

**STATE LIBRARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA**  
**J. D. SOMERVILLE ORAL HISTORY**  
**COLLECTION**

**OH 15/2**

Full transcript of an interview with

**VICTOR ADOLFSSON**

on 6 March 1985

by Dean Bruton

Recording available on Cassette

Access for research: Unrestricted

Right to photocopy: Copies may be made for research and study

Right to quote or publish: Publication only with written permission from the  
State Library

### NOTES TO THE TRANSCRIPT

This transcript was created by the J. D. Somerville Oral History Collection of the State Library. It conforms to the Somerville Collection's policies for transcription which are explained below.

Readers of this oral history transcript should bear in mind that it is a record of the spoken word and reflects the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. The State Library is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the interview, nor for the views expressed therein. As with any historical source, these are for the reader to judge.

It is the Somerville Collection's policy to produce a transcript that is, so far as possible, a verbatim transcript that preserves the interviewee's manner of speaking and the conversational style of the interview. Certain conventions of transcription have been applied (ie. the omission of meaningless noises, false starts and a percentage of the interviewee's crutch words). Where the interviewee has had the opportunity to read the transcript, their suggested alterations have been incorporated in the text (see below). On the whole, the document can be regarded as a raw transcript.

Abbreviations: The interviewee's alterations may be identified by their initials in insertions in the transcript.

Punctuation: Square bracket [ ] indicate material in the transcript that does not occur on the original tape recording. This is usually words, phrases or sentences which the interviewee has inserted to clarify or correct meaning. These are not necessarily differentiated from insertions the interviewer or by Somerville Collection staff which are either minor (a linking word for clarification) or clearly editorial. Relatively insignificant word substitutions or additions by the interviewee as well as minor deletions of words or phrases are often not indicated in the interest of readability. Extensive additional material supplied by the interviewee is usually placed in footnotes at the bottom of the relevant page rather than in square brackets within the text.

A series of dots, .... indicates an untranscribable word or phrase.

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

Spelling: Wherever possible the spelling of proper names and unusual terms has been verified. A parenthesised question mark (?) indicates a word that it has not been possible to verify to date.

Typeface: The interviewer's questions are shown in **bold print**.

Discrepancies between transcript and tape: This proofread transcript represents the authoritative version of this oral history interview. Researchers using the original tape recording of this interview are cautioned to check this transcript for corrections, additions or deletions which have been made by the interviewer or the interviewee but which will not occur on the tape. See the Punctuation section above.) Minor discrepancies of grammar and sentence structure made in the interest of readability can be ignored but significant changes such as deletion of information or correction of fact should be, respectively, duplicated or acknowledged when the tape recorded version of this interview is used for broadcast or any other form of audio publication.

Contemporary Art In South Australia  
An Oral History



**Interviewee: Victor Adolfsson**

**Interviewer: Dean Bruton**

**Date Of Interview: 6th March 1985**

# Contemporary Art in S.A.

Oral Historian: Dean Bruton, 7 Bundarra Rd., Marino S.A. Tel: 2983049

REF: 85/1/22

## INTERVIEW LOG AND DATA SHEET

INTERVIEWEE: VICTOR ADOLFSSON

DATE OF INTERVIEW: 6TH MARCH 1985

INTERVIEWER: DEAN BRUTON

PLACE OF INTERVIEW: , MCLAREN VALE

RECORDING: BIAS-NORMAL, GOOD QUALITY

SUMMARY: VICTOR ADOLFSSON, ARTIST, ART TEACHER, DESCRIBES HIS BACKGROUND, EDUCATION AND INVOLVEMENT IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONTEMPORARY ART SOCIETY OF S.A.

### INTERVIEW LOG-VICTOR ADOLFSSON

<u>SIDE A</u>		
<u>MINUTES</u>	<u>SUBJECT</u>	<u>PROPER NAMES</u>
0.00	INTRODUCTION	
0.30	FAMILY BACKGROUND	VICTOR AUGUSTE ADOLFSSON
0.50	ARRIVAL IN AUSTRALIA	
1.45	-GRANDPARENTS	WICKTOR ALAND FINLAND
2.10	-PARENTS	
3.50	-MOTHER'S NAME	TOBIN IRELAND CORNWALL
5.00	PARENT'S CHILDHOOD	
6.00	BROTHERS AND SISTERS	
6.50	EARLY SCHOOLING	PROSPECT
	-ATTENDED SCHOOL OF ART AT THE AGE OF TEN	
8.30	MARRIAGE, 1944, GLENELG	
8.50	CHILDREN	QUENBY SEACLIFF WOODLANDS
9.10	RESIDENCES IN ADELAIDE	
10.50	OCCUPATIONS	
12.10	EARLY TUITION IN ART	LARGS BAY

15.00	BICYCLE TRIP TO MELBOURNE	STANLEY
16.15	THE DEPRESSION, 1930S	
	-PERSONAL MEMORIES	MANLY
19.35	RETURN TO ADELAIDE FROM SYDNEY	CROWS NEST
21.40	TRAIN	
22.10	EDUCATION DEPT. TRAINING	HEYSEN
24.35	ART SCHOOL TRAINING	BUXTON
		IVOR HELE
28.00	MEMORIES OF C.A.S. FORMATION	EXHIBITIONS
		BUILDING
31.50	1942 CONCERT AT R.S.A.S.A.	
	-LAUNCHED THE IDEA THAT	
	THINGS COULD BE DONE TO BRING	
	THE SOCIETY ALIVE	ALLAN SIERP
34.45	C.A.S. FORMATION	MAX HARRIS
38.00	BOOKS WITH DETAILS OF	
	ASSOCIATES OF THE R.S.A.S.A.	
	MEETINGS, 1942, PRESENTED	
40.40	H.E. FULLER, SECRETARY OF THE	
	R.S.A.S.A., ADVERTISER ART CRITIC	
43.10	EARLY HEADQUARTERS	CAVENDISH
		CHAMBERS
44.5	ANTI-FASCIST EXHIBITION, 1942	
46.00	-THE OPENING	
END OF SIDE A		

# INTERVIEW LOG-VICTOR ADOLFSON CONTD.

## SIDE B

<u>MINUTES</u>	<u>SUBJECT</u>	<u>PROPER NAMES</u>
0.00	-THE OPENING, CONTINUED	KORAN
		JOANNE PRIEST
3.15	DESCRIPTION OF THE INTENTIONS OF	
	PAINTINGS USED AT CRITIQUE	
	SESSIONS AT THE C.A.S.	DORRIT BLACK
6.25	PORT ADELAIDE LINO CUTS	OVINGHAM
8.50	1939 HERALD EXHIBITION OF FRENCH	
	AND BRITISH CONTEMPORARY ART	HARRIS
		SCHULTZ
11.15	RUSSIAN BALLET	DIAGHILLEFF
12.10	THE ART SCHOOL TRAINING	
13.45	THE CARNEGIE REPRODUCTIONS	CARNEGIE
	INSTITUTE	
		FRANZ MARC
15.20	"STUDIO" MAGAZINE	AUGUSTUS JOHN
		LAURENCE HOWIE
18.00	EDUCATION DEPT. TREATMENT	
	OF TEACHERS INVOLVED WITH	
	THE C.A.S. EXHIBITIONS, 1942-3	FEHLBERG
		DONNITHORNE
		FENNER
		MCDONALD
		VERMEER
		DE HOOCH
20.00	VALUE OF THE C.A.S. ACTIVITY	

	TO THE COMMUNITY	
22.40	IVOR HELE-HIS WORK	
24.15	THE VALUE OF PAINTING	
25.00	PHILOSOPHY OF ART	SOLHENITZIN
26.05	REASONS FOR PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT IN PAINTING	
28.00	PAUSE	
29.00	ATTITUDE TO ART SOCIETIES	
31.25	ART EDUCATION IN RETROSPECT	
36.00	C.A.S. EXHIBITIONS IN RETROSPECT	
38.00	EFFECT OF TEACHING ON ART	
41.00	FUNDING OF THE VISUAL ARTS	
46.00		
END OF SIDE B		

THE EDITED TRANSCRIPT OF THE TAPE FOLLOWS:

Victor Adolfsson, interviewed by Dean Bruton, for the history of the Contemporary Art Society on 6th March, 1985.

---

**What is your full name?**

Victor August Adolfsson.

**When were you born?**

1915.

**When did your family come to Australia?**

My father came during the war.

**Did your father settle in South Australia in the First World War?**

He did. He liked the jam and the (chuckle) tomatoes.

**What's your family background; your grandparents' names?**

My grandfather's is the same name as mine.

**Where did they live?**

In the Aland Islands, Finland.

**What did your grandfather do?**

Well, cower down in the bottom of the boat when there was a storm on while his wife managed to get the potatoes (laughter) and the things to the market.

**Was there any artistic background in your family?**

Not on this side.

**On your mother's side?**

Yes, I can remember my art (chuckle) having some kind of awakening, knowing that my mother painted the things that were on the wall.

They were things done as a student under some guidance, and comprised painting on prepared coloured ground, such things as frozen flowers, but we had another... what I might call a monstrosity, this was a fire-fender a guard; it was tin with scrolls cut at the corners, ...so there was that level of art, you can understand. (chuckle)

**Do you know your mother's maiden name?**

My mother's maiden name was Tobin.

**Where did they come from?**

My mother's parents came from Ireland and Cornwall.

**Can you remember them describing in the early days to you of their childhood?**

Oh, indeed. (chuckle)

**Is there anything that you think would relate to the way you got an interest in art and the art scene from their experiences in the early days?**

I think two things happened to me from what they told me of their lives.

One was an awakening of my imagination to seeing... (long pause)

And the other was to plant in me a sense of endurance.

**How many brothers and sisters did you have?**

One brother, who died early as a result of the war, and a sister.

**What schools did you go to?**

Prospect Primary and Adelaide Boys and Girls High School.

**Did you study music or art at school?**

Neither of those things. When I was in grade four, the teacher sent me on Saturday mornings to the South Australian School of Art. So I started drawing what was called *Antique Models* in charcoal from the age of ten, and I continued that until I couldn't cope, owing to the amount of high school work.

**So your parents valued art lessons -Did they value drawing lessons?**

They did but they didn't have the money to send me anywhere but my teacher at school recognised that I should be there so she paid for me to go there.

**It sounds like a special relationship with your teacher; was she close to the family?**

Not in the least.

**Was it just that she saw a talent and wanted it developed?**

She would keep me in the dinner hour (chuckle) and I'd have to draw things from the National Geographic, in pastels.

**When were you married and where?**

On the 4th January, 1944, in the Congregational Church at Glenelg.

**Had you any children, and their ages?**

Yes, Quenby, my daughter was born in October, 1947.

**Does she have an occupation?**

She trained as a teacher of art and worked for about three years until she came into conflict with authority and left; whereupon she stayed in the



studio we built at home, and created an exhibition of art on the basis of her travels in Asia. Shortly afterwards, she gained employment with Woodlands. The major part of her career was there.

**How old is she now?**

She would be 37.

**Where have you lived since your marriage?**

Immediately, we lived at Glenelg and for about five years at St. Peters, thereafter we went to the home we built in 1950, at Seacliff.

**How did you get from Seacliff to here; did you built this place?**

Yes, I built it.

**How long ago?**

It was built in 1980.

**What occupations have you had during your lifetime?**

I left school the day I was 18, because I'd stayed there in the hope that the school might be able to procure me a job...but it couldn't. I pretty well sat on the doorstep in the sun, for years, during which time I ascertained that the man who married my mother and father, painted pictures and lived at Largs

Bay. So every week I rode my bicycle to Largs Bay. When I got there he would be having his lunch and I would be required to draw with a black pencil on white plates, so that he could paint these plates himself. That was my payment for his tuition.

**What was his name ?**

Stanley, he was an Englishman and he had been a missionary in South Africa as well as here. In his house, by the way, I saw wonderful pictures; they were all small, and of boats on the sea, painted by painters who were also seamen. Of course I knew enough by this time to realise

that I was looking at something that you could call the English equivalent of the Dutch masters.

I don't think I ever neglected art history...It had always been with me. People only have to mention a thing in Art History once, and it's with me forever.

**Where did you go from there as far as your occupation is concerned?**

I still had no job, no money, and I got to the point where I couldn't stand staying at home; it was too disgraceful. When I was about 19 I gathered certain things together and rode my bicycle to Melbourne.

You rode the bicycle to Melbourne, the whole way?!

In 92 hours. Goodness knows why, but I remember the difficulties of doing it; every little incident, it was wet and must have been something like winter; in fact when I got to Werribee there was a flood and I had to get on the train. I arrived in Melbourne at Flinders Street Railway Station. I was disgorged into an almighty crowd that was going home, I went to sleep for about two and a half days and the landlady became very worried. I got up in time to see the lights, because they were having their centenary then. I haven't got much knowledge of certain things about time, in my own life, I've never documented anything or dwelt on any thing, and I find it very hard to recall painful things. I lived in that place under certain circumstances. I used to play chess at night. I must have had two pair of boots because eventually I gave one away to a fellow with whom I played chess and he walked to Sydney. His need was certainly greater than mine. I earned my living independently in a semi-artistic way (chuckle) just enough to pay the five bob (shillings) rent and buy enough food. I was so desperate that when my mother sent me an

envelope with a stamp on it, I immediately took the stamp and bought eggs. She didn't get a letter.

Eventually I was able to take my bike to pieces, put it together in a bag, and put it under the seat in a train and arrive in Sydney. I earned my living there for six months and came to know the city from one end to the other and all its environs because I walked everywhere.

One walk I remember was from a place called Willoughby, I went straight through Frenchs Forest and along all the beaches to Manly and along the tramway line through Crows Nest until I returned back to past beyond Lindfield. No one would walk like that in these days, but.. (there was a time when as a school boy and, I couldn't stand my study, and I would - rather late - put a sour sob in a buttonhole, get a stick and walk straight from Prospect to Henley Beach, along the beach, through the main street around Black Diamond corner of Port Adelaide and up Alberton way, to Torrens Road and home. I'd get home somewhere around about two o'clock in the morning).

**They were hard times (pause) and what happened with your occupation? After Melbourne you went to Sydney, and then from Sydney somehow you got back to Adelaide?**

Yes, the day I was 21, I decided there was no future in what I was trying to do.

**In Sydney in 1936?**

Anywhere. I tried to get on boats to go to Canada. They were full of English people and they knew that I only wanted to get to Canada to jump off the boate so I couldn't argue or do anything, and anyhow I was talking to the wrong people, I was talking on the boate instead of at the ship's office. Well,

I didn't have enough knowledge at that time to make the right approaches.

I can remember in Melbourne standing in front of what I took to be employers and arguing with them about that I could keep books, and their telling me they'd give me a job if they had one to give me, but they couldn't.

And I suppose I got a little bit of artistic stimulus from seeing the people who, like the Salvation Army that went through the market after the market was over, through the rubbish bins and refuse heaps looking for what could be turned into stew or, you know, soup. These kinds of subjects.

**How did you get to Adelaide from Sydney?**

Simply in the train, straight through, and arrived as I determined with what I left - nothing! Not even my bike on this occasion, which had been my friend everywhere. But I'd had my eyes opened from the point of view of seeing life and seeing.

**What did you do from there?**

I think my father must have told me that the Education Department, and employers were looking for young me of certain ages to put them into training in whatever category they'd fit. In the course of the interview, I mentioned that I'd been copying Hans Heysen and had painted a few pictures so they asked me to bring them in to the Education Department. I took them there and was told that I should go the for the last term and more or less work with a view to their assessing whether I should join the Department. Well, being, with such a background as I had, I found it very difficult. I mean not to study and do well in art, but to cope with certain personalities. For instance, I was put in a class which was called

drawing for reproduction. It was a matter of drawing such things as crystal vases on scratch board. When I considered I'd proved that I could do that I wouldn't go to the class any more. I would go the art life class and the teacher would come into the life class and want me out of it. I would not go. An official from the Education Department came into the life class one day. I rather think he was there about me. By this time I'd had enough recent practice to show that I could comprehend a mass and divide it into it's actions and it's intentions and that I could distinguish flesh and bone and edges and such things. In front of Ivor Hele, the official said something such as, (chuckle) was I making progress (laughter) and Ivor Hele put him right. So, I knew I'd heard that I was recommended to go into the Department, and my God!, I didn't know what I was going into, but I knew that whatever it was I would succeed in it.

**Where was the Art School then?**

The Exhibition Buildings, which have been knocked down, the same place I used to haunt when I was ten. When my teacher sent me there, from the primary school. It was just a continuation on from the year one was ten as far as I was concerned, there was a lapse in between of unemployment and suffering, but I'd come back full circle to where I should have been in the first place - right through.

**Did it seem a lot in years?**

I'd rather not have had all the depression.

**Must have been hard times. What year was it?**

1937 by then.

**What were your first memories of the formation of the Contemporary Art Society of South Australia?**

The first memories I can only say were in a room occupied by a teacher of dance, who might have been Joanne Priest, in the Bee Hive Building. I was very innocent of all these pursuits and endeavours of the time. I simply went along with everybody. They formed a committee.

**Did it happen very quickly?**

As far as I was concerned it just came straight out of the blue.

**Do you remember the Royal South Australian Society of Arts ?**

Yes, and I have a few things I'd like to show you that I wrote on the back of books that I was reading around about that time. They're only lists of people who were elected to committees, but they give dates and people, and my endeavours at that time were in the direction of being a member of the Royal South Australian Society of Arts . It seems to me looking back, around about 1942, the Royal South Australian Society of Arts allowed Associate members to form their own committee with their own representative to Council. I see there were three representatives; one was Tasman Fehlberg; then it was Donnithorne; and then it was Victor Adolfsson, and I rather feel that in my term, probably only one year, I awoke the members to the fact that the Society, as a Royal Society, wasn't performing it's proclaimed functions of educating the public. I don't mean artistically (chuckle). I, at that moment, only held in mind that we should have a concert and duly we had the concert (laughter). I think it launched an idea on the Society that it should reach out to the public, and of course since then the Royal Society has come alive, you know, particularly with the introduction of *Kalori*, their magazine.

**Was this concert was before the Contemporary Art Society was actually inaugurated or started officially?**

I am vague about dates and times. But you see, at the same time as the Contemporary Art Society, was doing its thinking, it was acting, I think, through the Associate committee of the Royal South Australian Society of Arts, with a view to having their new ideas accepted whole heartedly and gracefully as a part of the total Society. There was no thought at that particular time, as I know, of creating a C.A.S. hit us when Max Harris called that meeting after he'd been over in Melbourne and had spoken with John Reed. Max Harris definitely called the meeting; it was his idea. Looking back on it, he simply brought it from Melbourne, created it here, and that's it.

**Did he take a big interest in it, after it was created?**

Yes.

**What kind of attitude did he have towards the members?**

Well... (much laughter)... I can only speak for myself. I remember I went to an evening and we played music, this was with my own friends; we were all ex-high school men and it was in the days of playing the gramophone more or less in the dark, with one light, and this one light cast shadows on the wall, of satirical dancers, as a result of all that, I painted a picture. It was well, contemptuous (laughter) of shall we say, established things, Max Harris

wanted that picture and as far as I know, he got it.

**Did he support thoroughly the idea of contemporary work being promoted?**

Oh yes, Max Harris was quite genuine; there was nothing spurious about him.

**Was he more interested in poetry than in painting?**

Obviously, because of what eventuated later. I have for Max Harris an admiration. I can understand what he did, based on his education. I can remember going to Max Harris's house. In his room the ceiling was plastered with reproductions of art and we asked him why they were there, on the ceiling. He said, "Oh, I lie in bed and one picks itself out and I look at it." So, he was a man with amplitude in his education.

**Can you remember who the original members were; I think you have lists of that?**

Yes, you see I bought this book in 1942, well, at least I put my name in it; it was given to me, and here I've written the representatives, Donnithorne. Donnithorne was a Solicitor.

**Is he around still?**

He was an elderly man then and we were very grateful for his services.

**Grant is one I'm not familiar with. Vice Chairman Grant?**

I think I can vaguely recall him. No, I'm not familiar with him.

**No, thanks, fabulous.(exchange of books)**

They'll help you cross reference something or other and may lead you perhaps to some names.

**Thankyou very much.**

Now you understand, that they are not the Contemporary Art Society as far as I can recall; these names you're looking at are Associate members of the R.S.A.S.A..

**These were meetings that were talking about the break away from the Royal Society because they couldn't get their pictures accepted, or exhibited with the Royal Society exhibitions, even accepted as a separate group. Is that right?**

No, that's not right.



**Why were these meetings being held, simply to educate the public?**

We were trying to co-operate as a group with more power, and voice, as Associates within the Royal South Australian Society of Arts and to some extent the Contemporary Art Society was by this time formed, and so we had these two bodies pretty well interchangeable.

**Ruth Tuck mentioned that you had to keep people on the Royal Society.**

Oh indeed! We had to know what was going on because by this time they were reactionary and we had to take notice of their intentions and their attitudes.

**What are your memories of H.E. Fuller; can you describe how he ran things?**

I, as I said right at the beginning, was not really in the swing of things. I was brought in almost from the outside. I knew Henry Fuller, I knew he was an architect, I knew he had designed the Glenelg Town Hall facade; he was an elderly man, and I also knew many others in the Society and they were all; of course, 40 or to me at that time, elderly, and they were all to me excellent painters and they had my respect. But from time to time I would hear, particularly concerning Henry Fuller, things he had done to thwart the progress of new ideas in the Society.

**When you started having meetings, once the Contemporary Art Society was formed, can you remember putting forward any motions, that you thought were important to the beginning stages of the formation of the group itself. Were there any important decisions?**

No, I had nothing to do with the formation of the Society. I was just a person who was put on the committee.

**Once you were on the committee, can you remember any input that you had, that you felt was important.**

No, I was even the secretary for years, but I still can't remember anything that I did that was vital or important. By the way our headquarters were Cavandish Chambers.

**Is that where your meetings were held?**

Yes, they were stockbrokers, and we went down a long passage to the end and up the steps to a room that was empty. There was nothing in it.

**What association did the Contemporary Art Society have with the Federal C.A.S., -with John Reed?**

I don't know anything about it.

**Can you remember the Anti-Facist Exhibition at the C.A.S.?**

Yes.

**Could you describe events that led up to that.**

Can't describe any events that led up to it, I can only remember quite clearly, the great excitement when the exhibition came. I must have been Secretary at this time. I was very conscientious, I unpacked the pictures. Someone took them upstairs. Upstairs was Max Harris and everybody else. All they could do was look and be enthralled by these pictures, but that wasn't my intention, it was not even to look at the pictures but to get them on the walls. We had to dismantle the exhibition. It was done by David Dallwitz and myself. We didn't have enough packing because it had been destroyed. We had to go and get more from John Martins, to get the pictures packed properly to send them back to Melbourne.

**Did you go to the opening.**

If I did, it would have been one of those occasions where you get on your bike and leave school, and you arrive just in time. At the opening a woman came up to me and she said, "Could you explain your picture that's hanging over there," and I thought to myself, "If I explain what's contained in that picture I'm going to get into bother".

With the world in front of you, you've pretty assertive powers... and this is nothing other than copulation (chuckle) or, if you can put it another way, not so much that, as the endeavour of man and woman to become on being. An this probably expresses a bit better one being in a loving situation. This is the actual copulation and here is probably my vague ideas of foetus in a womb.

**What was the reaction, did you get to show this?**

This was in the exhibition.

**This was in the Anti-facist show?**

I can't remember whether it was that one. (laughter)

**What was the lady's reaction, did you try to explain the picture?**

No. I knew she should interpret it herself.-I look into this (picture) now and I find certain peculiarities, if you understand me. I think that it is not naturalistic because I couldn't make it naturalistic.

I think that limb goes down there, and this is an attempt to make a frontal woman there where the man is also coming right through, sideways, so that I'm giving the... trying to give the... typical aspects, together.

**It's sexual.**

I don't know what you call it but, you see as a teacher of art my job was on the line. You see, I met with lots of difficulties, taking the course I took.

That picture, (pointing to picture on the wall) it was during the war you see. That fellow was a soldier and they dressed him in blue to make the public realise that he was a soldier back from the war. That was a picture I took along to one of those evenings when paintings were criticised. The Contemporary Art Society used to criticise it's own paintings and among other things they used to listen to music.

**Was this at Mary Martin's place?**

Oh no, Mary Martin's was a coffee place, we didn't do anything there.

**This was at Cavandish Chambers?**

Yes. And I can remember Dorrit Black condemning that, and by condemning that (picture), Dorrit Black (a picture by) she's up there isn't she, in the other room) and Dorrit Black by condemning that pretty well broke my heart. She didn't know it, you know; you're pretty sensitive in certain stages of your craft, and I thought I'd created a good picture but she condemned it by saying the worst possible thing, namely, that "It's been done before," and of course to me everything was new. Shall I go up(stairs) and get Dorrit Black? (the picture)

**Yes, and this is a fine print.**[Looking at picture]

The Ovingham Railway crossing; do you know here that is? It was those big black and white boom gates that go up into the air - up with all the lights in the trees, but behind was a hotel up on a hill and a sign on the side of the hotel, you know, about beer or something like that. That was the picture, and it was painted in a very summary kind of fashion. I don't mean swiftly.

No fuss, no detail, you know; so apparently she thought it merited an exchange...

In 1939, I was training to be a teacher. The exhibition of modern French art came to South Australia. It was in the Gallery and I walked around it with the Principal of the Adelaide Teachers College, a Dr. Schultz, and I can remember his telling me that Van Gogh must have had a stigmatism, (chuckle). When he came to Gauguin and saw the woman with the elephantine foot which I clearly recognised was such, to complete the design, he was aghast (chuckle). He was unable to accept anything new. So in 1939, the travelling French exhibition came here and it was housed in Australia during the war. About 1940 maybe Diaghilleff's Russian Ballet. That was a vital thing to us too. So you see, we had direct insights, I think elderly folk wouldn't have been emotionally stirred, like the young. Had these things not occurred we might have gone on to be fine practioners of tradition. We became radical progenitors. (laughter) We almost forgot that we'd been trained in an art school to draw it if you could see it but above all to see it; our eyes were trained for every little detail. Here we were, throwing all of this naturalistic kind of work away in favour of expressing artistic sensibilities.

**Were there any reproductions of European work, in books or magazines?**

The only reproductions that I, look, when I was being tested at the art school, in 1937, I walked into the life room one morning and there was a reproduction of Franz Marc's *Three Red Horses*. In this grey room with that vital picture, something in me came alive. I'd never seen such things and I later found, you know perhaps the next year, that the Carnegie Institute in New York had supplied the South Australian School of Art

with a great number of large reproductions here. Of course, the Impressionsits would kill you; no one here could paint like that. To show you how desperate we were to see European colour prints, there was a particular magazine. It was very expensive. I was at that stage receiving fourteen shillings and threepence a fortnight at the Teachers College, but I would spend some of that money to buy this rather expensive large slim magazine just because it had a reproduction in it of Augustus John or someone else (chuckle), otherwise I'd have known nothing about these people. So the Carnegie reproductions were stowed away, they weren't displayed. Only people in certain classes could see them, this despite the fact that Carnegie had said when they were worn out they would be replaced. That was the policy of the school.

**Who was the head of the school?**

Laurence Howie. He was a very nice old-time gentleman and a very good artist in watercolour.

**Did the World War Two period have much effect on what happened at the C.A.S.?**

Much effect on what happened at the C.A.S.? Let's have a look at that book with the names in it. (pause) You see Francis was a teacher, Tuck was a teacher, Adams, Roberts. Donnithorne was the only one who was out in the world, Tasman Fehlberg was a teacher of English.

**I see.**

And so it goes with the others; in other words we were all teachers under the thumb of the Education Department.

**How did the Education Department treat what you were doing at the C.A.S.?**

I can only speak of what happened to me. First of all I was still a student, I hadn't completed all the requirements and on Saturday mornings I would go and do landscape. My landscapes were as good as anybody's, but I was failed. So I picked them up and took them to the Education Department and complained to the official in charge of Technical Education. He called in Dr. Fenner who was the Director. He was a geologist. I argued for my work and in the end he asked, "Isn't he frightened of anything?" The answer was "No." and I wasn't. As he went out of the room, he pointed to Jan Vermeer and Peter De Hoogh, large prints on the office walls. He said, "Why don't you paint like that", I said, "Because I'm living in the twentieth century not the seventeenth. I had to go for another year of Saturday mornings to pass. I was in the Contemporary Art Society and battling against the Royal South Australian Society of Arts and the people who were running the art school were, the Royal South Australian Society of Arts. That was the kind of penalty you had to pay.

**Looking back over the period of the Contemporary Art Society that you know of, what value do you think the Contemporary Art Society has been to the community?**

It had the whole community afire, and astir about art values and it must have caused a deep awakening, but probably not among those people with their minds already made up, or with their minds incapable of receiving new things. But to the young people I'm sure it was a great enlightenment. (chuckle) It was also wonderful to know that there were people in other States who had similar thoughts, and it was a shock to me to realise that South Australia was way behind educationally in art, in the sense of world art, not in the sense of art itself. The art school was a

terrific place for people of natural talent. Ivor Helé knew by instinct anything concerned with a man or a horse when he was sixteen. All that muscularity appealed to me. Art as far as I was concerned was a human figure, and it was a human figure in action, and that's art, still, to me. Although I'm down to painting landscapes, (laughter).

**What do you see as the value of painting?**

Well, in my time I have said, that we only eat, in fact, we only live, to create art. I heard Solhenitzen say exactly what would be my philosophy about art. That was if he were to draw a diagram of the compartments of civilization art would be at the apex. It's so with me. All effort is to refine the sensibility of the human being and that end is in art. Art is not a small thing to me; it's not entirely painting; it is living. It is down to how you hold your knife and fork and whether, if you have not got those, how you eat. It is a basic thing in life; it is all that thing called courtesy or custom, or not custom, because that can be cruel, but it is all those things that are good.

**Why do you paint?**

I'm still painting, I can't stop. I feel very good, very happy, when I paint. I even sing when I paint, and always when I paint, I can recall music. It makes my hand work. It must be that you realise that you're doing what you were born to do and I've always felt that. That's the only thing I could do well, the thing I was born to do and that's why I stayed with it and have not gone up all the side tracks. Yes, it's the grand feeling that you're creating something new, and it's the communication with other peoples' seeing. It's the source of all that you are. I sit here and I say "I'll go and see my friend" - In the end I say "That may be good, but it



would be better to paint.", so I paint. You see you must remain productive; productivity is all that you are in the long run.

**What was your connection with the Royal South Australian Society of Arts ?**

You know for years I think I was poorly treated in the R.S.A.S.A.. They just rejected pictures and you'd take them home. So I simply dropped out of submitting art. There was no entry for me through the R.S.A.S.A., though I still belong.

**To the Royal South Australian Society of Arts?**

Yes. As an Associate member. They send me their message stick *Kalori*. They have the same problems now as they've always had with selection procedures...

The education I received at the South Australian School of Art was totally inhibiting. It acted as if there were no such thing as imagination. So you see the Contemporary Art Society to some extent had to destroy what I'd learned. But there were other people who more or less walked into the situation.

**Looking back on the Contemporary Art Society and important changes, important events, anything I might have missed that you think?**

I don't know much about the C.A.S.. I can only say how happy and pleased I was when the pictures came from Melbourne and I saw, Sydney Nolan, Counihan, Perceval, and thought that way I could see. The expression in them, it was more alive than any dead academic way of doing things. I knew in a vague way I had to re-educate myself. I never ever did. Other things occurred. (chuckle) Teaching got hold of me, I mean that's what teaching does. Teaching kills the art.