Full transcript of an interview with

JOHN RYAN

on 16 December 2002

by Rob Linn

Recording available on CD

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 donated to the State Library. It was not created by the J.D. Somerville Oral History Collection and does not necessarily conform to the Somerville Collection's policies for transcription.

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.

This transcript had not been proofread prior to donation to the State Library and has not yet been proofread since. Researchers are cautioned not to accept the spelling of proper names and unusual words and can expect to find typographical errors as well.
Mr Ryan, where and when were you born?

JR: Rob, I was born in Armadale, Victoria, in 1922. My earlier recollection was schooling at the Catholic school in Mildura. I guess that would be the first introduction to vineyards. It was also, as a young lad, the first introduction to wine. A few of the more colourful lads of the day used to get somebody to go, because we were under age, into the Commercial Hotel in Mildura and get a bottle of what was then called Family Port. We’d take it down on to the lawns by the rowing club, and we used to drink this Family Port from the small round Capstan tobacco tins—glasses. I think that’s my earliest introduction to wine. (Laughs)

And what did your father do around the area there?

JR: Previously we lived in Pinnaroo and we were a wheat farming family. They had a terrible fire that burnt the flour mill down at Pinnaroo and I guess I probably would have been about four years old at that time, subsequent to moving to Mildura. In those years you’re talking about the depression years and people being out of work and so on.

Was your schooling mainly in Mildura?

JR: Yes, it was. At the Convent school in Mildura.

And did you go to secondary school?

JR: Only the type of secondary that they had there. They had a combination of primary-cum-secondary. It was hard to draw the line
between one and the other. You had the varying students all in one class in those days.

**You did your QC, or whatever it was called?**

**JR:** So you just had to do the best you could.

Anyway later, getting up to about seventeen years of age, I met a couple of English lads from a British ship who’d paid off the ship. We’d subsequently moved to Adelaide where I met them, and they used to fill my head with tales of ‘remember that night in Rio de Janeiro?’ And blah, blah, blah. And I thought that, well, this seems to be the life. I must try and get on a ship and get a piece of the action.

So one day I happened to see in the daily newspaper an advertisement requiring somebody for a ship, and it was through Crosby Mann, the wheat shipping agents. So I went along and applied and found that what they were looking for was somebody for one of the big four-masted barques—so called wind-jammers. They gave me the job and I had to go down to Port Victoria to join it. It was anchored in the bay there.

**How old would you have been then?**

**JR:** Just turning eighteen. And the war, of course, was on at that time. This was 1941.

**How did your mother and father take the decision?**

**JR:** Oh, my father was dead at that time. My mother thought that it was a bit of a risk, particularly in war time, to be going off on a big sailing ship with no engines or no protection of any kind, and no radio transmitters. No fridges. *(Laughter)*

The transport from Adelaide was an old Essex car that carried the Royal Mail. So we had the driver plus myself, the only passenger. When I got down to Port Victoria eventually, I looked out and I saw this, to me, quite huge ship with four sticks sticking up in the sky. *(Laughs)* Previously the largest vessel I’d been on was a row boat, so it was quite a shock.
They had a tin shed on the jetty there, which was the shipping office. I went along there with the skipper, who was a Finn. The ship was a neutral ship at that time owned by a person named Gustaf Erikson from the Aland Islands in Finland. He owned all the remaining sailing ships. So I signed on and got on to a motor launch with the captain and the driver and out we went into the bay and pulled up alongside of this ship named Lawhill. They had a rope and wooden ladder hanging down the side of the ship, so we had to jump off a bouncing motor boat and grab that and climb up. *(Laughs)* When I got to the top, and my head looked over the railing, you had varying seamen walking along the decks with rubber turned down thigh-boots on their legs, and knives in their belts, and all the ropes and lines around. It was the boyhood image of a pirate ship. *(Laughter)* I thought what have I got myself into here?

However, it was late in the afternoon and they were about to have their meal, and I enjoyed my first meal of salt beef from barrels, which was the main fare on the Lawhill.

But I spent over twelve months on the Lawhill, and as I mentioned, Rob, Finland was neutral, but apparently at one stage the Finns let the Germans through Finland to enable them to invade Russia, so England declared war on Finland, and when we arrived off the coast of South Africa, the South Africans came out and captured us, so to speak. Took the ship over as a prize of war. But all the crew, with the exception of a New Zealander and myself, were Scandinavians of one kind or another. Finns, Norwegians, Danes and a few Swedes. We all signed new articles for the South African Railways & Harbours Board, who were given the job of running the ship. That was quite an adventure.

**Did you enjoy that year on the ship?**

**JR:** Really great, yes. The Scandinavians were all ex college boys who were supposedly to do a world trip and go back and sit for their Masters certificates. But, of course, the war intervened and you couldn’t go back to
Europe with a big sailing ship without any engines or anything. You’d be sitting ducks.

**So, John, you said to me earlier that you’d actually starting studying. Was that while you were on the vessel?**

**JR:** Yes. I started studying journalism and photography, and I subsequently was doing some freelance journalism and photography. And when I left the wind-jammer, we went down—the New Zealander and myself—to join the Army. We passed our medical, signed on the dotted line, held the Bible and got sworn in, but they stamped our papers essential services, so you have to stay at sea. So I shipped out on a British steamer from Port Adelaide over to the UK. That was across the Pacific, through the Panama and across the Atlantic, at the height of the so called battle of the Atlantic. I sailed then to all the varying theatres of war carrying ammunition and bombs on the outward journey, and generally somewhere in Africa loading up with iron ore to take back to England to make more bombs.

We had a standing joke. We had to keep a sense of humour because it was a pretty worrying time. We used to debate whether it was better to get the so called hammer, as we called it—that means torpedoed—and get blown straight up to heaven, or on the way back loaded with iron ore, get the hammer, and the ship, because of the dead weight of the iron ore, would just sink like a stone. You’d have hardly any time to get off. That was a bit of a joke we had. We didn’t wish either on ourselves.

**And all this time you were continuing to study?**

**JR:** That’s right, yes. I decided, from reading, that an upcoming thing would be public relations, so I got all the text books I could, mainly American because it was not well known outside of the States, and studied public relations. Then after coming back to Australia I set up as a one man public relations consultant. I was one of the early public relations consultants.
**So is this in the late 40’s/early 50’s?**

**JR:** In the early 50’s, yes. I think that it was in 1956 that a group of public relations practitioners—there were two or three other consultants at that time, plus some people who worked for companies, and a person named Don Dyer who was public relations officer for the Adelaide Children’s Hospital—decided that it would be a good idea to form a Public Relations Institute in South Australia. They already had one in New South Wales and Victoria, so we set this up. I was a foundation member and made Honorary Treasurer of the Institute at that time. Subsequently I was programme director.

In 1958 I was admitted as a member of the Institute of Public Relations in London, and then in subsequent years I was, here, Vice President, Deputy President and President.

In 1964 I was the only Australian actually invited to serve as Vice Chairman of the opening ceremonies of the Third Public Relations World Congress, which was held in Montreal. Actually the Chairman of that, and he was an associate of mine in America, was a US Senator, Senator Robert Bliss. He was a well known senator over there. He had a big public relations company in addition to his work as a senator. Then in 1967 the National Public Relations Institute created me a Fellow of the Public Relations Institute of Australia.

**So John, in the briefs you handled, I think you told me there were a number of quite notable German chemical companies—agricultural chemical companies?**

**JR:** Yes. At that time the three major German chemical companies were Hoechst, BASF and Bayer. They were operating in Australia under the banner of Henry H York. Henry York was a major client for whom we produced a number of horticultural newsletters detailing the successful use of chemicals in the vineyards and other horticultural areas. Plus another major client was the then Farmers’ Union, which is a very well known name in South Australia in particular. And we produced a sixteen page monthly newspaper that was mailed out to over 30,000 shareholders every month.
in addition to setting up and producing a staff publication to help bind the staff together. That, Rob, was probably the direct reason that we got into publishing for the wine and grape industry. The then Secretary of the Grape Growers’ Association came to me and, having seen the publications we were producing, wanted to know whether we thought it would be viable to produce a publication for wine grape growers. I had a good look at that, and the problem was that they didn’t have any money. *(Laughs)* Wine grape growers weren’t getting very much money in those days.

**No, they weren’t.**

**JR:** So they wanted to have a free publication. In effect, somebody to produce a publication and give it away to them for free. But having a lot of contacts in the varying industries supplying chemicals and so on, we did a check around, and the consensus was that, yes, this would be a damn good idea to have a publication for grape growers, because there wasn’t anything at all in Australia. They said, ‘Oh, yes, we’ll give it some good advertising support. No worries’. Being human, we took them at their word and said, ‘They’re gentlemen’. So we organised and set up to produce the first issue of the publication that we called *The Australian Grapegrower* at that time. We didn’t expect it to be a great 100-page bumper issue, and we were producing in what I called a semi tabloid format. Just fractionally smaller than a full tabloid. So we printed it on heavy glossy art paper, (1) because it looks good, and (2) because it had a lot of guts to it, you see. And even though it was only an eight page publication, when you held it in your hand, you felt that you had something. *(Laughs)* Printing on flimsy paper, you know, it would collapse. So when it came time to get support for the issue, as often happens, people go a little cool and you just don’t get the promised support. We hardly had any ads in that first issue. As a matter of fact, that followed through for a long, long time, and I personally had to subsidise the
publication very heavily indeed out of income from my public relations business.

**So your public relations firm you told me was called Ryan International -**

**JR:** That’s right.

- and in effect that became the sponsor for the grape growers’ magazine.

**JR:** Yes. We actually registered another business called Ryan Publications, which still exists today, to publish *The Australian Grapegrower*, so we could keep it distinct from our public relations activities. But we weren’t getting any income from *The Australian Grapegrower* at all. The Grape Growers’ Association didn’t pay one cent towards it, so we’ve had to set it up, print it and actually mail it out. Stand the whole cost, so I had to subsidise it from my income from public relations. It was quite a strain in those years, but I did feel, Rob, that it was really something worthwhile. It could do a good job. And the way I set it up was to get a good mix of extension technical type information, plus the major news of the industry, into the publication. The importance of it, I think, was that it went to everybody. It went to every wine grape grower, not only in South Australia but in the other States. It was the official journal of the Federal Wine Grape Growers’ Council, and in turn, the official journal of the varying State bodies. So everybody got a copy.

**Were you paying the postage as well?**

**JR:** Paying the postage, and about two years down the track we still were losing money on it. At a meeting we called with the then officers of the Grape Growers’ Council, we put it to them that they would need to make at least some token contribution towards the cost of the postage to mail it out to them, which they agreed to do. And I reiterate that it was only a token payment but something was better than nothing.

**Yes, exactly.**
JR: And over the years we did manage to get them to increase the amount slightly from time to time. In all the years that all those members were getting it every month for twenty-three years, we still never ever got to the stage where they were paying anything like a reasonable price to share the cost, so we had to pay for the whole thing from advertising. Of course, as the industry developed, Rob, we found it much easier to get advertising. It became a good viable publication.

The importance, I think, is the policy that I personally made from its inception, and that was to let it be known to all the people within the varying state departments of agriculture, CSIRO, wine research organisations, and other industry bodies, that our policy would be to publish predominantly, and give first preference to, official extension technical work rather than, like so many other newspapers and publications do, publish articles by Bill Smith and Tom Brown who don’t really have the expertise to conduct trials in a meaningful manner. Well, Tom Brown claimed that he was able to cure downy mildew by doing this, and this, and that. Well, perhaps he did, perhaps he didn’t, but it doesn’t necessarily follow that his next door neighbour could get the same results.

Exactly.

JR: So, yes, we tended to avoid that type of information and, as I said, from inception we would have published many, many hundreds and hundreds of extension and technical type articles from at least 550 different authors.

So your first issue, John, came out in December ’63?

JR: Yes, it came out at the end of the year. It should have come out a little earlier but, as I mentioned, that lack of financial support made it a bit of a problem. So, yes, it didn’t come out until December ’63.

And how was it greeted when it came out by the growers themselves?
JR: Well, at that time the President of the Federal Grape Growers’ Council was Bob Hollick from Sunraysia, a very well known member of the industry at that time, and a thorough gentleman as well. Bob was a great believer, and mover, and a key person in getting the publication established. In that first December ’63 issue, Bob Hollick hailed it as something really tremendous, and he was quoted as saying that the publication *The Australian Grapegrower* was a realisation of the aspirations of the men chosen to lead the grape growing industry over its fifty years of organisation. We published on the front page a photo of Bob plus his story and comments on it. And over the years Bob continued to give us tremendous support in keeping the publication going.

And indeed, because of the policy that we adopted and the fact that I personally used to talk to wine grape growers, often at their meetings and so on, I used to remind them that they might be growing wine grapes but they’re selling wine in effect. There was only one use basically for wine grapes and that was to turn it into wine. And because of that they needed to get away from the attitude of just being concerned with their own little vineyard, wherever it may be, and start to look at the broader picture of what happens to the grapes when they leave the vineyard, and the problems of the winemaker, both in making the wine and in the marketing of the wine. Because of the type of material we published month by month, indeed all wine grape growers throughout Australia were able to get this greater understanding and knowledge of the broad general industry, which was something they’d not been able to achieve before. And the important thing was that they were all getting exactly the same information -

**From credible sources**

JR: - which was a good thing. And this still stands today. I continued to go into the office five days a week—had two days off—until I was seventy-six. I’m now eighty, so that was three years ago when I sold the publication to Hartley Higgins. I think you’ve met Hartley, Rob.
Yes, I have.

TAPE 1 - SIDE B

So going back to the early days, John.
Can I ask you a question though. One of the things that’s fascinated me. You began this in 1963, and that date more or less coincides with the beginning of the rise of dry table wines in Australia. Was there any link between your interest in wine itself and bringing it out at that time, or was it just a fortuitous thing?

JR: I think it was from the wine grape growers themselves, that point of view that their associations were developing and the wine grape side of the grape growing industry was doing a lot better than they had previously. That would be because of the swing away from the so called sweet red wines -

Of your youth. *(laughs)*

JR: Yes, the commercial Port. Family Port, I think it was called. - to dry table wines. The unfortunate thing, of course, was that it became too tempting for wine grape growers, and people who wanted to get into wine grape growing, and they began over-planting with red wine grapes. So you finished up having surpluses. At one stage, you couldn’t sell Shiraz. They were letting them dry on the vine. So working in with the Grape Growers’ Association of the day, approaches were made to some of the major bakery people. Eventually an agreement was reached that they would produce some Shiraz muffins. *(laughs)* So, yes, the Shiraz muffins. They had dried Shiraz in the muffins.

Did that work?
JR: It worked but only as a novelty. It didn’t really set the world on fire, so to speak. It only highlighted the problems.

Yes, in the industry.


That’s right.

JR: It has some historic value. I don’t think Shiraz muffins have been made since.

You probably wouldn’t get a Shiraz grape free these days, John. *(Laughs)*

JR: No. Well, that was the problem. Once the demand started picking up, then of course everybody wanted a piece of the action. I think at that time, too, I laughingly used to, from time to time, say to Justin Brady, an editor of mine—‘I think we’d better run some surgical notes this month’. In effect, reviewing our subscription list we noticed that many doctors, dentists, lawyers, were subscribing to the *Grapesgrower & Winemaker* because they’d gone away from having a beef cattle property and having a more up-market wine grape property, and subsequently if they could a small winery. They all wanted to be a Dr Max Lake.

Yes, they all wanted to mimic him. *(Laughs)*
Medicos had a fair hand in the industry, didn’t they, in a way?

JR: Yes, they did. At the time we started, as I mentioned, it was then *The Australian Grapegrower*, we hadn’t added the ’& Winemaker’ on. Jeffrey Penfold Hyland was a great supporter of the publication, along with the Chairman of Seppelts. That was the late Ian Seppelt, who for many years was Chairman of the Australian Wine Board at that time. He was another great supporter of it. Most of the key people like that—the Haselgroves, and more latterly Richard. I guess you know Richard Haselgrove.
I know of them. I haven’t met Richard.

JR: Richard was a very great supporter. Windy Hill Smith, when he was alive, was another one.

What about Harry Palmer?

JR: In my view, Harry Palmer was the best ever general manager of the Australian Wine Board—it was at that time. I think Harry probably spent about seventeen years in that job. And I speak not only as a publisher of a wine industry publication, but as a leading public relations consultant, so I was fairly clued up on what you could and could not do, and what should be done in terms of promotion and public relations. Harry, in my view, was a one man public relations band. He really got out there into the market place. You know, around the world, and everybody knew that Harry had been there. He had a flair for writing a good story, a good report. We published many, many reports on the varying places that he visited and the trends and possibilities of future wine sales. No, I feel Harry should have got, from the industry, a lot more recognition and a lot more thanks than he ever had. I can’t see how one person—and I’m only relating to people in, you know, Wine and Brandy Corporation roles over the years, that singly has done as much for the industry as Harry. And one must always keep in mind, Rob, that he had the hard yards.

Yes, he did.

JR: Those days it was hard. It was hard to keep the Grapegrower going, you know, as a viable proposition.

I was just thinking, he actually hired Len Evans, didn’t he? Not the other way around. (Laughs)

JR: He did. That’s right, yes.

I remember Len, when he first came here to Australia, and toured a few places in South Australia with Len. So Harry, God bless him, I think he was a forerunner in really getting the industry moving and getting it away from
the sweet wines you mentioned to dry table wines. But again, we can’t say too strongly that he had the hard yards, and he did a tremendous job under the circumstances.

John, the names you’ve been mentioning, like Windy Hill Smith and Jeffrey Penfold Hyland and Ian Seppelt, did they give you a lot of encouragement to keep going?

JR: They did. As I mentioned, it was quite expensive. I don’t need to dig out any old figures but you can imagine because it was a quality publication. You know, printed on art paper. It wasn’t a piece of rubbish. Yes, it was quite expensive, and certainly Jeffrey Penfold Hyland from Penfolds, Windy Hill Smith from Yalumba, Ian Seppelt from Seppelts, and the Gramps at Orlando, even though the publication wasn’t a consumer oriented publication, it was an industry publication, they gave me financial support by placing advertisements in the publication when they didn’t expect to sell one bottle of their wine as a result of having an advertisement because it was the wrong type of publication. But it was a way that they could take some funds from their advertising budget and make some annual allocation as a measure of support for the work we were doing in keeping the publication going. We were very grateful to them.

More latterly, the other person that had been a tremendous help was Karl Seppelt, now with his wife, Lottie, have their winery/vineyard in the Adelaide Hills.

Grand Cru.

JR: Yes, Grand Cru.

Karl was a tremendous backer, and I can’t emphasise that too much, in terms of personal support and also in his role on the Wine Board at that time—or Wine and Brandy Corporation. He, in addition, wrote many dozens of extension type articles of great benefit to vineyard people, which we published. See Karl, for a long time, was the company vineyard director. He was director of Seppelts vineyards.
That’s what I was just about to say. He was very far sighted in his own vineyard developments.

JR: He was.

Padthaway, for one example.

JR: That’s right. As you would obviously know, Rob, Karl was a very busy man, but he used to take the time to write not one, but dozens of extension (we refer to them as) articles that proved to be of great interest and value to readers because of his expertise in running big vineyards around the country.

What about in the scientific field, John? Did you also get support from the people at CSIRO and that type of people?

JR: Yes. We did make it a policy to give preference to the official work. We would have published literally dozens and dozens, if not hundreds, of articles from varying experts within CSIRO. Yes, they were, again, great believers in the job that the *The Australian Grapegrower & Winemaker* was doing, and they gave it their full support, along with key scientists and extension officers within varying state departments of agriculture.

Of course.

JR: Plus, of course, our Wine Research Institute. Bryce Rankine, for example, who was a long, long time at the Wine Research Institute before he left to take up his appointment at Roseworthy College, wrote a regular monthly article on varying aspects of winemaking and problems and so on. Yes, the support was, and still is today, very, very great.

John, you really had the leaders and the leading thinkers in the industry supporting you.

JR: That’s right. From the winemaking companies. I think what happened was that the winemakers of the day—and I mean the owners of the major winemaking companies—saw that the publication wasn’t what some may have thought could be a grape growers association rag that was going to
be blasting and having a ding dong battle with the winemakers. As I mentioned earlier, there used to be a little ill feeling between the grape growers and the winemakers.

**I think there probably still is. (Laughs)**

**JR:** That’s subsided considerably as a result of the publication and us getting the message across. Again, as I mentioned, we told them you’re growing grapes that are selling as wine. So, you know, wake up to yourself and look at the broader picture. And that is what has happened, with some exceptions. Some people can never change. Broadly speaking, the industry did change and there’s a better rapport between the growers and the winemakers. I guess you’ve still got all those people prepared to differ over pricing. Winemakers want to buy at the best price and grape growers want to sell at the best price. At least if you behave like gentlemen and you’re both open and fair, they’ll get somewhere.

**John, I don’t know if you can remember this one issue, but its been occurring to me that, say, something like the coming of the first mechanical harvesters was of critical interest to the CSIRO people, the wineries and the grape growers. Did you feature that type of article?**

**JR:** We did. All those things from mechanical harvesters through. Back in the early days a person—I don’t know whether you’ve met him—Des Burke from Mildura?

**No, I haven’t.**

**JR:** Back in those early days with the first mechanical harvesters there was a company in Mildura called Patterson Engineering.

**I’ve heard of that.**

**JR:** It’s now UR Engineering. But Des Burke was a forerunner in the establishment of mechanical harvesting in Australia. In effect, they more or less built the first Australian mechanical harvester, and they’re still very, very strong today under the UR Engineering name.
Yes, so we published the first stories on mechanical harvesting and followed through all the way along the line. Of course, the publication today is still keeping people up to date on the very latest ones, not only in Australia but around the world. There’s a lot of French products sold here now.

**There is indeed.**

**JR:** A very good product. They’re all featured regularly in *The Australian Grapegrower & Winemaker*.

One of the things, Rob, that I did do was look at the varying things that went on in the industry. I decided I would take individual issues of the magazine and devote a large part of a single issue to one case—you were just mentioning mechanical harvesting. So one issue would have a special mechanical harvesting section where you brought a lot of material together. Another one would be pest and disease management, which became a very big bumper issue. Then we covered irrigation. All the major aspects, we devoted one issue of the publication to putting the spotlight on those areas. That was a thing that was greatly appreciated by not only the industry but the manufacturers, or we call them supply companies, supplying goods. You just had this difficulty in the specialised industry like the grape industry. You could put something in a daily newspaper, or even a country newspaper, but that country newspaper’s only serving one little neck of the woods. But we were covering everybody right throughout Australia, and of course New Zealand. We then were also going, each month, to forty other countries around the world. So it became an internationally respected publication, and still is. It’s enjoying that now.

John, you would’ve seen some of the really major changes in the industry that have brought it to where it is today, and I’m thinking of not just the technical things like harvesting but the new grape varieties coming in, the new types of clones. You would have actually had contact with the people behind those things, but also would have seen them and witnessed them. Did it surprise you that the industry just happened so quickly to where it is?
JR: Yes and no. I wasn’t really surprised. With my public relations work, one of our clients was the then Barossa Cooperative Winery.

**Kaiser Stuhl.**

JR: Kaiser Stuhl. And that was back in the days when Ian Hickinbotham was the general manager there. Yes, so we were doing a lot of work for Kaiser Stuhl. That was back in the days when they brought Wolf Blass out. He was brought out as a sparkling winemaker, not as a red winemaker. He subsequently demonstrated a talent for red wine blending. And they introduced a great novelty wine called Pineapple Pearl. It had a bottle with printed cellophane that resembled the outside of a pineapple around it.

**Was there not a Cherry Pearl, too?**

JR: Yes. So Pineapple Pearl was going so well that they brought out a Cherry Pearl, but Cherry Pearl, like what so often happens, the one that follows doesn’t do as well as the original. But they have now gone along with Gramps Orlando -

**Barossa Pearl. Starwine.**

JR: I also was doing public relations work for Gramps. Sid Gramp was actually in charge of marketing and promotion, and Sid employed me as a public relations consultant. And at that time—talking about Pineapple Pearl—they brought out a wine called Sparkling Printz. I remember Sid asking me what I could do about promoting that. And I thought I’d go down and talk to the Editor of the Sunday Mail, and I suggested that we have a contest in the Sunday Mail, looking for what I termed a Sparkling Printz for women. Not being sexist, but for women to write in and nominate their sparkling prince, who had done something well for them. That went off well, and we had some major cash prize, plus consolation prizes of bottles of Sparkling Printz. (Laughs) Yes, that put Sparkling Printz on the map but, again, it was one of those things with a short life.
And then, of course, there came the Wine Coolers. I don’t think you can find many Wine Coolers around now. The Wine Cooler as such, I thought it had a great potential. In fact, it did. And in Rankine’s book that I’ve previously mentioned there’s also a photograph in there of—I can’t recall his name. He was a marketing person at Southcorp. They made a cake in the shape of a carton of Wine Cooler and he was cutting the cake. I think it was the millionth case or something.

Now that had a great potential, and I wrote and said at the time when people started putting Wine Coolers into big plastic bottles, like those big Coke bottles, and other types of containers, even wine casks, it was my considered view that that in the long run it would be detrimental to Wine Coolers. I believe it had a good following among the female population who thought you could buy one of these stubby sized bottles of Wine Cooler and you could ape your male companions with their stubbies of beer, and you could have a stubby of Wine Cooler, which in fact they did. But it created an image. So you had a firm image of product, which was a Wine Cooler, but it had to be in a stubby sized bottle. Once you shift it from that you lose the image. And that is what I said, and I think that probably was a major contributing factor to the near demise of the Wine Cooler. I see no other reason why it still couldn’t be a major seller today had the image been retained and you continued to market them. Let’s face it, since then you’ve had all these spirit mixers of one kind or another. Two Dogs Lemonade and Three Cats something, and whatever. \(\textit{Laughter}\) I likened it to champagne, the image that champagne has, you know, in its particular shaped bottle, and cork, and the hood. I mean, if you start putting champagne in big plastic PET bottles—is that what you call them?—

\textbf{That’s right.}

\textbf{JR:} —it’s going to lose the champagne image. And that’s what I’m fearful of down the track, Rob, that with more and more companies getting bigger and bigger and getting greater and greater production that it can only be
sold at, the most, $10 and under. I think in the US, roughly around 90%, if not more, of the wine sold in the US is all sold under $10 bottle.

**Ten US. That’s correct.**

**JR:** I think we’re finding the same thing here, that the big major brands are all going to be wines selling at that $10 or under. They are now selling under $10 Australian and as they get bigger, and you get more bigger companies, you’re going to get this higher percentage. I think in the future it spells a danger for a lot of the small to medium winemakers who can’t afford to be selling $10 wine. I mean they make and sell ex number of bottles a year. It’s got to sell at a reasonable price just for them to make a very run of the mill living. They’re not big enough to make a quantity of $10 wine and make a living at the same time.

**OH 692/43 TAPE 2 - SIDE A**

**AUSTRALIAN WINE INDUSTRY ORAL HISTORY.**
**Interview with John Ryan on 16th December, 2002.**
**Interviewer: Rob Linn.**

John, how many years would it have taken the paper to actually get on its feet? You mentioned that you had to subsidise it for a long time. How many years, roughly, would it have taken?

**JR:** I would think, from inception in December ’63, it would have taken ten years before you could sit back and relax and say that it was a really viable publication. That doesn’t mean that it was losing money. I no longer have the records of that, Rob, so I’m just going back that certainly for the best part of those ten years, if you subscribe to proper company book-keeping, it would have been making a loss. Where you’re a sole owner of a business, as so often happens, you can keep something going, but if it was a public company it would have been tossed out long ago. You know, they wouldn’t tolerate it. Whereas I had faith in it.
I believed right from the start it was going to be something worthwhile. That’s the initial reason why I stuck with them. I was prepared to put my hard earned money from the public relations work into keeping it going. But, yes, up to around ten years, while getting towards the latter stages in that ten year period, it could have been making some small profit. It wasn’t anything that you would jump up and down with joy, but at least you weren’t in the latter stages, as I said, losing money. With the growth of the industry, it then started going from strength to strength, and it’s a tremendously viable publication today. That’s one of the reasons why the new owner has made no attempt to change it from the pattern and format that I established. It still has my own staff, my own editors and other people employed there, and it’s just continuing along the lines as I set it up. The new owner is not only a gentleman but wise enough to appreciate that fact.

**Eventually, John, you made it into a colour format, didn’t you?**

**JR:** Yes. As I said, the original publication, which was called *The Australian Grapegrower*, was in that semi-tabloid format on quality art paper. It was in 1972 that we added ’& Winemaker’ to the mast-head. That was to sort of more fully acknowledge the integrated and inter-dependent roles of the grape and wine industries. I mean, as we’ve said, there’s only one use for wine grapes. They’ve got to be together, haven’t they?

**They do.**

**JR:** Then a bit later down the track, in 1982 it was, we changed the tabloid format to quarto size. It was before the present A4 became popular. We changed it to a quarto sized full colour magazine format. That was instrumental, too. A lot of people preferred that size. I think they found the tabloid size more difficult to keep and file. In *The Australian Grapegrower & Winemaker* office we have hard bound copies of the publication right from the first copy, and the tabloid ones are in volumes
that you practically need a lift truck to lift. The magazine sized ones, they make a nice hefty book but much easier to handle, and I think that those people, because of the nature of the publication with its technical and extension type information, a very high percentage of subscribers would keep the magazine. They wouldn’t throw it in their wastepaper bin like a newspaper or something. So, yes, it was greatly appreciated and, as I said, following that it became certainly one of the most popular English language grape growing and winemaking journals in the world. And that’s what it is today. It still has a bigger circulation than its counterparts in America, which was the next major English language market.

John, did you have it printed in Adelaide?

JR: Yes. It was printed by Stock Journal Publishers, who printed a rural newspaper here, as we had some earlier connection, again in Adelaide, particularly through our public relations business through Farmers’ Union. The Stock Journal Publishers published it for the greater part of its life, and then I can’t tell you exactly when but we then changed to a different Adelaide printer. Lane Brothers as a matter of fact, and they’ve been printing it ever since and are still printing it. Doing a good job.

John, over the years that you published it, were there any major issues affecting the industry that have always stayed with you? Any really, really major ones that you felt were critical to the path of the industry?

JR: No, I look back on the over supply of grapes as being the major thing, and having to let grapes rot on the vine, having to cut them back and graft—I mean, you were grafting white varieties on to Shiraz, which was sad. I think those days were probably the most critical times in the industry. It’s been a slow, steady progression and build up of sales and potential over the years. The Wine & Brandy Corporation became a little more active with their overseas promotion and one way or another. Generally speaking, I think the industry’s taken advantage of the change of climate and change of thinking of people. It hasn’t been by large volumes
of paid publicity. Having been the public relations person at the time when it was difficult to get anybody to actually agree to pay you a reasonable fee for doing work, you really had to come up with extremely creative ideas. Hence you did. You were a very creative person, otherwise you couldn’t get any money. And I had to come up with creative ideas. Nobody would pay me, whether it was Myers or John Martins or—I used to do work before John Martins for Jimmy Martin, the Managing Director of Myer Emporium.

**I knew Jimmy. You’d have to be pretty creative with him to get paid. (Laughs)**

**JR:** Yes. They had an international display of furnishing fabrics in Myers one day. I went in and walked around, and I said, ‘This looks a nice display. Looks very good’. While I’m there admiring it—James his name was but he was known as Jimmy Martin—happened to come along. He used to call me Ryan, and he said to me, ‘Ryan, what are you doing about this?’ I said, ‘I’m not doing anything about it, Mr Martin. This is the first I’ve heard of it. If I’d been informed about it beforehand I would have done something’. He said, ‘Such as?’ You’ve got to be quick, so off the top of my head, I said, ‘Oh, well, for one thing I would have had every available Consul in South Australia here and have had an official opening. You know, put it on the map’. ‘Do it’. That was Jimmy Martin.

In those days I had a little one room office in Gilbert Place, which was behind Buring & Sobels. It then turned into a steak cellar, but Buring & Sobels used to be there. So I went down into my little one room office and got on the phone and went through the list of Consuls. Of course, it’s handy having a client like the Myer Emporium. You know, the biggest buyer of stuff. So I said, ‘Jimmy Martin from Myer suggested I ring you. They’re having an official opening of an international furnishing fabric exhibition tomorrow afternoon’. No time to give them any time. Anyway, every available Consul—there was one interstate—agreed to come along, so we had an official opening. I said to Jimmy Martin, ‘Oh, you’ll have to put some afternoon tea on for them’. They put afternoon tea on up in the
Board Room, which he incidentally used as an office. He never had an office.

Yes, I’ve heard that.

JR: He used to sit at the head of the Board Room table. (Laughter) That’s where I had my interview with him. Anyway, the Consuls came up. A funny man—Jim. (Laughs) So they’re all sitting around this Board Room table. It was one long bench on one side. Hadn’t been there ten minutes, and Jimmy said to me, ‘Ryan, come over here and have a look at this’. And over here was windows in the Board Room, looking down on a back lane called Stephens Place, or something or other. And he said, ‘Look down there’. So I looked down to the ground level, and there was a whole lot of rubbish bins down there. And he said, ‘Have you got any idea how much rubbish is swept up in a big department store like Myers every day?’ I said, ‘I wouldn’t have a clue, Mr Martin’. He said, ‘It’s many tons. Go down to the Advertiser and tell them to print an article about how much rubbish is swept up in Myers every day’. And there are the Consuls cooling their heels, so to speak, with their afternoon tea, and he’s talking rubbish to me—literally. (Laughter)

Literally rubbish.

JR: Yes. (Laughs)

Did you find though in the wine industry, John, it was a much better industry to work in? You said you had those very encouraging people.

JR: That’s right. I say in all sincerity, I never met one person in my forty years in the wine industry that I could say that I really didn’t like. You know, they were all gentlemen. Some may have been a little bit more of a gentleman than others, but I emphasise that they were all gentlemen. No, it was a tremendously nice industry to be in and, as far as I know, still is.

Well, thank you very much, John.
JR: I’m pleased that I had that opportunity to be part of it. As I said, they now commemorate my name with a John Ryan trophy for the best dry red table wine in the National Wine Show of Australia. I guess they’ll keep that going. The new owners of the publication provide it every year to the National Show. That started with the very first National Show. And that was when red wine was hard to sell and I, again, thought that I’ll try to do my part and we’ll have a trophy for red wine to try and help red wine sales along. Doesn’t need any help now really, does it?

Does not. Thank you so much, John, for talking with me today about your life, which has been so instrumental in the Australian wine industry.