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Full transcript of an interview with

BRYCE RANKINE

on 28 June 2000

by Rob Linn

Recording available on CD

OH 692/138 **BRYCE RANKINE**

NOTES TO THE TRANSCRIPT

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NATIONAL WINE CENTRE, WOLF BLASS ORAL HISTORY.

OH 692/138 Interview with Dr Bryce Rankine on 28 June, 2000

Interviewer: Rob Linn.

Bryce, I've been fascinated to read your 1996 book "Evolution of the Modern Australian Wine Industry", and found that you were born in 1925 at Murray Bridge. Tell me a little about your parents and background on the land there.

My father was a country stock inspector in the Department of Agriculture stationed at Murray Bridge. I was educated at the state high school, won a scholarship to the University of Adelaide and graduated in 1945 with a science degree in microbiology and chemistry. This was in part triggered by my dad taking me as a boy on his rounds to treat animals. I was entranced with this, particularly those animals with microbiological diseases. I knew early that I wanted to be a microbiologist and did not waver from that.

And your first career step was to Fauldings?

Yes, as a microbiologist involved in making penicillin for incorporation into what were called ethical products, intended for medical practitioners for their patients. This experience was good as it taught me more about industrial microbiology, production practices and finance, and was a good preparation for what I eventually did in the wine industry. My boss at Fauldings was John Bertrand Smith, a delightful man who with his wife Lila became lifelong friends. In fact they came from their retirement home in central Victoria for our golden wedding celebration in Adelaide on February 22, 2000.

I could see that my job at Fauldings had no great future, so in 1949 I applied for a microbiological research position with what was called Oenological investigations of CSIRO at the Waite Institute, and to my surprise was successful. Before taking the job on March 5 1950 I married Ellaine Bosisto of Perth (our mothers were actually childhood friends near Strathalbyn) and this was the best thing I ever did. We have had an idealic marriage. producing three children who presented us with four grandchildren.

So you really entered the wine industry in 1950. Is that when you met John Fornachon?

Yes. He was the leader of the tiny section at the Waite and I became his assistant. We had one laboratory helper between us; a girl called Nadia Bressler. John was a great man, both in stature (six feet four) and in reputation. He had a keen brain, great sense of humour, and was self-effacing with innate modesty. I was just so lucky to be able to work closely with him for so many years, as he was revered and became an icon in the industry. His daughter, Elizabeth Mortimer, and his son Michael are still living in Largs Bay.

He was appointed in 1934 to start up formal wine research, financed by the newly-formed Australian Wine Board, and became a world leader in microbiological diseases of wine, especially those caused by *Lactobacillus*. Australian wines at that time were mainly fortified and many were infected with lactic acid bacteria. Fornachon effectively solved the problem of bacterial spoilage of these wines, and, in conjunction with Ray Beckwith and Alan Hickinbotham, introduced the concept of pH into the industry. In 1956 he was appointed director of the newly formed Australian Wine Research Institute. He and I planned the new laboratories that were opened in 1958 on vacant land on the eastern side of Waite Road in Urrbrae and opposite the Waite Institute. Now all that land is built on with research buildings for CSIRO, the University of Adelaide and the State Department of Agriculture.

Could you give a little bit of your personal background please, Bryce?

I was very lucky to be in the position I had because it gave me unique experience with wine, and enabled me to get to know the wine industry in depth over the next 29 years, before moving to Roseworthy College to take charge of the wine courses. Fornachon died in office in 1968 and I will never regret the years I spent with him. He became an expert in flor sherry production as well as bacterial spoilage, and I followed him into that, riding somewhat on his coat tails.

One of the delights of working in the wine industry was that I could meet so many fine and affective people. Before we started this interview, Rob, you mentioned Colin Gramp of Orlando and Rudy Kronberger (a Klosterneuburg graduate from Austria) of Yalumba. These people and many others, including Ray Beckwith, Max Schubert, Colin and Ron Haselgrove, Wolf Blass, Guenter Prass, Tom Hardy, David Wynn and Roger Warren, impressed me greatly with their knowledge and wisdom. They were very helpful to me as a young researcher, and I am so grateful to them. There are many more that I could mention.

How did the industry develop?

This is too broad a subject to summarise in a short interview, especially since I wrote an entire book on it that you have read, Rob. Very briefly, the wine industry recognised that its future lay in making good table wines, because in 1950 about 80 per cent of the wines were fortified dessert and appetiser wines for which customer demand was not high. This transition to good table wines was thus crucial to the future of the industry, but presented many problems with which we became involved. There were just so many pressing problems during this transition. One major example was oxidation. The fortified dessert wines

were made oxidatively with fermentation in open fermenters (with plenty of contact with air), whilst table winemaking required reductive conditions or absence of oxygen. To change this required major technological developments in equipment, procedures and concepts.

The whole approach to winemaking had to change, starting with the vineyard and including the varieties of grapes grown. In 1950 vineyards were largely planted with grape varieties such as Sultana, Doradillo, Palomino, Muscat and so on, intended for making fortified dessert and appetiser wines and fortifying spirit, These needed to be changed to the classical varieties of Europe, such as Riesling, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz, Merlot, Pinot noir and the like, which as you know are the basis for quality table wines.

In addition, many technical problems were encountered and better quality control overall was required. The industry had to contend with hazes and deposits caused by trace amounts of iron and copper (as well as other causes), better and selected yeast strains were needed (I was initially appointed to set the industry up with such yeasts), more effective use of sulphur dioxide and pH control, removal of off-taints and smells and so on.

We worked closely with the industry on these and other problems, with the result that we were able to help effectively with the transition. Industry structure at that time was such that the level of knowledge was quite variable and in some cases poor, especially in the smaller wineries, so almost everything we found out helped someone.

The introduction of new overseas equipment, together with stainless steel, in the late 1950s and 1960s, for example, was expensive but a tremendous boon. Colin Gramp was one of the main initiators here. New overseas and local winemaking and sterile-bottling equipment enabled important advances to be made in wine styles and quality, enabling, for example, the production of new

sparkling wine made in bulk pressure tanks, such as Barossa Pearl by Orlando, Sparkling Rhinegold by Leo Buring, Pineapple Pearl by Kaiser Stuhl and others. Woodley's Est, a sweet white still wine, was also a market leader.

These developments were coupled with significant advances in education available to the industry. I don't want to become involved with wine education here, Rob, because the topic is too broad. However, I should mention that we planned and, together with industry and colleagues, presented the first Wine Industry Technical Conference in 1970 in Mildura. I was chairman of the organising committee. The function was hugely successful with 450 people attending, and was the forerunner of many more to come.

You became involved as a wine judge, didn't you?

Yes. I was a judge for about 30 years and, as a researcher, found it to be extremely beneficial. I became a senior judge then chairman of judges in both Australia and overseas, and not only enjoyed it but found it valuable in following changes in wine styles and improvements in quality. Wine shows have become a very important part of the Australian wine scene, and I am told that we now have over 30 major shows annually.

One thing that I wanted to ask you, Bryce, in particular. This research that you and Fornachon and others were doing in the 50s - was it specific to Australia or worldwide?

Essentially the research findings had an international component. Some of the studies were designed to solve local problems but the wine industry is a worldwide organisation, and what we were able to do usually had overseas implications. Bacterial spoilage of fortified wines occurred wherever such wines

were made, and Fornachon's studies, for example, clearly had international importance.

One of the more pleasant parts of my job was that I was fortunate in being able to travel widely to overseas wine-producing countries and attend international wine conferences and visit research stations. Australia was increasingly becoming known in the world of wine, and both we and other countries saw an increasing need to know about new developments. One way of finding these out was through international meetings and visits. At one stage my wife and I lived in France for months, where I visited all the major wine research stations. These visits were tremendously valuable and provided an essential interchange of ideas.

The opportunity to be involved in the wine industry as it evolved, and to be able to help solve important technical problems, was just wonderful experience. Being a researcher in an applied field like wine carried with it an essential component of service and responsibility. One has to relate to the industry, know its problems and help in its advancement. No man is an island and advancement in an industry comes from a wide range of sources. I was just lucky to be there at the right time when such help was badly needed. This period of change and intense development was probably taken into account when McWilliams presented me with the Maurice O'Shea Award in 1998, but I was only one of many who helped the industry.

Bryce, one thing I'd like to recap on, we were talking of the record earlier. You mentioned wanting to experience a vintage first hand. Tell me about that.

It soon became apparent to me as a wine microbiologist that I should work a vintage in a commercial winery, so that I could understand the essentially practical aspects of winemaking, which is after all, a branch of industrial

microbiology. In early 1952 I asked Fornachon if I could work a vintage in a local winery and I gave him a specific proposal. He agreed and so I worked with one of Australia's finest winemakers, Jack Kilgour at Stonyfell winery near the Wine Institute. I asked Jack to give me all the rough jobs, because I wanted to learn the ropes from the ground up. It was great experience. I came home every evening tired out but glad to be having such essential experience. Jack was a gifted winemaker who had won the top export award in the Adelaide wine Show four times – an industry record-

Could you talk a little about oak in winemaking, please?

We have learnt so much from Europe, and this applies as well to the use of oak. We have used large oak vessels of 1,000 or more litres, and to a lesser extent hogsheads of 300 litres for a long time, for making dessert and red wines. Max Schubert introduced the use of small oak, mainly barriques of 200 litres, following his two visits to Bordeaux and Europe generally in the late 1940s. This resulted in the production of Penfold's Grange Hermitage in the early 1950s, which has set a standard of style and quality. Many other makers have incorporated oak into their winemaking processes, including barrel fermentation. Wolf Blass has had great success with this, which in part enabled him to be so successful with the Jimmy Watson Trophies in the Melbourne wine shows. Many other makers have followed this lead.

Geoff Schahinger and I realised in the late 1980s that not enough was known in the industry generally about the details of the use, maintenance and care of small (but expensive) oak cooperage, and we decided to write a textbook on the subject. This appeared in 1992 and proved to be popular. Surprisingly, it won the only prize from the Office International de la Vigne et du Vin for a book in English for that year. This was one of six books that I have written for the industry.

So Bryce, the moves forward in the 50s and 60s, do they continue on in terms of wine research?

Yes, they do, and with the added advantage of increasing availability of money. In the early days we set out to solve the pressing and immediate problems of the industry, and collectively were largely successful. This was done at minimum cost. Fornachon once told me that when he started his groundbreaking research into bacterial spoilage of fortified wine he agonised over the cost involved in buying a good incubator. As money came to be more plentiful the range and scope of research studies became wider. Also as solutions were found to the main practical problems, these enabled researchers to attack the more difficult problems associated with the nature of wine quality and the more esoteric aspects of grapes and wine composition, including DNA analysis. These two approaches could be termed essentially applied research to solve pressing practical problems as compared with the more fundamental and long-term studies associated with more abstruse studies.

I'm interested in you personally, Bryce. Why did you move to Roseworthy at age 53?

I moved to Roseworthy, Rob, because I felt that at that time I was needed more there than at the Wine Institute. It was not a question of money because I actually dropped in income by moving. Roseworthy wanted to introduce a degree in oenology and viticulture to replace their existing diploma, Basically, they wanted someone of sufficient stature to head up the department and new course and give the college more status.

We developed a first-rate staff to teach the course and carry out research. On the viticultural side there was Richard Smart (now a world name), Peter Dry (now senior lecturer at the Waite Institute), Mike Marclay and Prue Henschke

(Stephen's talented wife). On the oenology side we had Robert Baker, David Bruer, Andrew Ewart, Andrew Yap and Alex Sammut, These were all good people and we knitted together well. In addition, we tried very hard to make the course as good as possible.

In fact, the technical director of Germany's largest and best-equipped winery stated publicly that he would prefer to accept graduates from three sources - Geisenheim in Germany, Beaune in France, and Roseworthy College in Australia. This was music to our ears, to be known as being in the top three wine teaching institutions in the world! We also developed a valuable association with grape and winemaking equipment manufacturers, who would offer their equipment to us for testing and student use.

Do you think that the era when you were at Roseworthy has produced many of the top graduates who have made the modern Australian wine industry?

I would have to say yes, Rob.

When the industry knew that we had this staffing team available and what they could do, we began to get more enrolments, including the sons and daughters of well-known winemakers. In addition, Roseworthy began to attract top overseas researchers and teachers who came to work with us and give specialist lectures in both viticulture and winemaking. These visitors gave a great boost to our students, whom we encouraged to spend as much time as they could with them, as well as later seeking overseas experience after graduation. In addition, it became routine for many of the overseas trade and other industry visitors to stop by Roseworthy as part of their Australian itineraries and meet with the students and staff.

We also received increasing support from the industry in various ways; for example, Penfold's gave us a complete refrigerated and insulated wine maturation building. We introduced the Roseworthy Wine Seminars on a range of topics for the industry, with the emphasis on communication and discussion. We also introduced winemaking quality control courses for industry. These continued for some years and attracted industry members from across Australia. We also introduced the first wine marketing course in Australia, and were swamped with students.

As far as our students were concerned, Rob, we had more than we could handle and had to restrict our annual intakes. They came both from Australia and overseas, including many from New Zealand.. When I was in the USA last month I met one of our former students who had been sent to Roseworthy by her winery in California. She could have gone anywhere she wanted but she chose Roseworthy. I asked her whether in hindsight the experience was worthwhile and her reply was that she could not have come to a better place! It is a comforting observation, Rob, to see former students holding senior positions in the industry and overseas.

Bryce, in concluding the interview, taking your book ("Evolution of the Modern Australian Wine Industry") into consideration, and what you've been saying to me, do you find this whole period of your life in the industry a time of continual change?

Absolutely. There is little that is stable and unchanging about the industry, and if there were I would start to get worried. When one hears statements to the effect that someone makes wine just like his father and grandfather did, you can be reasonable sure that the wine quality is not very good. Wine quality has never been as good as it is now, and it will improve further in the future. I used to quote an analogy to my students; if you were a winemaker in 1950 and fell asleep like Rip van Winkel and woke up 50 years later, you would not be able

to recognise much of the viticultural and winemaking equipment, and would be astonished at the improvements in vineyards, grape handling, wine processing and style and quality of the wines.

Speaking personally, Rob, I feel that I've had a fortunate life in a wonderful industry.