you like it because this is my life' and I thought 'Well if this is his life it's going to be absolutely hell'. (Much laughter)

We went to New Zealand on our honeymoon in November and they had a very, very late fall of snow - it was right to the waters edge as we went

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right down the South Island in a dreadful little ship, there was a full moon and snow right to the waters edge when we went into the Milford Sound too. This was simply beautiful. And then we went to Mt. Cook and that was exciting - I was absolutely exhausted by the skiing. We had meant to go hunting at Cook but there was masses of snow so all we could do was to ski. It didn't seem too bad, there were lovely sunny days and spring snow and so on. Then we went to Christchurch - Tom had been New Zealand champion the year before and we met a whole lot of Christchurch skiers. They were absolutely determined that Tom was going to see their new hut at Arthurs Pass and when we left them he asked 'do you want to go' and I said 'no'. He said 'well I do', so that was that. One of the chaps who was there had been a much older man who was a solicitor and he must have realised that I was really scared stiff and he found another girl - she was older than me, but at least she couldn't ski any better - and she went up too. We had beautiful spring snow and except that they took Tom up to the top of the mountain, they skied with us and turned it into a sort of kid's picnic most of the time. We had a marvellous time. I wasn't going to let on that I thought it was ok. Then we went to Mt. Egmont - there was about 3,000 feet of snow on that and that was superb and I found I could turn - you had to anyway because it was very steep - you came out of the crater and you could just see the little fields of Taranaka(?) between your ski tips - straight down. We had two days and that was great. Then we went to Ruapengo and Tom got a poisoned knee and he couldn't ski and he was most amused to find that I was really fretting to get up the mountain. I went up with a Norwegian guide and we got to the top of Teh-hu-hu (?) just at dawn and the snow was just turning from ice to spring snow which is terribly easy to ski on and that was it, I was absolutely sold on it.

GM: You have briefly explained some of your escapades, I think Klaus mentioned also, when we were walking around there that you used

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to transit from home by horseback - I'd be interested to hear - if you are going for a day's skiing, what a typical day would be or did you ever camp over night?

EM: Yes, we nearly always camped overnight - the only time I remember going for a day was just when we had to pick up stuff we had left. We'd either camp with a tent or cattlemens huts were everywhere - we'd go to Pretty Plain or Wheeler's hut.

KH: Was there a hut on Pinnabar?

EM: No, there was a hut way down.

KH: Pinnabar is just across the border isn't it?

EM: That's right. Nobody ever skied there before - we camped in this hut. We rode in and got there very late at night and it was a little wee hut and the smell was frightful and when we woke in the morning there was a sack of dead meat hanging there.

GM: Did you deposit your rations in huts?

EM: We used to sometimes, yes, if we were going for big trips but in the spring time we'd take a pack horse up and camp in a hut and then go out to the snow. In 1944 in a terrific drought year my sister and I went up with a chap to look after the horses - because you can't tie your horses when you ski - and camped at Pretty Plain. We rode up the sunny side of Jargunal, within about 500 feet of the top and then parked the horses and skied on the other side. There was an enormous amount of snow on the other side. My sister had never skied before - it's the only day she has ever skied in her life - I showed her how to stoke and pick herself up when she fell over and went up the top for one run myself. Then we rode back to Pretty Plain that night into the setting sun, there was a bit of a wind blowing, and she was working in the Navy so she was inside all the time, and she got the sort of sun burning I've read about and it's the only time I've ever seen it - but she just swelled up and she was delirious in Pretty Plain

hut and Errol and I didn't know what to do.

KH: Errol Scammel - he didn't ski?

EM: No. Errol Scammel looked after Waterfall Farm which is a professional men's club for fishing. A lot of university professors and a lot of doctors, solicitors and so on - from Sydney mostly I think - owned Waterfall Farm which is above Murray II.

KH: Where Major Clews lived?

EM: No, below where he lived. It was the end of the road at that time and because there was no road in to the mountains, they had to have pack horses to take their fishing gear in. So you had a lot of quiet riding horses - very quiet for these chaps - and pack horses, so Errol used to take us in the winter time, when there was no fishing.

KH: Did they also take you up to Hannels Spur?

EM: Errol's brother Keith Scammel.

KH: Did any of those stockmen ski?

EM: No, they took us, but they'd go down with the horses or camp on the edge of the snow like Errol did that time.

KH: But when you went up Hannel's Spur, you then skied across and down to the Chalet?

EM: It's only been done back once -, a chap called Wilson from Wagga - Roger Wilson and two others I think managed to make the return trip, but so often the weather is bad on our side and good on the Chalet side and its almost impossible to organize. I think they might have done it without horses, they might have walked.

KH: So you mostly skied into the Chalet, spent several days there ...

EM: We tried to get back and we couldn't.

KH: You'd go back by car ...

EM: I don't remember how we got back that time, somebody must have picked us up in a car or something because we had expected to get back.

The next time I did it was with Jill Macdonald and we had to come back by

train plus my sheep dog which was really quite an expedition. The sheep dog got so frightened that he got savage and he would go for anybody that came anywhere near us. The weather turned dark that time and they couldn't get up to meet us and then something else happened at home and they couldn't get the horses up so we had to go back by train.

GM: I heard stories of the early pioneers stocking the streams in that area by taking a pack horse with milk cans on either side of the horse ... was your husband involved in any of that sort of thing?

EM: No. Some of those pack horses - the one I had during the War were broken in to carry galvanized iron so they got quite used to carrying skis. Ours used to carry skis, but before that Errol's wouldn't - we used to carry them slung on our shoulders like a rifle and it was really frightfully uncomfortable. A long days ride with skis on your shoulder, they weighed about 15 lbs.

GM: I would be interested to hear your comments about living in a place like that and especially how you managed with little children?

EM: It was fairly ghastly in lots of ways.

GM: It must have been very isolated?

EM: It was isolated then but it isn't now. There are lots more neighbours now. One of the things in that area with little children is that there is a river mist which rises off the river each night in the winter time for at least six weeks and so a small child is wet to the waist as soon as it gets outside. Otherwise except for the winter months - being able to see the snow and not ski - that's a very good area to bring up children and we had little ponies and swimming all the time. I had them on correspondence school work. I must admit that when Thredbo started we used to do 3 days skiing a week and do 3 days correspondence school on the weekend.

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GM: I'm not too sure where Towong Hills is? How do you get down to Thredbo from there?

EM: You go up through Khancoban, onto the Alpine way.

GM: Is it kept open during the winter?

EM: Yes it is. But then I always have a Landrover.

GM: Did your children's books grow out of stories you told your own children?

EM: Well not quite. The eldest girl could read perfectly well and couldn't see any point in reading and I thought I have to write her something that she really enjoys and that was the Silver Brumby and it was meant just to be a short story. She used to come and take the pages off the typewriter. I suppose after about two-thirds of it I realised that there were two or three strands that I could carry through and make it into one, but that was really how that started - how the children's stories started.

KH: When did you start writing those? After the war?

EM: Yes, The Silver Brumby was written in 1955 and wasn't published until 1958. That has sold better than any of the other books which was refused by about six publishers.

KH: So the late 50s and 60s were your busiest periods in terms of writing?

EM: No.

KH: But that was your first book of that kind?

EM: Of that series, yes.

KH: You probably had another dozen or so didn't you?

EM: Yes, but children's stories are still coming out - one came out last Xmas. The hardest work probably of all was Light Horse and no way could I have done it in the time if I hadn't done a children's one before hand on the same subject. I did Light Horse of Damascus about - it was published in 1971 I think and the horse was the hero, and old Michael

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Brookson, who was alive then - I had a broken leg from skiing - he lived near my sister-in-law in Sydney - I used to hop around on my crutches with the tape recorder and see him and he said 'If the horses owners got to have emu plumes in his hat, he has to be a Queenslander and he'd better be in the fifth regiment and second brigade'. I followed the fifth regiment and second brigade right through the campaign but when they asked me if I'd do this book, I said I'd love to - and then they said they wanted the early regiment of the Boer War too and I didn't know anything about it. Of course, just following one regiment through was quite a different story compared to getting the whole thing and so the amount of work was absolutely colossal. There was a dead line on it and I really had to work.

GM: Have you written any fiction?

EM: Yes, a couple of novels and a few short stories.

GM: What was the name of the children's book ...

EM: Light Horse of Damascus was the children's book and the Light Horse - Story of Australia's mounted troops the adult one.

GM: What sort of literature would you recommend to anyone to get an appreciation of the Alps? The spiritual, poetic qualities.

EM: Well there are lots of marvellous mountaineering books - I don't know what's available now - I've been collecting them for about 35 years I suppose. There isn't very much written on the Snowy Mountains. I think there is David Campbell's poetry and there's Douglas Stewart's poetry. I suppose most of you have seen this one that the Park got out. That has a lot of Douglas' in it more than Davids' in it. There was a young man - Lhotsky - but that's Lhotsky's journal edited by Allan Andrews and there's really not a great deal else.

KH: There's Hancocks ...

EM: ... discovery of Monaro - that's more on the historical side rather than straight literature and jolly interesting too. I got one the

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other day which is extremely interesting. It's by a man called Brodribb and done by the NSW Historical Society - Recollections of a Squatter. He does a fantastic overland trip from Coolringdon. He says the last property he saw was Stewart Ryrie's - well Stewart Ryrie had a property at Jindabyne but whether he had any other property I don't know. Then the first one he found on the other side was at Possum Point which is on the Tooma, so he must have gone somewhere slightly south of Kiandra. He says it was dreadful and the gorges were frightfully steep - there is no other description of it, which is really sad because it would be so interesting.

KH: That's one of the first trips wasn't it?

EM: It was the second - 1855 - and he said there was one before with cattle. It's a pity it doesn't give more description.

GM: There is some Douglas Stewart prose - sort of fishing stories - but there doesn't seem to be anything I've been able to discover on the actual mountains.

EM: Miles Franklin's novels which have great descriptions of the mountains in them - it's a long time since I've read them but there is the story of a family going to the Brindabellas I think.

...

SIDE 2

EM: David Campbell's poetry does spring from this area. There was a lot written about the development of his poetry after his death but even so, some of them have said that his very best poetry does spring from this area where he was born and lived most of his life. Douglas of course is a New Zealander, but some of his poetry is delightful about the mountains - his fishing expeditions.

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KH: When did you first meet David Campbell?

EM: I think it was that evening at the Lodgers - only a couple of years ago - just about six months before his death. I'd corresponded with him a bit, got his permission to quote and so on ...

KH: You did an article in the "Canberra Times"...

EM: Yes ... the whole thing was rather psychic because I rang up Margaret Lodger to see if I could come and stay and she said 'But I've just written a letter to you' and that was the first - it was quite an extraordinary evening. David said this is too psychic I'm going.

GM: Is he a member of the Campbell family from Duntroon?

EM: I don't know but I think there is probably some relationship because all his family lived in this area for ages.

KH: Did David actually do much skiing?

EM: I think a lot of time fishing and I think he must have skied before the war because of that poem "Winter Stock Route" but I never met him skiing and I never met his children skiing - the two older ones.

KH: Would you like to read some of his ...

EM: No, I don't think I can read poetry well at all.

GM: Can I change the subject and ask you about the grazing - when you were first going up to the mountains - all those stockman's huts which were in use - cattle all over the place - cattle and sheep?

EM: It was mostly cattle but there were sheep. Foreman used to run sheep. If you stand on Charlotte's Pass and look straight down at the Snowys, there is a point comes off and he had a hut there. The chimney was there until quite recently ...

KH: It's still there.

EM: ... well that's Foreman's hut. I saw sheep on the Bogong Swamp in 1944 and of course this was terrible because the sheep were pounding their little hooves on all those swamps. When we rode up there that time

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in 1944 our head stockmen said to me 'You must be careful of Bogong Swamp, you can bog your horse there, anywhere'. You could ride nearly anywhere and you could drive the jeep over a great deal of it too later on, and this has been caused by the pressure of hooves mostly, because sphagnum is so spongy and they just press the moisture out. I'm quite certain and I don't think there is any question about it that above the tree line there should not be grazing. You would have to know much more than I know, to know about the forest area - what should be grazed and what shouldn't. Obviously there is a lot more danger from fires when it isn't grazed because there becomes a lot more rubbish and so on. I saw quite an example - I think it must be three years ago - the Park were slow burning in October on the Alpine Way and as I driving down - there was a particular corner on the Alpine Way where lilac hovea bloomed and it doesn't bloom in many places - as I was coming to this corner I thought 'gee I hope they haven't burnt it' and they hadn't. But now - a bush fire came through from Youngal 4 or 5 months later and really burnt it, and because that had not had a slow fire through it, the hovea was just gone. The first thing to recover were the tree ferns, which surprised me frightfully. I did see the value of slow burning because the fire that went through where there had'nt been slow burning was just absolutely frightful - terribly hot and some of the trees I don't think will ever recover. Just from what I've seen over the years - the improvement in the tops since there has been no grazing has been enormous and just the aesthetic value - the wild flowers are just so much better. A lot of them are unique and they're absolutely beautiful and why shouldn't we preserve them, quite apart from the fact that it's our best catchment area.

GM: One thing puzzled me last weekend when we were up in the Cooleman area and there was talk about the cattle coming in from vast distances and I guess the same thing happened ... did the cattle come up from the Victorian side?

EM

EM: Yes.

GM: What route did they follow? It's such dense forest - where did they get feed along the way?

EM: They came up a lot from Groggin to Dead Horse Gap and then apparently went up Merritt's Spur onto the tops.

GM: Did they come through in small groups?

EM: I don't know. I was out with Nankervis' who had that lease - Dead Horse Gap up on the tops and they'd bring them up from Groggin because they owned Groggin too. But I think for many years the Victorians brought them up to Dead Horse Gap. I was told that the Victorians always tried not to get there at the same time as the chaps from Monaro because the Monaro had very strong overproof rum and the Victorians couldn't take it, nor could they gallop after their cattle the next day with heads going like this.

GM: Is that the area of Foreman's hut?

Do you remember the first trip out we saw some grasses ...

EM: When I said that I thought the other one was the shoulder of Mt Clark my idea is that it should be on a tongue of land that comes down - this slopes that way and Foreman's was on a slice of land ...

KH: The chimney's still there ...

Well in the early days it would have been one of the highest huts - Foreman's. Was it still standing when you were there?

EM: It was certainly standing in the late 30s.

KH: Two rooms or one room?

EM: Two I think - I can't really remember. Some friends of mine camped in it once - the Lane-Pooles in fact - old man Lane-Poole was the head of the forestry school here and his eldest daughter Charlotte was always called Charles because she was meant to be a boy - she's a great friend of mine. We did a lot of camping together - she was in the WAAF in Albury and she would come up for her leave and we'd go camping in the

EM

woods - its about the only skiing we ever got - she was in that story - "Images in Water", that I sent you - and when the tent ridge pole broke and the trees cracked all around us - it was quite a hair-raising experience and all her father said was 'what a fool you were you were always brought up not to camp under tall trees'.

KH: Did you ever ski on the skis they made here in Canberra?

EM: No, but she did. She had some made out of Maculata and they weighed a ton. She was very strong.

KH: Where did your skis come from?

EM: Andy Broad made some in Victoria but we also had European skis that we brought home - we were in Europe just before the War.

KH: They were hickory.

EM: Yes. Some were laminated - we didn't use them much, they weren't very good. The hickory were very good.

KH: They are heavier than the alpine ash aren't they?

EM: Yes they would be - more solid.

KH: But they were faster?

EM: Oh yes because alpine ash grooves out - that's why they are called butter-pats. There were metal edges by the time I started skiing but that was another thing of Toms - he decided that you should always learn to ski without metal edges and then you had to learn again to ski with metal edges. It was quite hard work I tell you. Our first effort to try to get back from the Chalet to go over the Townsend/Abbot range and home, it was blowing a terrific blizzard and I only had metal edges and I was blown over all the time because you just couldn't hang on. I've got metal edges on cross-country skis.

GM: You obviously used huts a lot and as you know they are a controversial subject in this current study being undertaken by Parks and Wildlife - I just happened to hear on the news on the way in that they are retaining 40 huts and they are recommending the demolition of

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12 of the huts.

KH: That follows the leak that Bruce gave me last Wednesday night.

GM: What are your views on that?

EM: Well I don't really know what they are going to demolition, but their idea is that they don't want huts. I think there are two schools of thought in the Park. One lot would like them and one lot wouldn't. If you get down to absolute basics, if you don't have any huts there are going to be some frightful tragedies - that's what I think. It won't be the ones lost who will die but the ones looking for them probably.

It doesn't make sense - they've got a lot of young people keen on cross-country skiing and they've got a country that turns on the filthiest weather at the drop of a hat and if you don't have any shelter to go to, something nasty is going to happen to someone. It's quite a different set-up from when we were skiing. I mean, there were very few skiers comparatively and after all what was the population of Australia - you've got a very mobile population that can get up to the mountains very easily and a lot of them don't know anything about them and it's a miracle that there hasn't been more trouble than there's been. There's been a lot more trouble than anybody hears about - I know - you just get it on the grapevine. I can only think of one tragedy with cross-country skiers in the last six or seven years.

GM: There have been far more than that from downhill, there's been a fair loss of life there.

EM: There was one last year wasn't there at Perisher? I think it was Perisher. I was in Melbourne at the time - the Melbourne Herald had 'Thredbo - A Perisher skier skied off Charlottes Pass. That was one wasn't it?

KH: According to Wendy Cross - there are two or three every year. In general there are more fatalities due with downhill skiers than with cross-country skiers and I think in the high country - on NSW side there's

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only been one - back in about 72.

EM: If they don't have some sort of shelter for people who are searching I think they're going to be in trouble.

GM: There is also a theory being offered that by reason of the huts being there people try to reach the huts and very often that causes problems in itself - that they try to reach the hut instead of turning back. The rationale briefly on the radio - the Parks and Wildlife are offering for the demolition of the 12 huts was that they had little historic value or there were others close by which had similar historic value.

KH: The other is that the huts are not for accommodation, they are only for shelter.

EM: I don't know what huts you are actually talking about.

KH: Albina, Rawsons and Cootapatqmba, so that the only hut which would stay above the tree-line is Seamans. They are very concerned about getting huts out of that area - out of the Summit area and then through from Whites River there's Disappointment Spur, Schlink, Valentine, Grey Hill Cafe on the Grey Mare Range, O'Keefe's, Happys, Boobees - that's about it on that line I think. Two or three in the Summit area and its reducing the number between Guthega and Kiandra by about half - taking about 50% of the huts, so that the distance between huts will be more like nine or ten kilometres instead of an average of five or six. In essence also really not catering for the beginning ski tourists who will go up from Guthega from Munyang who will head up to those huts in that Whites River corridor - if they narrow that down to one hut, those sort of people have got very few places to go to. I think that whole issue is one being taken up by nordic skiers, the fact that nordic skiers are largely not been catered for in the park which ties in with the huts issue. So we have quite a hot spot at the moment.

EM: We'll have to have more igloo makers.

KH: I think in some, there is talk of actually excluding people

EM:

from the Summit area for overnight recreation of any kind - so that igloo building would be out, tenting would be out at any time of the year, so that the Summit area is only visited in day trips. That seems to be something they're heading for by the year 2000 or that's one of the ideas.

EM: I haven't heard them talking on this.

KH: I think we'll end up with a compromise.

EM: I don't see how they'll stop people going out and then I think it will be so dangerous if there's no shelter.

KH: I think the point about a base for rescue groups is very important.

EM: Albina I suppose.

KH: If there was an accident on the western face it would be Albina.

EM: I don't think you break your leg very easily with cross-country skis, but I do think you can twist your knee very badly and then you're in as much trouble as with a broken leg.

KH: Especially because this western facing business is becoming popular again ...

EM: On cross-country skis?

KH: No on alpine skis - people who actually go there on cross-country skis with their alpine skis - their shorties - strapped on their back across the pack and then they spend their days - they build an igloo or they stay at Albina and spend their days going on the same runs that you did.

EM: Ken Breakspear took to downhill skiing - he went over the range - over 70 I think he was - just towing his skis behind - walking on firm snow and skiing down whenever he could.

KH: You first skied with Ken at Alpine - would that be right?

EM: I certainly used to ski with him before - I was wondering if he came to New Zealand with us but he was in the Langlauf team in 1937.

GM: I didn't realise that Langlauf skiing had been going in a

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competition sport as long ago as that.

EM: Yes, in the early club races they had Langlauf, a jump and a downhill slalom.

GM: You did them all on the same sort of skis I suppose?

EM: No, we had proper langlauf skis - the downhill skis were sometimes without edges.

KH: Ken Breakspear, he's now 74 or 75, who still skis the Paddy Pallin classic. He's in the year book every year - under 2½ hours he still does it.

EM: He's a very fit man.

KH: He was involved with the Alpine hut which was specifically built for ski touring in the late 30s-down near a mountain called the Brassy-which was burnt down last year. Alpine's gone now and all its history and memories and what have you. You spent several trips in there.

EM: No, I went in once and spent four or five days there and we went to Jargunal from there - that was the first time I'd ever skied on Jargunal.

KH: You went in on horseback?

EM: No, we walked - we walked miles.

KH: Across Snowy Plain country?

EM: Yes. Then we skied.

KH: Was there a cook in residence then?

EM: Yes, Fletcher.

KH: Charlie Fletcher?

EM: Yes, I think so and he went off and came back with great excitement because Ray Adams had married a McPhée and he kept saying 'well Ray is in the bullocks now'. It was Ray Adams who was out with cattle at Whites River hut when we got there with the jeeps and we couldn't get out of Whites River hut - there were sphagnum bogs all the way along Dicky Coopers Bogong - on the Whites side we were stopped by a scarp

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it was just a wall almost as high as this room of rock and we couldn't get the jeeps up it at all and on the other side which is Dicky Coopers Creek - that was all sphagnum bog and we couldn't get up it. Willy Littlejohn who was with us, was a sub-mariner during the War and he suddenly realised that the jeeps of course would go down the creek and so we drove down the creek until we reached a place that wasn't all bog and then we drove up Dicky Coopers Bogong and we had Ray with us by this time - he knew a place that wasn't boggy, but he was fascinated by the jeeps going down the creek.

KH: What prompted that trip in the first place?

EM: I don't know. I think it was probably Tom's idea. I wasn't all that crazy about mechanical mountaineering but I did enjoy that trip. It was quite an endurance test.

KH: That just preceded the beginnings of the Snowy Scheme didn't it? There were lots of other Land Rovers following in your tracks?

EM: We had a very early Land Rover, which belonged to some American Colonel who had never been to the war - in Australia. It was in quite good order and there was one other in our district and they were the only four-wheel drive vehicles around. When they could drive over Dead Horse Gap with a four-wheel drive vehicle, they invited Tom to go and see everything - that was 1955 - and they apologised for picking him up in a Land Rover. He just looked at them stonily and said 'I've driven all over these mountains in a four-wheel drive vehicle long before you did'.

GM: There is a track that is still visible that goes below Dicky Cooper, right down to Guthega Creek and also goes down the other ridge too. Who were they used by? It's just a couple of ruts now, but you can see it, in the snow grass.

EM: Well they must have been used several times - you've got to go over it twice to kill the snow grass - we had no idea when we did it that it damaged the snow grass so easily.

EM

KH: That's interesting. When your son John went into Pretty Plain hut with a mate of his from the Forestry Department and they wrote about the history of that journey that you did - there has been a whole debate in the visitor's book on that page and ensuing pages - how dare you abuse the high country - here was John lauding this event that his parents went by jeep from Khancoban to the Chalet and other people made some very acid comments about it.

EM: The funny thing was that we were terribly conscious of soil erosion and Tom had been all around the southern States - very bad erosion parts - we went round that in 1938 - we were frightfully conscious of erosion. If you look at the list of books I've written, one of them is on soil conservation ... it was called Soil and Civilization ... and we wouldn't have any idea we were doing any damage - permanent damage. We realised that the bullock wagons had made some permanent tracks going to the various gold diggings, because we came across one or two. They didn't realise it until they started building Albina hut. Down from Seamans they've put wire netting over that track and it still hasn't regenerated.

KH: It's just starting to come back now.

EM: Snow grass or what?

KH: No, mainly flowers.

EM: That's right, the flowers and the scrub grow first, the snow grass is more fragile.

KH: Do you know anything about Wheeler and Wheelers hut?

EM: One-armed Will Wheeler.

KH: Do you know where he came from?

EM: Towong village I think. The Wheelers were all there and he had one arm - one-armed Will.

KH: Did you know him?

EM: No, I didn't, Tom probably did. I know a funny story about him.

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Among all these fishing people were a Dr and Mrs Mordsley - he was the head psychiatrist in Melbourne and he was a most amusing man and she was a very amusing woman. They always came up fishing every year and this year they went to Wheelers hut. They had just gone to sleep - it was a pretty decent sort of a hut - when all of a sudden they heard cattle, but they also heard the sound of many whips cracking and lots of people swearing. They thought, 'God what's coming' and Mrs Mordsley was wondering how many men were going to be in the hut and so on and all this swearing - and when the mob arrived it was just one-armed Will Wheeler.

KH: Cracking two whips with one arm!! Do you know how he lost his arm?

EM: I have no idea.

KH: Did he build the hut?

EM: It was built for him, as far as I know.

KH: Some of his descendants would still be down your way?

EM: Yes I think so.

KH: It's the rather attractive slab hut in the film, Wheelers?

EM: It's a jolly good hut.

KH: It's one of the best in the mountains.

What about Geehi camp? You mention Geehi camp in either Australia's Alps or one of your articles - was that one of the river stone huts then? There are a number of river stone huts down on the Geehi.

EM: They were built by fishermen I think.

KH: But the old Geehi camp that you used to use when you went up Hannel's Spur and so on - is that ...

EM: As I recollect, the first one we stayed in was before the river crossing - between it and the one the Park use. There's a river crossing right beside the one the Park uses, or just up stream a bit, then you ride around the flat behind, and another river crossing. As I remember its that hut that we used was underneath the Geehi Wall. I think there was

EM

probably one river crossing before you got to it. I can't remember how many crossings ...

KH: Was it a river stone hut?

EM: No I don't think so.

KH: It's probably gone then.

EM: I camped one Easter in Nankervis' hut, where the stone hut is now on the airstrip and with Charles Lane-Poole and she had to be back in Albury on Easter Tuesday. We rode up Hannel's Spur and it rained - just poured, you couldn't see a thing - I had a pony that had a marvellous sense of direction, so I just pulled my hood over my head, let the reins go and we just let the horses find the way back. There were supposed to be fleas in this hut - we had a tent - but we reckoned that we had to light a fire and get dry and get the dog dry too - so we lit the fire and hung all the clothes out and tied the dog to a table leg. Charles was having one of those days when she spilt everything - the coffee on the dog and then she finally tripped over the dog's lead and that was the final indignity - the dog had had it by that time. Anyway in the middle of the night the moon suddenly shone and we could hear the river roaring, we had all these crossings to do and she had to get back, otherwise would have been in awful trouble. So we got up and caught the horses by moonlight, saddled up and it was just daybreak when we came to the first river crossing right in front of the hut and this pony of mine was very sensible - he wasn't a bit sensible but he knew about deep water and bad weather - so I gave her the packhorse and I could feel the pony just tip-toeing through the water and then we'd gallop to the next crossing and through he went - we got through the lot. We were pretty tired by this time and we went up the Geehi wall - its red clay on the top and was very slippery - the packhorse just got on its side and it slipped down nearly the whole way again - it wasn't in any way hurt but it was so annoyed.

KH: But you got it up there?

EM

EM: Yes and got her back to Albury in time too.

GM: Did you know who Dicky Cooper was?

EM: I'd heard that he was an Aboriginal, but that's all I heard - everywhere where Bogong months were ... I never really looked for them though. John found a lot on Jargunal once - they were dead but they were still hanging, one under the other - there were great clusters of them - estavating is the word.

KH: Josephine Flood has done a lot of the work on the Bogong months. She spoke to us about five weeks ago. Maybe they were just in a state of hibernation.

EM: He thought they were dead. I don't know whether he touched them.

KH: What maps did you use in the 30s and 40s - the old Lands Department maps which just had a few ridges and a few rivers?

EM: Yes, that's right. The Snowy ones were done during the War or towards the end of the War. They didn't really have very much on them at all those maps.

GM: Were any of the huts marked or not?

EM: Yes the main ones were marked.

KH: I think we might show the film.

GM: Were they a special type of ski?

EM: Some were seal skins and some were plush. I had a pair of black plush ones and a pair of white plush ones and one of each wore out and the black one went faster than the white one down hill - finished up with one black and one white on my skis.

KH: If any one is ever at Corryong there is a collection of the Mitchell skis at the Museum there including incredible contraptions, one of which Tom found I think - it had various springs and bits and pieces on it. Devised - I can't remember exactly for what.

EM

EM: I think to make you turn ... I can't remember where he got them from. He had it for a long time and a Bogong snowshoe thing - he got at Bogong - just like a Kiandra ski, but it was broader.

KH: Will you be skiing this year?

EM: Hopefully, if there's snow.

GM: It's going to be a big snow season this year.

EM: Maybe I won't even get across the mountains in my land rover.

KH: Do you know of any other books in production or any poetry that has been inspired by the mountains which ...

EM: I think Alan Andrews is getting out another book this year and I'm not dead certain but I think it is about the artists of the mountains, von Guerard and others.

KH: One of things I was asked, when I met a guy from the Monaro Folk Music Society, was whether or not there was any music that came out of the mountains - any indigenous songs as it were - indigenous entertainment. Do you know of anything like that from the old stockman - things they wrote themselves?

EM: No I don't. The days of the concertinas were practically gone by the time I got here. A few of them make their own fun with concertinas now, but not the sort of local hops.

KH: What about bush ballads - no bush ballads around the place?

EM: No. Albert Bach who lived in Corryong - pre World War I I think - he must have made up a few and his book is called 'Kerani's Book' - he wrote under the name of Kerani and there must be copies in the Mitchell Library.

KH: Bush ballad type things?

EM: Well yes, and stories and essays ... Sydney Jephcott - they weren't bush ballads, they were very sophisticated sort of poetry. He lived at Ournie - there is a marvellous collection of trees there and he

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was almost entirely self-educated and he could spout Latin and Greek actually - he wrote quite a lot of poetry. Pentraillar(?) was called one and that was in the Mitchell too.

KH: Where did he live?

EM: At Ournie - its on the NSW side below Walwa.

KH: Where's that?

EM: It's 35 miles down river from us.

KH: South of Tumbarumba - sort of.

EM: Yes, you come straight down from Holbrook ...

GM: The Murray Valley highway goes through Walwa.

EM: Yes - there's no township - it's just an area.

KH: Anything else that is on the horizon for you - book wise?

EM: Yes, another kid's book - Snowy River Brumby - next Xmas I hope.

KH: Who publishes most of those now?

EM: Hutchinson - all the children's books.

KH: There is talk of going to Bogart's again, is that right ...

Thank you very much for coming.

EM: Thank you very much for asking me.