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Full transcript of an interview with

MAX FATCHEN

on 24 August 2004

by Peter Donovan

for the

EMINENT AUSTRALIANS ORAL HISTORY
PROJECT

Recording available on CD

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

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Interview with Max Fatchen recorded by Peter Donovan on the 24th August 2004 for The State Library of South Australia Oral History Collection and the National Library of Australia.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

This is Tape 1 of an interview with Max Fatchen. Max has followed a distinguished career in journalism and as an author of children's books. He's retired from journalism, insofar as it was a full-time occupation, but he still continues to write feature pieces for *The Advertiser* and he's certainly still continuing to write. Max will be speaking with me, Peter Donovan, for the Eminent Australians Oral History Project conducted by the National Library of Australia and the State Library of South Australia. On behalf of the Director General of the National Library and the Director of the State Library of South Australia, I'd like to thank you for agreeing to participate in this program.

Max, do you understand that copyright is shared by you and the libraries?

Yes, I do understand.

This being so, may we have your permission to make a transcript of this recording should the libraries decide to make one?

You have my permission.

We hope you'll speak as frankly as possible, knowing that neither the tapes nor any transcripts produced from them will be released without your authority.

This interview is taking place today, the 24th August 2004, at Max's home in Jane Street, Smithfield. Okay, Max, let's begin.

Andrew Male has written a biography of you. We won't canvass all of the issues there, but we certainly want to look at the background of many of them, and we will certainly sort of canvass some of those issues. But can you just comment on your impression and your experience with this biography, so that we can sort of judge you against the biography, I guess?

Well, I was flattered to have a biography written about me, and Andrew Male was a lively young journalist – he's now a senior executive of the ABC¹ – and he was determined to write it, and so we spent our spare time, which wasn't much, together.

¹ ABC – Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

We sat by the sea at Port Victoria, the old square rigger port, while he interviewed me for hours.

The interesting thing about it was that I began to look into myself, with Andrew's help, and it made me, I suppose, more aware of what I'd done and what I was – without a feeling of superiority or pride, but just to see the course of my own life, and that's something a biography does and something that a biography – – –. Perhaps it's rather flattering, but in the end it says the things about me that I was glad it did.

Max, Andrew makes a lot about your growing up at Angle Vale as a child. How much has that become *you*?

Well, it's been an important part of me because, I mean, I was an only child and therefore I spent a lot of time to myself, I spent a lot of time being aware of things around me, I – through my parents, who are both remarkable people, totally different from each other – I learnt something about the seasons, the environment, about the animals that surrounded me, about farm life, and as a ploughboy at twelve I drove a team of six horses and it's a wonderful sensation, driving a plough with a lot of knowledgeable horses and hearing the sound of the shares breaking the soil. And both these remarkable people, as well as the farm I lived on, where life was simple – it was a mixed farm, we grew mainly hay because it was a great area for hay – and it all embedded itself in me. And I used to write little stories to myself and even lie awake in bed thinking about it, which I suppose is a bit unusual for a child, but then again that's growing up. And all of it stayed with me through my life.

When you think back, how much of you was your father and how much of you was your mother, and how has that come out in your writing?

My father was a man who loved the soil, who loved his farm, who had a great knowledge of how to grow things, how to build a stack, how to care for his animals, but he also had a great feeling that the land wasn't just earth and growth, but it was something more than that. And I remember him taking me into one of our biggest crops and telling me to look at it, that this is a wonderful thing, and the fact that we were standing there, we were in the midst of something that was important, and also the fact that it was our livelihood but it was something more than that because it was the miracle of growing and harvesting and reaping. And he took me through these steps of farming life. And, sadly for him, I never made a farmer; but what it did make me was aware of my environment, of the land, of the seasons, of farm life,

which was such a basis of all our economy, and for me was a basis of the things that I would come to write.

Now, you were born in 1920, so we're talking about the '20s and early '30s. What did you get from your mother?

My mother was a lively, intelligent woman, who was – I think – before her time. She'd been a wonderful horsewoman, she came from an interesting family, but she was aware that I had some kind of instinct for creativity, which she encouraged. And she was foremost in working with women. Later, when she got an MBE², when she'd retired to Gawler, she was a JP³ and she'd sit on the bench with the magistrates in cases where women and children were involved. But always she had a liveliness about her, and she made sure that I understood things about life, but also she encouraged my reading and she and I would have conversations. And I remember at night she once took me out and said, 'Listen to the sounds.' And as we listened there was the weird bark of a fox in the distance, there was the sound of a night bird somewhere, and there were the distant lights of a steam train, and the stars themselves, because there wasn't any smog then. And these incidents in my life, I was a child that could be influenced, they did influence me, and she put into me – I suppose I may not look too lively, but she encouraged in me a liveliness of mind which was a part of her own life.

There almost seems a tussle between your mother and your father for you – your father to keep you on the farm, and your mother to give you something beyond the farm.

Well, there was a great tussle, as a matter of fact, because when I went to Gawler High School my father was reluctant for me to go – because I did well at primary school, particularly in English, and I went to a little, one-teacher school at Angle Vale, which is now a growing suburb. My mother wanted me to go to Gawler High School, which I did, because she wanted my education to improve. And I did a year there, and the second year my father took me home on the farm. My teachers fought him furiously because of my skill in English. So they compromised and, while I drove the plough and did the farm work, I did three of my Intermediate subjects:

² MBE – Member of the Order of the British Empire.

³ JP – Justice of the Peace.

History, English and, believe it or not, French. And I'd drive a little horse and buggy the ten kilometres to Gawler once a week, leave my horse and little sulky, and the horse with a nosebag, and go up to the High School and have my papers corrected. And so the struggle went on to keep me on the farm, on one hand, and on the other to further my education. And my mother won in a way, because I wasn't a good farmer. I loved the horses and I loved the environment but I couldn't drive a plough straight, I couldn't lay a sheaf straight on a stack and, although I was full of recognition of the wonder of farm life, I was so impractical and unsuited for it they sent me back to school.

What were the big influences on you at school? Were you in the footy team, in the cricket team, did you play tennis, were you anything of a sportsperson?

I was quite a good cricketer. But I used to spend all my lunch hours in the library, and this was due to a wonderful English teacher, a young English teacher, Alfred Higgins, who years later became headmaster of this high school. He had just come out of college and he had a wonderful knowledge of English especially – poetry, literature, the classics – and I just gobbled it all up because it struck a corresponding chord in me. And therefore I got the nickname of 'Swot', not unkindly from my friends. But while they were all playing cricket down at the nets or hammering at the tennis court, I was in there. And it may sound strange for a child of this age, reading the poets and reading the classics, and people couldn't understand: 'Why aren't you out eating,' they'd say – and eating has always been a strong point with me, but I was feeding on a different kind of food.

Did you have any soulmates your own age?

Oh, well, I had friends and there were some – I did board with two close friends at a Miss Pederick's in Gawler, and we three, one of them, Oswald Pederick, became a forestry official, Tom Arney became a farmer and I became a journalist. But we were close and we were all different and we had different ideas. One thing we all did do was our landlady, who was very strict and Methodist, did allow us to listen to *Dad and Dave*, and as soon as we heard the tune, 'The Road to Gundagai' – it often came at teatime, and she allowed us to eat, and it always reminds me of banana custard because that's what we had every meal for tea as sweets, all the time I was there. But she had an influence because she was a strict Methodist lady, but she was very kind.

And we all were pretty disciplined. We did the things boys do, but I suppose we – we were really occupied in our learning, but with me it was – – –. Alf Higgins, I can see him now, he was very handsome, wonderful tennis player, had a beautiful tenor voice, but he saw something in me and, in true teacher fashion, because I married a teacher later, he drew it out of me and he implanted in me a very great love of literature which fired me off and has never left me.

It may sound pretentious, but as an only child I would go home and I would lie awake at night writing my essays in my head, and I wrote some pretty good essays. But that was the doorstep to a life that was going to spread out and involve literature in a fairly big degree.

In little country towns, little country areas, religion often loomed large, it was often the means for gathering people together. Did it loom large in your life, and did it have an ongoing influence?

It loomed enormously large because all the communities, many of the communities on the Adelaide Plains, I belonged to a Methodist community and the whole social life of the community revolved around the church. There was the religious aspect on Sundays, but there were many side issues. And many of the farmers were erudite people, they read a lot. People think farmers just go out and farm but they didn't, they read a lot, they were erudite. And Adelaide was far away, it was just a distant place, the lights on the horizon. And so the church was everything, marriages, and there was a great festivity called a 'tea meeting' once a year, which we children loved. It had long trestle tables and the hot water for the tea was boiled in a huge copper, overseen by an old bloke who wouldn't let anybody come near it. The tables became laden with – every woman was at her highest level of cooking: there were pasties and pies and there were cream cakes and cream puffs of such delicacy that a slight wind would blow them away, but of course we children made sure this never happened. But this whole life had an effect on me because morality was the key, not in such a stuffy way, but of course dancing was frowned on until later and in its place there were social evenings where we played games such as 'Push the business on'. And also what influenced me was that we, once a year, we had a newspaper night and we all submitted stories and papers to this newspaper night, which was conducted by a very erudite farmer. And it was there I achieved my first great triumph as a writer, because I wrote a little poem and it finished, 'Though nations may tremble, though

kingdoms may quail, though empires may totter, there's still Angle Vale.' It brought tremendous applause and made me think – because I was only young – 'There must be something to this writing.'

Well, leaping ahead a little bit, when you had, just about to complete your high school, what were your options? Did you know anything about journalism, did you know anything about where your love of writing – – –? Why not become an author, rather than a journalist?

No, I just loved the written word and I just loved expressing myself. And it was very apparent that I'd never make a farmer, this was very apparent – to my father's sadness, but he accepted it. One of our great friends was a senior journalist on *The News*, Don Stevens – he later became Mayor of Prospect, he was a great journalist – and he said, 'There are openings in journalism.' There were no cadetships in those days, but he said, 'There's an opening for a copy boy. He likes writing, why not let him try it?' And so I became a copy boy of *The News*. And the copy boys were the lowest form of journalistic life, we did everything. We shot copy, we made tea, we ran messages, we 'phoned stories back from patient reporters to impatient girls on typewriters, because these were the days before all the fantastic electronic equipment newspapers have. But you had to strive to write and draw attention to people. So you began this – the *Mail* ran a little gossip column in which you could write about all kinds of things: I wrote about people's hats blowing off; I wrote about one day a whole lot of oranges fell out in the train; I wrote about anything I could lay my pen on. And I could type reasonably well. But we all had to struggle for recognition, and one of the things it taught me as a copy boy was accuracy, because at last I had a major article accepted about Banjo Paterson, the great poet. And my great horror, it was discovered – it got through – that I'd spelt his name with two 't's' and our literary sub-editor picked this up not long before the paper was going to press – in fact, the metal cylinders were already in position on the huge press – and the sub-editor took me and said, 'Now, you come down with me because you're going to get a lesson about writing you won't forget. Names are names. The first thing you do in your journalism, get names right.' And I went down to the press and there stood a huge mechanic, with a huge screwdriver in his hand, and he said, 'Is this the boy whose spelt wrongly the name of one of our greatest poets?' 'This is him,' said the sub-editor. 'I am now going to lean in,' said the mechanic, 'and with this screwdriver

I'm going to expunge one 't' in this story.' So he did that, and then the presses rolled, and I went back very crestfallen and, sure enough, when the paper came out, there was my story with a little space alongside the lone 't' in Paterson's name. And although these days you have graduates in journalism, this taught me the first ingredient: get names right. And so therefore began my long experience in journalism, and learning to get it right.

So you became a copy boy in 1937. And you had a chance to actually write little pieces as a copy boy?

Yes. Well, they encouraged it, you see, and it's the only way you could be recognised. There was no system of cadetships. You got there by the sweat of your brow and the ingenuity of your pen. And we began to write quite considerable articles. And one of the great characters who had a great influence on me was Max Harris, who became very famous in all aspects of literature and bookselling and poetry. And Max took me – he'd won the Tennyson Medal in Leaving Honours, and he took – – –. His father had, I think it was Henley Beach, but in those days people were allowed to build shacks in the sandhills where they could go down and spend the evening, and Max and I would go down to the beach, he'd take me down, he was determined to educate this young country bloke who became a good friend. We'd take a stable lantern, which threw a reasonable light, we'd take a ham roll, a bottle of lemonade, and he'd take a copy of the Russian, Dostoevsky, and we'd sit on the sand with the sound of the sea and the sound of Harris reading this great Russian novelist, and also the lesser sound of me eating my way through the ham sandwich and having a quick sip of lemonade. But, apart from perhaps the humour of it, he had a tremendous influence on my life. We never lost touch with each other. He was highly amused and highly critical of some of the things I wrote in journalism, but always this friendship maintained and he was one of the early influences on my life because we were both copy boys, and I never forgot it. And it remains still.

He went on to a different career as writer, author, bookseller: did that not entice you, or suggest that there might be another avenue rather than just journalism?

It didn't, really, because I was so interested in journalism. And I loved the atmosphere of it, the tensions, the edition times, the kind of men. And *The News* then, as I'll say later, the sub-editors were very erudite, they knew their classics and things like that, and in those days we had a reading room because the readers read the

proofs to collect the in it. And one of the head readers, Harry Driscoll, he ran a quiz in *The News*, but he's one of the most incredibly knowledgeable men I've ever met, and he took an interest in me. And Cec de Boehme, who was one of the theatre critics and also a senior sub-editor. And the first story I ever wrote was called *Fog was rising* – it was about a retired naval officer going back to his ship in a fog, and the ship sank with him. And I remember the young compositor bringing up the heading he'd set, just to show me, 'Fog was rising by Maxwell Fatchen,' and I think I heard heavenly music seeing my name for the first time.

But then you threw it all away. You went and signed up in the Army.

Yes, well, the War had pressures on us all and I wasn't very good at anything in that way but I felt I should do it. My parents, they had – you weren't allowed to enlist, particularly in the Air Force for aircrew, without your parents' consent if you were under twenty-one. So I got around it by joining the Army Service Corps and I went down to Keswick Barracks where we supplied all the training camps at Woodside, we'd take up their provisions to them. And this gave me a taste of Army life. I mean, I used to take up some of the supplies with a driver and we had a very strict major in charge of us, and we had a bugler, a wonderful bugler: his bugle would ring out across Anzac Highway. And I sometimes went on guard there wondering whatever I would do if something happened because I was very clumsy with a rifle. And so it gave me a new aspect on living with a lot of young men, who later all dissipated – not dissipated, but who all went into different services, and some of them sadly never came back. But it gave me understanding – because I'd been brought up as a single child – it gave me an understanding of camaraderie, of boisterous humour, of wicked songs, of discipline, of the awful inoculations you had to have which made some people faint. But it was all a kind of initial entry into this great web of war in which I played a very insignificant part, I must tell you.

So what did you do during the War, Max?

Well, I then entered the Air Force in the ground staff in the Signals, operating teleprinters and the like, and I remember the day I was having my entry exams – because you had to for the Air Force, even to hump things like this – my father, who was desperately sad, knew it had to happen, I looked out of the window and he stood on the corner by the railway station, as it was there, and I'd look out every now and

then: he was there for three hours just standing and waiting. And so I went into the Air Force and I did my initial training at Victor Harbor, where I was very notable for dropping my rifle on parade. And I remember one incident that amused people hugely. We had a passing-out parade, and the sergeant said to me, 'Only an Act of God will get this squad past with you in it, Fatchen.' And, as it happened, the Act of God or whatever it was happened, because I had a sudden infection, they had to put me in hospital and take all my teeth out, and the squad passed by brilliantly without me. And the sergeant, whose heart was supposed to be hard as Granite Island, came and fed me ice cream, he said, 'because it was an Act of God,' and he was very grateful for it.

And from there I went to Point Cook in Melbourne, which was a great training station and the oldest Air Force establishment, I think, and there as a signalman I saw young airmen train on various aircraft, and also I got a taste of a different kind of life. And one day in Melbourne, in a milk bar of all places, I saw a young student teacher who's still with me now after sixty-two years.

How does a shy, country lad court a slick, city, Melbourne woman?

Well, she wasn't such a slick, city, Melbourne woman; she was a country girl who came down, had been brought up in the Victorian Mallee, she'd won a scholarship from the Sunshine Harvester people – in those days they were the great makers of agricultural [machinery] – and she went to a ladies' college at Ballarat and then she came down to be a teacher. And I was deeply impressed with her because, after the first time I took her out, I got a letter from her in which she quoted some verses from Omar Khayyam, and I thought, 'Any girl who knows Omar Khayyam is worth cultivating,' and cultivate her [I did].

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A: TAPE 1 SIDE B

A friend called Scotty, a sailor, his young wife was a teacher too, and she and Jean were coming down on the Melbourne express and we were at Spencer Street Station to meet them. And there was a great kerfuffle there, it was full of service policemen, and there was a ragged guard of honour the Americans had drawn up, and Scotty and I wanted to get on the platform to meet our loves and I said, 'You can't get on the platform, General Macarthur's coming.' And then the train pulled up and the guard of honour gave a very sloppy present arms, and out came Macarthur, who'd already –

a little place called Terowie in South Australia – had made his famous ‘I shall return’ speech, out he got with his wife and child. And Scotty and I couldn’t stand it any longer, we were well down the train, well up the platform, so we evaded the SPs⁴ and raced to see our girls, and there we were on the platform, General Macarthur and his lot, and Scotty and I and our two young wives.

Just a little more on your wedding. It happened in Melbourne, did you have family there, did they come over for it?

Yes. Yes, they – – –.

Where did you have the reception, did you have a reception, a honeymoon?

Yes. Well, we were married in Wesley Church, which is, as you know, a very famous church. It’s in Lonsdale Street, Little Lon, which CJ Dennis, whom I love, is always writing about. And Cyril Waklate, who was the minister there, also ran the mission, and he was a good boxer, and sometimes when some of the refractory people would come in and play up he’d say, ‘If you don’t behave yourself – – –.’ And then, once or twice – he had a good left, I understand. But he made us feel – – –. And my commanding officer of my signal unit at Point Cook, he came, Pilot Officer Studley, a wonderful – he was more of a – he was one of those old Air Force men who felt his – – –. We signal people worked all hours and we were different and were the envy of some other people and they regarded us as, not mountebanks, but people who got it easy, which we didn’t. And some of the WAAAFs⁵ came. And one of the WAAAFs – and she’s still alive and she rang me recently – she ironed my only pair of good trousers before I went, and she felt, she said, ‘I shall never forget that I ironed your wedding trousers.’ Actually, it was in the middle of wartime and this was a bad time when New Guinea was the scene of those terrible battles and the Kokoda Trail and everything that – this was a little oasis of, I suppose, yesterday, and it was something – – –. And we went to the Dandenong Ranges for a two-day honeymoon, and we thought it was wonderful, the Dandenongs, beautiful ranges and great for when you’re romantic and in love.

When did you get Jen to meet your parents?

⁴ SP – Special Police.

⁵ WAAAF – Women’s Auxiliary Australian Air Force.

She met them – my father came over, she met him, and then she met my mother. They managed to get over. Later on, when the restrictions came on travel and you weren't allowed to travel interstate without a passport, without a permission, I think it was when Jean was up teaching at a little country place called Sandsmere, near Kaniva, and I was on my final leave, and my father got off the train at Bordertown and he walked all the way to Kaniva so he could see me, which was a long trip, right across the border. He was at – he wanted so much to – well, you know what, an only son and an only child. And I wasn't in the forefront of battle or anything like that, but they were separations and you never knew in wartime, did you?

So you went overseas, you left the mainland. What were you doing?

First of all I went to Birdum, which is up in the Territory, and I spent – and later Alice Springs. Signals were, often signalmen were posted independently, and I spent the first part of the War there. I went up the road to Birdum before it was even made, it was just a huge, dusty track, convoy after convoy. But later on, later in the War, I went over to Madang in New Guinea, and then up into the Admiralty Islands. The Japanese had been largely defeated but there was still a huge army at Rabaul. They didn't have any aircraft because they'd been knocked out of the sky, and most of their ships were sunk. And at Madang, of course, the Japanese – at Wewak there was another big army there, they didn't surrender until the Japanese Surrender. But the thing I did in these hot little bases, we lived very primitively, you know. Sometimes we were attached to a fighter squadron, which – – –. When I flew into Manus, which is an island in the Admiralties, I was actually stationed Los Negros, by the great Seadler Harbour there, an enormous harbour, part of the invasion fleet for the Philippines was there. And also there I remember one afternoon, very near the end of the War, I came off my duty in Signals and the entire British fleet sailed by: three aircraft carriers, the *King George V* and cruisers, on the way to Truk, which was a huge Japanese base.

But what I used to do – and I was encouraged by the people, by the CO⁶ and others, and the men liked it – as a morale thing I established little unit newspapers, and I called one *Tropical Spread*, because we had this fearsome replica of butter, it

⁶ CO – commanding officer.

was called 'tropical spread' – it was pretty vile, I can tell you. So I wrote this. But what I did do, I began to send articles down to the Sydney *Sun*, which was then an independent newspaper. And this had happened because I'd been stationed on the Macarthur property with a coastal command of Beauforts, and because I was in the operations room as a signalman, one of the operations officers was a Sydney lawyer and I showed him a short story I'd written. He said, 'This is good.' He said, 'My mate, Gunner Pryce, is feature editor of the Sydney *Sun*,' he said – and Gunner Pryce had been a World War I person and quite a well-known poet, who was very sympathetic to writers. And he took this poem in to Gunner Pryce and the Sydney *Sun* published it as a short story, and this was the first of fifty short stories I was to write for them. And Gunner Pryce – I mean, my manuscripts would arrive all with mould on them, you know how the tropics are, and they'd publish them and they made quite an impact on him. And I remember, when my first – my second child was born, because I wasn't home for either of the first two, and Tim was born later, I have four – I wrote a poem called 'By the Range Stairs', because at Madang, across Astrolabe Bay, the great Range Stairs rose to eleven thousand feet. And I wrote this poem about the ache of young soldiers and airmen, servicemen, when they were away from their wives and children. Pretty sentimental, it was really designed for Christmas. But Gunner Pryce thought so much of it that the *Sun* published it after. And I'll never forget his encouragement, because after all he'd been through the Western Front and all those things, and he set out deliberately to this young, ground staff person who was very insignificant in the war effort, but he felt that this was terribly important to people down south because I wrote about life up there in these short stories. And my officers, who had to censor things, naturally, they were impressed and I was encouraged on all sides.

And then, of course, while we were in the Admiralties I heard that – we had heard that a bomb had been dropped, which we didn't believe, you know, you don't believe. The services was a great place for rumours. And I remember the most – well, we were all so relieved, you know, and homesick and everything else – we decided to have a test match with the British fleet. We only had half a pitch of concrete, it was right by the edge of Los Negros Island. And the British fleet were only too pleased to have a test match. It meant we had to change ends each time so that you could use the concrete strip. And we had, the field was sort of scattered around the coral. But

we had, the deep fine leg fieldsman was in a rubber dinghy which we'd purloined from the Air Force and he was out there, because we only had one cricket ball, you see, and if the ball was hit out there ---. And the sea went down to nearly two thousand feet, I think, because it rose precipitously from the ocean floor, and you hit a ball out there, it ---. And the Americans were astonished at this strange - there was a huge traffic jam of American lorries and servicemen and airmen, and one American said, it was reported to us, said, 'What's the matter with this goddam game? Instead of running around they run straight up and down.' But I knew, and sensed, because I had some wonderful friends who were top soldiers - one of them, Norm Fleay, later became a DSO⁷ and he became our day printer at *The Advertiser*, wonderful man - but I knew, because I'd lost some friends, one of the death marches, Sandakan, and I felt I was very lucky. But there again, it all imprinted on me, being with men, understanding them, because they'd share their thoughts and dreams with me because writing this little paper gave them some kind of access to someone who'd listen. And I think one of the things writers and journalists and everybody else, you have to learn to listen, not just to ask questions, but you learn to listen and to observe. And all these things sort of fed into my lifestyle and into my mind and were stored there for future use.

So did your wartime experience help or hinder your career?

I think it helped immensely. I mean, wars are awful things and we know what sacrifices people had to make. But because it gave me such an insight into men and great friendships were formed, you saw things under difficult circumstances, it all bound itself up into the web of experience from which I could draw later on. And therefore, although I suffered the deprivation of seeing my family being with Jean and things like that, it taught me a great deal about - although it may sound a corny expression - it taught me an enormous lot about mateship, which has always remained with me.

After the War you would have had two challenges: one is to get back into civilian life, which you'd hardly started beforehand anyway; the other is to get into a married life, which you'd hardly started beforehand anyway. How did you grapple with those two issues?

⁷ DSO - Distinguished Service Order.

I remember arriving at Adelaide Railway Station and Jean came to meet me with the two children, Michael, whom I'd never seen, who was then about sixteen months old, eighteen months old, Winsome, who was about two and a half or three, and I remember seeing Jean, who looked lovely, and these two children. And I thought – this was the reaction so many people come in – ‘Are these really mine?’ And Michael rushed up and – because he's now a senior captain with P&O, but he's always been outgoing – and Winsome had a reserve, she was a haughty young lady, and she came up and looked me over, up and down, and then she took out her finger and she poked me to see that I was real and not some kind of phantom that had appeared on the railway station. And of course we had – my aunt let us have a little flat down at Grange and there were other people in the other little flats and everybody had been affected by the War, they were returned people – and so we all grew together in this kind of colony of young people settling down into a new life. And of course I had to find a job. But fortunately this friend, who is now a senior journalist, Don Stevens at *The News*, they found an opening for me and because they'd seen my writing and, you know, had known me before as a copy boy, and they gave me a job as a D grade journalist. Now, I hadn't done a cadetship or anything like that, I'd done two or three years as a copy boy learning it all the hard way, but suddenly I was plunged into journalism again. And it was difficult settling down. And there were a lot of other journalists who'd been away, they'd been in the thick of it fighting in Syria against the Vichy French, which was a bitter little part of the War in the Western Desert, but we all came back because we were absolutely relieved to be out of the kind of environment we'd been in. And we all had a burning enthusiasm to find our way to enjoy the challenge of journalism again, and it all became quite a remarkable experience.

Why come back to Adelaide? You'd now – the farm lad had sort of left Angle Vale, had gone to Adelaide, then he'd gone to Melbourne and then the world, and you'd made an impression at the Sydney Sun. There was no hint of going anywhere else other than Adelaide?

No, well, because of the associations with *The News*; of course I knew this newspaper and they'd seen enough of me to know that I had some kind of talent. And I liked Adelaide and, you know, it was the old tug of the countryside, even though I was now in the suburbs, it was the old tug of the countryside. This was my place, this was the

place I knew. Somehow I felt that if I was going to grow intellectually and personally and everything else this would be the place where I would want to do it. So that was the thing. And, although in later life the Americans tried to get me on their top newspapers, I've got a very strong thing about 'one's place', and the roots, like a good crop of wheat, go firmly into the soil and what grows and flowers from it is something that's also integrated with childhood, with people and with areas, scenes and settings, and they affect me very strongly. Very powerfully. Although I've travelled the world, and seen some of its great disasters too, this was the thing that made me stay.

From Andrew Male's story, one gets the impression you just didn't walk into a job back at *The News*, that it took a little while before a job came up. Why did they not welcome you with open arms, since you'd been ---?

Well, I think it was a matter that there was such a confusion. There was an enormous settling-in period after the War. You've got to remember all these people came back and they were all adjusting to a former life or a new life, and it took everybody a while to settle down, and I remember the first article I wrote was for *The Advertiser*. And my uncle, RT Foster, was a very famous journalist associated with *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and he actually wrote to Sir Lloyd Dumas in *The Advertiser* and said, 'Would you consider Max for a position?' And Sir Lloyd wrote back – who was later to come looking for me, and for whom I had a great regard – said, quite stiffly and primly, 'We of *The Advertiser* don't take people who *The News* might want.' Life changed dramatically in that respect as one ---. And for a while I was wondering. But then Don Stevens knew I had talent and they discussed it in *The News* and then they offered me this job. And I remember it was eighteen months before I could afford a suit, so I had a sports coat and one pair of good trousers, because we were all poor. And it became a challenge, it was full of excitement, and I was very fortunate to be among journalists who were sympathetic, who'd been through it themselves, who remembered me, who recognised that I had some talent, and they were a – and also we had a couple of remarkable editors.

So where were you in the pecking order at this stage?

I was just a D grade journalist, and that was the bottom rung of the 'graded journalists', as we called them. And my brief was sent out on all kinds of stories, mind you. But the point was that, very early in my journalistic career, I suddenly

showed a talent for feature writing and for light-hearted writing, and I had a remarkable editor in John Hetherington, who was a war correspondent and who later wrote biographies of Melba and Thomas Blamey, the Australian Commander-In-Chief, and he encouraged my writing and he saw that I had a flair for humour. And he said to me, he called me in one day – because he'd been a marvellous correspondent, he'd covered the war in Crete and just got out by the skin of his teeth, and he wrote a very famous book on Crete called *Airborne invasion* – and he said, 'You've got a sense of humour and I'm going to give you a little column – apart from your other work; you've got to remember this is an additional thing – but it's called 'Life with Fatchen', and thus began my humorous writing. I wrote this pretty well every day and it was full of puns and mad observances, but people were in the mood for it, they'd all been through the War too, the public had.

And to give you an illustration, they began to send me out on assignments that they knew it would be very difficult to find a story in. But, just as an instance, they sent me one day to cover the Orchid Show, and orchids and I weren't even on a nodding acquaintance, and the orchid growers were one of the most elitist group of people. And when this young journalist showed up in his sports coat and slacks, the looks of horror were carefully concealed, but they were there. And I looked at all this and I thought, 'What am I going to write?' And I was doing this for the *Sunday Mail*, whose editor, Ron Boland, became my great mentor. And Ron said, 'Oh, you'll get a story out of it.' So I went back and I saw orchids had names like 'Mendelissima' and 'Grace Darling', so I went back and I wrote a love story how I fell in love with them, and I thought, 'The sub-editors will kill me.' But they didn't. 'The orchid people will kill me because,' you know, 'I've made a lot of nonsense of it.' The story appeared on page three with an illustration, the sub-editors were delighted, and the orchid growers were over the moon because all they'd ever got before was a little paragraph called in the very smallest type at the back of the paper, and here they were on page three. So that's just an illustration of how I began to take a certain journey in journalism.

And John Hetherington was succeeded by another great editor, Rohan Rivett. He'd written a brilliant book called *Behind bamboo* about his imprisonment. He was, I think, the grandson of Deakin, one of the Prime Ministers. He was tall, handsome, he had flaming hair, and he was an idealist. And he would address us in the morning,

like a young general addressing his people. I mean, you were given assignments, you went in and saw the chief of staff, he had an assignment book and he gave you your assignment, but every now and then Rivett would call us together and he was so inspiring that, you know, I would have gone out and covered the last days of Pompeii if I'd had a chance. But he again had a great effect on me. And at that stage a lot of the people in *The News*, such as Kenneth May and Frank Shaw and others, they became Rupert Murdoch's top men later on.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B: TAPE 2 SIDE A

This is tape two of Peter Donovan interviewing Max Fatchen, the date being the 24th August 2004. Now, Max, we've now got you back to *The News*. Can you tell us a little bit about *The News* of the period – we're talking now, I guess, of the late '40s, early '50s – and what it meant to Adelaide?

Well, an afternoon paper. It was a good afternoon paper, because of its editors and the staff of journalists, and it came out usually three editions, and the final edition, we had *News* sellers on every street, and they had their news cries: 'Here, get your *News*, *News*' – it rang down the tiny canyons of Adelaide streets. And they would shout the headlines. And as *The News* came out the circulation manager would write up on the board 'Today's cry', it was called: it would say, '70 people lost in earthquake, ship sinks off Argentina.' He was horrified one day when – he would go around and check with the *News* sellers to see they were giving the right cries, and one man on one corner, one old *News* seller was shouting – it was a day of great disasters, you know, black headlines, because the posters came out, posters were a great thing then, you had posters everywhere for the paper – and he was crying – and this had been a day of great disasters, a ship had sunk or something – and to the circulation manager's horror he was crying out, 'Man sits on ostrich egg, man sits on ostrich egg,' and this was a tiny paragraph somewhere in the paper, but he'd thought he'd be different. He was very different after the circulation manager got to him.

But the interesting makeup of a newspaper then was you had the main newsroom and you had the chief of staff's office, you had the sporting room. The sporting writers and racing editors, they were very racy – they had bowties and excellent suits – and they quarrelled intensively, I don't know why, but whether it was because they had different ideas about different horses – – –. One of the things I remember about *The News* is the noise of these strident voices from the racing room quarrelling about

something or some horse or some trainer. But it was all part of life. And the sub-editors sat in a room, they sat around a table, there were big gluepots in the centre, there were scissors, and they had these big pencils which we all dreaded, because they — — —. And brevity was the absolute fact. You had to write a good lead to your story. There were newsprint shortages at one stage; we had six pages of the larger newspaper, so everything had to be kept very tight. And the news editor sat, he assessed a story, marked the type on it or marked the page, and then the sub-editors. And there was a copy boy who shot this out to the copy box outside, where the man at the copy box allotted various stories to the linotype operators, who were very skilled people. You know, linotypes were great things, remarkable machines, they transferred hot lead into back-to-front type and trays of it. And then it passed to the compositors who had plans of the pages with the makeup sub-editors, and we were always racing against edition times. That was the excitement in an afternoon paper, you had to get your stories in, you had to be fast, you had to be accurate. You had questions asked if you were summoned to the sub-editor's room, and it was like going to the firing squad. And when the paper was getting near edition time, we had a marvellous old head compositor, head printer, Tom Poole, and he would start rubbing his knee, and this was taken by a storm warning by everybody, and the word would pass that Tom's starting to rub his knee and everybody, the frenzy redoubled, and then there would be the furious banging because the lead type was inlaid into pages and the type had to be hammered down so it was perfectly flat, because it came under another press which took a copy of it on a special kind of paper — I think it was made of asbestos or something — which was bent[?], and then again the ultimate thing was lead was poured on it and you got the semi-circular printing parts went on the press itself, were attached to the press itself.

But the compositors were remarkable people, and they helped me a lot because I had terrible trouble if I did any sub-editing by sending out too much copy, and if you had a lot of leaden type left over it was not a good thing.

And then the cryers went out and everybody on the trains would be reading the afternoon *News*. You'd sit in a carriage and all the papers would be out and they'd all be looking at it. It was like having a cup of tea or kissing your wife, you must have the afternoon newspaper. It was such a part of the city's life. And of course it had an effect that *The News* was presented well laid-out, brief and to the point, and that's

what you needed for an afternoon newspaper because people were going to read it on trains and they didn't want to read the *Oxford dictionary* on the train, they wanted terse, quick, interesting paragraphs and good headings.

And then one day onto the scene came someone who would revolutionise not only our newspapers but, in effect, have a great effect on journalism in the world, and that of course was Rupert Murdoch.

Tell us a little about Rupert and his change.

He came from Oxford. His father, Sir Keith Murdoch, whom I knew as a young reporter and who was very nice to me ---. And *The News* was Rupert's birthright, that was his newspaper. And he came, he was an enthusiastic, hands-on, young proprietor and he galvanised the whole place. And he'd see the paper to bed, he'd take an interest in every part of it. And I remember the first thing that impressed me was we were going to run a story on page three – I think it was the *Mail* – of Adelaide, the St Peter's Cathedral floodlit, which was quite a thing, and it was just a two-column picture, and Rupert said, 'We want it bigger than that,' and he increased it and it had a galvanic effect on the page. And I thought even then, in my inexperience, that somebody here's got an eye on something, and that enthusiasm pervaded the newspaper. And from then he never stopped, he was dynamic. And of course I know, and I'm not going to enter into all the controversy that's followed Rupert all his life, but when I knew him as a young, when I was a young reporter and he was a young proprietor, he was a hands-on newspaperman. He loved the newspapers, he knew the inside of it, and that's where it all began. And he knew the people who would be executives in it in future, they were there among the senior reporters. So it's very interesting to see the beginning of this pretty dynamic newspaper personality.

Other people have written about him. What was your role? Did it change during this period at all, Max?

Well, Rohan Rivett was the editor and I made a pretty quick progression to an A grade journalist because of my feature writing. I was hopeless at Parliament, they never let me loose there. I was hopeless in law courts because my shorthand had disappeared during the War somewhere up in the islands. I remember one day I had to cover three, because the regular court reporter wasn't there, I had to cover three

major stories at the courts, which I managed to get through by getting hold of the depositions and things. But I suppose my feature writing flowered, you know, they began to make sure that I did the features. And there is no doubt Rupert and Rohan thought a good deal of me. And at this time rearing its head at the other – because *The Advertiser*, the warning bells had started to ring for Sir Lloyd Dumas and the Bonythons and everybody else that a young tiger was in town, and they decided to bring out a rival Sunday paper, the *Sunday Advertiser*, for which they appointed a very fine editor who became one of my finest editors, Harry Plumridge. And Sir Lloyd forgot his letter to my uncle that they never stole people from *The News* and they decided I was the one they wanted. This is not praising myself up, this was the fact of newspapers, that I was valuable, because I did a page in the *Mail* first of all with a fine artist called Ian McBain, and then Norm Mitchell who'd come from *Smith's Weekly* long ago, and every week we'd go out and we'd do this page about some aspect of Adelaide life and it was humorous. And we had colour then, but it was very difficult because of all, you had to get all – they didn't have the wonderful technology now – you had to get all the different colour plates exactly in position. And this had attracted everybody's notice so much. And the *Herald* had sent over a peppery features editor called AR McElwain, and he was a great help to me in the end. But he decided this Fatchen and McBain page, this was nonsense, we'd get rid of this, but he suddenly found there'd be such an outcry he couldn't get rid of it. And then he came to realise that, well, I was something a bit special. Anyway, so did *The Advertiser*.

And now the *Sunday Advertiser* came out – and I was on the *Mail* by this time – and there was furious competition, as you can imagine. And Ron Boland, who was then my editor and I was working with, I did a lot of work on the *Mail*, one day I was approached by Alan Williams, who was a marvellous journalist of *The Advertiser* – a DFC⁸ winner, by the way: he had a Sunderland flying boat who beat off three German fighters, I think, he was a marvellous man – and they approached me and offered me a job on *The Advertiser*. Well, I was quite shocked. And Sir Lloyd himself wrote a letter to me. And they offered me, really, security for life, that's what they offered me. Now, I hardly had a penny, you know – journalists are not among

⁸ DFC – Distinguished Flying Cross.

the millionaires until you become a proprietor – and I had my wife and two young children and another one on the way, and I’ve only got one sort of talent and I thought, ‘If this one’s not exercised,’ you know, ‘I won’t be going where I want to go.’ So I went and told Rupert and Rohan. You might remember that they later broke up over the Stuart affair – I think it was Ken Inglis who wrote a book on it. But anyway I told Rupert and Rohan that I’d been approached by *The Advertiser*, which was like saying that something rather disagreeable had entered the room. Because, well, you know, I had a strong sense of loyalty for *The News* because I loved working there, and I was so grateful, it had taught me everything about newspapers, the rudiments of it, and I said, ‘They’re coming back for me in six months, they said.’ And they said, ‘Oh yes, well, we’ll do something about it,’ and I said why I was interested in it, you know, gave them a lot of warning. Anyhow, they did come back in six months and they increased the offer, the salary, they gave me top rating and they said I’d be doing the feature work; they wanted me for the paper. So I went down and I told Rohan and Rupert and they couldn’t believe their ears. ‘You’re not going to take it,’ they said. I said, ‘Well, I’ve got to, I feel, with my wife.’

They didn’t make a counter-offer?

No, they didn’t. That was the strange part about it. They thought that loyalty – they knew I loved working for *The News*. But I had other things that pressed on me too. And so Rupert said, ‘My name’s not to appear anywhere in the newspaper.’ And I thought that’s fair enough, I understood this. But I was to serve out my three months, and I still did all the features, a lot of features and things, but my name never appeared on anything, you see. So *The Advertiser* bided its time and when the time came for the changeover Ron Boland was terribly upset, he said he should never have let me go. *The Advertiser*, to rub salt in the wound, brought out posters all over Adelaide: ‘Max Fatchen joins *The Advertiser*’, which added fuel to the fire. And so I – what was called ‘crossing the town’. I instituted it, and from then on there became a frenzy of people taking each other’s journalists. *The News* took John Miles from *The Advertiser*, he was a very fine journalist, and they took Ted Smith [?], he was another one. And they tried to run a column like mine, but it failed, the public didn’t care much for it. And soon after I went up there and wrote a column for the *Sunday*

Advertiser the war was fought to a bloody draw. The papers, they decided to jointly combine in the *Sunday Mail*, and I wondered where this was going to leave me, but suddenly a whole new world of feature writing opened up because Harry Plumridge, who was a very good pilot, had been a wing commander in the War, he decided that he would send me up on lots of assignments in the Outback, everywhere, and this opened up a new career for me and it also gave me the background in the years to come for my children's books.

Did you lose any friends, moving across town?

I think people understood pretty well, but it hurt Rohan Rivett, the editor, it really hurt him. He told this to friends, you know, that he couldn't understand why I did it. And he was big enough and generous enough to give me a farewell dinner at his house, which was a beautiful dinner, and invited some of the senior people. But he really couldn't believe it. And I had an enormous amount of time for him because he was a crusader. He – well, you know the story of his crusading over the Stuart case – but he was a – – –. And *The News* had been my fostering ground. This is where I had learnt so much about energy, about feature writing, about all aspects of the newspaper because I knew all the compositors, I knew the readers, I knew the linotype operators, I knew the fellow journalists. It was like a very interesting, vibrant, often difficult family, but it was a wonderful place to be.

I'm not satisfied with your reasons yet. So what were the reasons for going to *The Advertiser*: was it just extra money, extra salary? Could you not have negotiated that at *The News*?

Well, I waited for them to negotiate because I told them quite frankly what it – – –. It was really security had an enormous part in it.

Why did you have no security at *The News*?

Well, they didn't offer me the kind of things that *The Advertiser* did. *The Advertiser* offered me all kinds of – well, a raise in salary, but long-term things such as they gave me shares in the company, they gave me all kinds of inducements. And also I knew the *Advertiser* journalists anyway, and it was a different aspect, and someone said, 'Oh, it's a very stuffy newspaper,' you know. They said, 'You're going to the Adelaide Club.' But I wasn't, I know it had a great effect on me because Sir Lloyd – but Sir Lloyd I found to be a remarkable man. He had a great effect on Adelaide's

life, and he watched over my interests and he never broke a single word or promise that he made me. And when you're – you know, you're not very old, are you? You're only in your late twenties or early thirties when this happens, and I wondered whether I would have lasted in Rupert's eventual new order, you know, because perhaps it was different.

And what it did in *The Advertiser* was to give me a different kind of scope, because the kind of assignments I began to get were what I'd always dreamed about. I went and lived in the Outback, I lived on ships, I did assignments of all kinds, I covered the first atomic bomb at Maralinga, and it was at this stage that – – –. When I went there one of my, the first person who illustrated my humorous article was *The Advertiser's* young cartoonist, Pat Oliphant. And of course, as you know, Pat Oliphant became a world-famous cartoonist, he went to America, he won the Pulitzer Prize. But he applied to the *Denver Post*, which was a very famous American newspaper, and when he was there he began to encourage me to write for the *Denver Post*. I wrote humorous articles and poems, you know, topical stuff, and they became tremendously interested in me and in due course they made me a couple of tempting offers. And at the same time Sir Lloyd made sure that I didn't go, to a degree. America wasn't my place. I like writing for them, they thought a lot of my work and they did very hard to get me over there, but I belong where I belong and it was the right thing to do.

And the British Government had taken me overseas with two other journalists, one of them Jack Fingleton, the great cricket writer, and I'd never gone overseas before, and to go as a guest of the British Government – because the Brits liked some of the things I'd written about Britain, you know, feature articles – and it was this trip that really changed my life a great deal because, coming back through America, I saw a deal of American life. I went to Kennedy's last press conference, I was in Dallas Airport when they brought his body out and I was the only one anywhere near. And all these things had an effect on me. And when the Americans came up with their offer to me, and I told Sir Lloyd – this was later on – he said to me, 'What would you do to stay with us?' And I said, 'I'd like another trip around the world.' It's the boldest thing I ever did. 'I'd like another trip around the world, Sir Lloyd, a writing trip, and take my wife; and I'll pay you back if you'll pay her passage.' And he did. And of course I wrote a lot of major stories about the American air bases and the Strategic Air Command.

But always Sir Lloyd kept an eye on me, and although he was very powerful and influential, and *The Advertiser* was very conservative, and of course there was *The News* bubbling away with Rupert leading the charge ——. So I had two kinds of experiences: one with a vibrant, thrusting, afternoon paper; one with a solid, conservative, morning paper. But somehow the changes were being rung, and it was the influence of Harry Plumridge – and of course later on they got brilliant young men like Des Colquhoun and Don Riddell and other people – but it was the fact that Harry Plumridge knew my feature writing and he decided to do things that hadn't been done on the paper before, and that was to send me out into the field, and had an enormous part of [effect on?] my life, and especially on my writing life, because suddenly out of the door out came the second stage, as a children's writer.

We'll certainly get onto that. But just in your writing, had that matured, had it changed during this period? How did you see it changing? Another little question allied to that, were you a writer or a poet, or did you make a distinction in your mind or not?

No. I'd written verse ever since I was a child and I had a facility for it, you know, I loved rhyme and rhythm. I remember my old grandfather saying, 'Everything's got a rhythm, the seasons have, life has, farming has,' and I suppose the rhythms of life and sort of ——. And I read all the time, I read assiduously from when I was young, and I particularly liked the American short story writers and a great English writer called Saki HH Munro, who wrote wonderful short stories. And I was reading all the time, even in my busy time. And I think that it all fused together in some kind of way and fell into compartments in my mind. And my writing was maturing all the time; I was learning – because you make mistakes in journalism. And also, although newspapers were things to be forward-thrusting was a great thing, you're also under discipline because you're under the discipline, not only of edition times and things like that, but you're under the discipline of sub-editors and editors. And on *The Advertiser*, as on *The News*, and especially on *The Advertiser*, they were erudite men, you know, they knew their English literature and things like that. And you'd get hauled up and you'd get told things. But they were also people who focused me on the colour of life. I mean, they didn't like stories that were padded out with a lot of fancy things, but what they taught me was direct English, and that you can be as graphic with a verb as you can with an adjective. And so my writing was being honed all the time. And the

creative spirit was starting to bubble up, because – reverting just quickly as an anecdote to my wartime days – when I was stationed at Alice Springs out in a sort of cowshed, we lived on the little unit out the airport because there was a huge traffic going up to Darwin, the Japs were bombing it, this Chinese shop was run by people called the Lims who'd come down from Darwin and they became very famous Darwin people, Mayor of Darwin and everything else, one of them was killed in Cyclone Tracy, but they were interested and they used to patch my clothes up because I was hopeless with my Air Force things. And I wrote a poem about a Melbourne tram and going to see my girlfriend. And it wasn't a bad poem, and the *Women's Weekly* was a marvellous paper then and it brought out a whole page of soldiers' poems and this 'To a tram', it was called. And I was walking down the darkened street of Alice Springs and suddenly the whole Lim family disgorged themselves from their shop waving the *Women's Weekly* and saying, 'Hey, Max, you're in the *Women's Weekly*.' And that was my first notoriety as a poet.

But getting back to the writing, all the time I was on these marvellous assignments. I'd travel with the tea and sugar train. It was a continuation as a study of people that had started in the services and went on and on. And you can't – if you have a sense you want to write and you study people, and even though you're writing present-day stories, you're also writing, you're also getting the urge to do something beyond this, to be creative, to write stories. And because after all I'd been a short story writer – – –.

END OF TAPE 2 SIDE A: TAPE 2 SIDE B

– – – quite a bit of my humorous stuff, which was rather unusual, was Pat Oliphant's influence, he was now established and he wanted me over there very badly and so did they. But there again, it was the sense of one's own place, one's own surroundings, one's own activities. This country's big enough and varied enough in its coast, in its Outback, in its characters to satisfy any writer. And all the time I was writing about characters because I was interviewing them, and some characters there were, and this was tightening the country's hold on me, the place. And, although I did get my trip around the world and I did take Jean and I did pay *The Advertiser* back for her, but I also had strengthened and widened my whole spectrum, what I saw and what I observed, from this would come the second stage of my work.

Okay, I won't put you off any longer. Let's get to the second stage. I'll just put a date in there, though.

Yes.

I think your first book came out in 1966.

That's right.

Why did you – well, I guess you've half-answered why you had this creative urge and why you wanted to write – why write for children rather than, I don't know, novels like a Tom Clancy or something like that?

Well, I suppose that's what I – I liked children and I suppose I thought as a child. Because we've all got the child hidden away in us, because that's what we once were. And of course I loved things like *Wind in the willows* and Winnie-the-Pooh books, and as it happened my first book was published by Methuen in London, by a publisher that published them. It all came about in a very strange way. My wonderful editor, Harry Plumridge – I lost one of my best friends and I'd been working very hard and I was tired. And at that time the Chowilla Dam, they were going to build this great dam – thank God they didn't because it would have evaporated before it got anywhere – and he said, 'Look, go up.' He knew that I was not far off breaking point, it was the nearest I came in newspapers. He said, 'I want you to go up, do a story on the Murray. And Spen Ogilvy,' who became a great friend and who's got a dedication in *The river kings*, my first book. 'I want you to go with him.' And Spen was an accountant but he was also our correspondent. He had a little boat called the *Waterhen*. 'I want you to go with him from Renmark to Mildura, where they're going to build the Chowilla and I want you to observe what happens on the banks, what kind of people are there and things you see.' And so Spen and I set off in this little boat. And one night we were anchored by the shore and I was feeling pretty low and depressed – you know, depression's a big thing they talk about – and the moon came up over the river, over the cliffs, and it shone right down the river and you got this sort of golden pathway, and the great gums and all the mystery. It was just as if a great hand had lifted this depression off me. It was quite remarkable. I suppose you'd call it a 'spiritual experience', but from then on I felt all right. And this became sort of in my mind, and I duly wrote the story. There are some wonderful stories on the river about people and the river boats. A lot of them have

been refurbished and rebuilt and they are back on the river again, the ones that I saw, high and dry on the bank.

But on that trip to America – this was on the first trip where I went to Kennedy’s last press conference and saw his body come into the airport out of Dallas – before I went there, I went down to the Mississippi. Well, I went to New Orleans, which is a Mississippi city, it’s on the great Algiers bend. And it’s a river city. And the Americans knew I was interested in rivers and they came and interviewed me, and they ran a headline: ‘River lover in New Orleans’, which amused me a bit. But the American State Department invited me, they took me to a luncheon in the British Consul, and they sat me next to one of the Mississippi’s historians. I don’t know his name but he’d written a lot of books. And we talked rivers all the time. I told him of this experience I had on the Murray and he said, ‘Listen,’ this guy, he said, ‘Listen, Max.’ He said, ‘You don’t let an experience like this go to waste. I know my river and you know yours, you go back and write your book about it.’ And I did go back, and I wrote *The river kings*, which – I wrote it because a whole multitude of feelings came out from it. And as with your first book you have terrible trouble getting it published because I wasn’t known as a children’s writer. Cassell sat on it for ten months until I took it away from them; then Lionel Godfrey, who was then the Australasian manager for Longman’s, said, ‘Look, Max, it’s a marvellous book. I’ll publish it with my own money if nobody else takes it,’ he said. ‘But look, get an agent and see if you can’ And the first agent I got was Florence James, who with Dymphna Cusack wrote *Come in spinner*, and then she handed the book over to a very famous English publisher, Ursula Winant, who was the niece of Winant the ambassador, American ambassador to Britain. You remember Joseph Kennedy was the ambassador for a short time and he said Britain wouldn’t last more than a few weeks, which didn’t please the Brits, but Winant was a wonderful And Ursula did the rounds and just as I was going to give the book to Lionel Godfrey her telegram came from London that Methuen had accepted the book. It gave me a remarkable feeling because this book had come out of my feelings of a lost friend, the enormous effect the Murray had on me, and the urging of this remarkable man in America who knew about rivers and knew that rivers went beyond boundaries, the rivers of the world, well, they were in a class of their own because so much
..... Anyway, the interesting thing was about it, it was published in six countries, the

Americans published it, the Brits published it, published in Australia, the Danes published it in Copenhagen, the Swedes in Stockholm, and the communist state, because Poland was then communist, they published it too. And that book, later of course it was made into a mini-series, and even now, after this, people are starting to look at republishing it. But that was the doorstep to everything. And it just, I think because the fact of my childhood, the boy that's the hero had a lot of me in him because – and a lot of the characters were people I'd met or I'd drawn from far backgrounds or ones I met on the river, but it was enormously significant and that was how it began. And, strangely enough, my first six books were novels, all with Methuen, and two of them received awards, one was short-listed and two of them were made into mini-series. It didn't make me a millionaire, but anyway, to get a book published by a top publisher makes you feel like a millionaire even if you're not one.

In these books, the first one, were you writing for anyone? Were you writing for one of your own children or your – – –?

No, I was writing for myself. It just welled out of me. It must have been lying in wait, I suppose, after this experience on the river. But it really came out through such remarkable circumstances, and so many people contributed. I remember when I was writing the book one of my – I'd come down, they'd brought the *Marion* down to Mannum to restore her and I travelled on her, and this was a wonderful experience on a riverboat, you know. Billy Drage was the captain, great old river man. He did many other things, but it gave me the understanding of how to handle riverboats. And when I was finally writing the book Billy Drage, I'd take him to lunch and we'd be manoeuvring the various pieces of sugar lumps around the table to show, you know, now, if you were going here you'd keep over against the high bank because the shoals were on the other side.

The other remarkable thing about it was – I battered it out on an old typewriter because Jean had gone back to teaching then, the children were at school and she'd gone back to school. She was a wonderful teacher. She taught in every Elizabeth school for thirty years. And she was a tough, good teacher who cared about the kids. But it was very untidy, I thought I'd better get – – –. And wonderful Italian background neighbours, the Iacopetta who'd come from Calabria, their children and ours grew up together, Eleanora, who was seventeen, she was a very good typist and I

said to her, 'Eleanora, I've written a book, it's a mess. Would you type the manuscript out for me?' And Eleanora said, 'Yes, I will.' As she typed it out, she read it out to her parents in Italian and they loved it, they doubled up with laughter. And she brought the book back, she said, 'I think it's a nice book, and,' she said, 'my parents think it's wonderful.' I said, 'How do they know?' She said, 'Well, I read it to them in Italian.' And I said to Jean, 'Well, if Eleanora likes it and the Acapettas like it it might stand a chance somewhere.' So it stood a chance all right, it was a while in gestation but in the end it reached its goal and it's still there, I suppose.

You mentioned Jean there. Has Jean been a bit of a critic, has she helped formulate your writing style? Do you bounce ideas off her?

No. Well, I've read things to her, naturally. Where she's been a help, she has a fantastic knowledge of English. Her memories of poetry, they're only equalled by two other people I've met: one was Sir Paul Hasluck, who loved poetry and humour writing; and the other was Bill Scott, famous folklorist, author, goldmining, you name it, in Queensland, who's still alive. He, Colin Thiele and I are close friends. All of us are over eighty and pretty frail in one way and another. But Jean would read it and she particularly loved the poetry I wrote later, you know. But she was a wonderful, she knew just when I needed to go away and be with myself and she never disturbed me, she had the family bringing up, she did a lot of bringing up of her family, as wives do. But because of her love of literature and because she was a teacher and she loved English, but also she loved grammar, and I had grammar – not hammered into me but, you know, I'd had these wonderful teachers. And she was an enormous help in this way. And sometimes when you get stuck you need to go and read it to somebody, as you used the words, bouncing things off. And I did this quite often because I knew that she'd give me an intelligent and honest view, and she had a great feeling for character, she knew the classics backwards and she was an ideal helpmate, I can tell you.

With this new aspect to your life, you were still working with *The Advertiser*. How did you combine the two, or did you start changing your role at *The Advertiser*? You were literary editor for *The Advertiser* for a while.

Well, that came later, because it came – Shirley Stott Despoja had been the literary editor and a very brilliant one, too. She was a very feisty person and you can understand her being the mother of Natasha Stott Despoja. They came here

sometimes. I remember Natasha pottering around here as a five year-old, coming out to join me in breakfast – a very probing and questing five year-old, I can tell you she was. But Shirley had to go away and I stepped into the role as literary editor because, you know, my writing by this stage, I was already writing books and I'd received an award or two. And that opened up a new phase because I mightn't have been the best-educated and literate literary editor, but I had a feeling for books and I had a feeling for reviewers. I had some very famous ones like Dr Anne Summers, who wrote *Damned whores and God's police*, which was a milestone in books about women and she became a great feminist. She and I had a few disagreements, but I worked on the principle that my reviewers were experts in their field and I emphasised that, while I wanted to use to the full their expertise and background, I didn't want too much strutting in their reviews. I wanted them – which they did very well – to keep their eye on the ball. And this they did.

What I loved about the literary editor part of it was that, being a writer myself now because my books were starting to come out, this came before the great publicity drives now. I mean, when you get a modern contract you've got all the things laid out about what you've got to do for publicity and everything else, but very often great writers came to town without much fanfare, like PD James, great mystery writer, who walked, a very commanding woman, walked into my little poky office at *The Advertiser* one day with my sprawling files, seated herself in the chair and introduced herself because I knew of her. And I made her a cup of *Advertiser* tea which was appalling, which she survived. And she was then a senior administrator in a hospital organisation, she was also nursing a very sick husband. And what she told me about life and about writing was a great spur to me.

And another great spur, which was in London, was a woman called Ursula Torday who wrote forty novels for Hodder and Stoughton. She was totally crippled, she was in callipers. And when – my daughter and I were told by she was coming out, would we look after her – and when we met her she was this little woman encased in these callipers and we were horrified. She said, 'Don't worry about me; I will handle everything.' And we took her around everywhere and she wrote a book about Australia afterwards, a novel. She had taught Jewish boys who'd come out from concentration camps after the War, and she was a remarkable woman. And she was someone else who influenced my writing life, that you keep your eye on the main

course of your inspiration and feelings, and also this was the great effect my agent, Ursula Winant, had on me.

And also my marvellous publisher, to whom I'll come back a bit later, Olive Jones.

But being a literary editor was – I didn't read all the books myself; I couldn't. But I had very good historians – Brian Dickey was one, from Flinders; Roger Hainsworth was another one, from Adelaide – and I had – – –. And they all knew that (laughs) I was probably the least erudite of the lot, but they delivered the goods. And the publishers appreciated it because they knew we would 'give them a go', as the saying goes. And also I came to know Adelaide booksellers very well, and the Adelaide literary scene, and of course the inevitable, indefatigable and outspoken Max Harris, because our friendship always – – –. And when I went into Mary Martin's bookshop he would immediately come over. He presided there like a patriarch of letters, and of course he was highly controversial. And the British publishers didn't like him all that much because he shook them up no end, because we're very much under their rule then – I suppose we still are, to a degree – but Harris made sure that there was an independence about Australian writers and that Australians should be given a fair go and it was time we were. So all this interwove into my life as a literary editor. And again, it taught me an immense thing – – –.

And the *Advertiser* also ran a literary competition for the Festival [of Arts] which found a lot of books, I think about forty of the books we had were published. We had various judges and I was on the panel as a kind of watchdog for the paper, and we had many – we brought some of the judges in from interstate, but the two I remember were both local people, wonderful people, they taught me a lot: Professor Colin Horne, he was a professor at the Adelaide University; Dr Brian Elliott, who is reader. And they taught me so much – here again is the writing aspect – of what to look for and how to appreciate words and themes and plots. We discovered a lot of writers. we didn't know who they were because as far as – they were anonymous or we were given the manuscripts. We had preliminary readers, one of whom was a relative of mine, Rene Foster, who'd been head of the Adelaide Telephone Exchange but she became a very famous book reviewer. She knew Dame Mary Gilmore.

And at the same time I began to meet a lot of writers who became great friends. One was Dame Mary Durack Miller, who wrote *Kings in grass castles* and became a great friend. George Farwell, who wrote some wonderful books about the Outback,

about Tahiti and other places. Another one was a journalist, Robert Langdon, who became a great expert on the Pacific. He wrote *Tahiti, island of love*, which is the best book on Tahiti I've ever read – in fact, I remember him staying out here when he was quarrelling with Cassell's over the contract, and he walking up and down our garden, which is a bit of a ruin now, and I was trying to persuade him not to say no to this 'Because,' I said, 'you've written a great book. Don't get too involved in quarrels with them because Cassell's are a great publisher.' And this had an effect on him. And later on he became the *Pacific Island Monthly's* editor, which was a famous magazine about the islands. He wrote another wonderful book called *The lost caravel*, which was about the Spanish exploration. And he later went to the ANU⁹ – I think he became a keeper of charts and some kind of – – –. And the interesting thing about it is that the Spaniards actually made him a knight, a Spanish knight, so he could be called 'Don Roberto', because he spoke perfect Spanish, he'd been in Bolivia in the revolutions and things. I don't think he was in journalism there, he was something else. But these were some of the remarkable people, and something from all of them brushed off on me and gave me a feeling of, well, intensity that in the end – newspapers are wonderful; today's story is tomorrow's fish-and-chip wrapping. I didn't mind wrapping fish and chips, which I did like, but I did hope they'd read what I'd written before they wrapped them.

And the other experience to show, Collins was a great publisher then – it's been absorbed since – but Sir Billy Collins and his wife went to Africa to see the woman who wrote *Born free* which became one of Collins' greatest sellers and of course a great film. He came here, and I'd contributed a story to one of Collins' anthologies for children and I was surprised when I met him he'd read this story and recalled it, and we talked about it, and he gave me an insight into publishers. But the greatest insight I got was from my publishers at Methuen.

END OF TAPE 2 SIDE B: TAPE 3 SIDE A

This is Peter Donovan speaking with Max Fatchen – or, rather, having Max talk to me. This is tape number three, the date is the 24th August 2004.

Now, Max, you were going to tell me about your relationship with Methuen, I think, and the influence, the effect that they had on you and your writing.

⁹ ANU – Australian National University.

Yes. Well, when I received that telegram to say Methuen had taken it, *The river kings*, I felt tremendously excited because I loved *Wind in the willows*, which they'd published, and of course all the Christopher Robin books, and they were one of the most famous children's publishers in the business. And Olive Jones, the editor, I didn't meet her until she came out to the Festival here to do some talking. And Jean took her for a drive along the Murray, because *The river kings* was coming out, with two boys, one of whom, Chris Willis, became a top television personality, news editor. And she was very impressed by this. And when we went to London and I went in to see her once, I remember I had a very – they were in New Fetter Lane, around Fetter Lane, and this was around all the law courts, you know, it's 'Rumpole'¹⁰ country, where you see a lot of striped pants and interesting coats and superior people. And I remember one street, Fetter Lane, there was priority where you stood to get a taxi, everybody had to – – –. And one day I invaded somebody's territory in that a cab pulled up and I was about to get in it, and a very authoritarian legal person who could possibly be a judge said, 'We don't take other people's cabs in this street.' And he proceeded to get in with great dignity and I felt – – –. And so when I went to Olive and told her about this she said, 'For a start, your umbrella's in a terrible mess. Let me furl it properly for you.' So she furled my umbrella properly for me, and that was the way she – she furled my words, too, properly. And she left out a couple of chapters of *The river kings* because they slowed the action of it. And she had been, as a young woman, secretary to Walter de la Mere, the English poet, and she knew precisely what a story should contain for children. After all, she was publisher of one of the greatest children's publishing houses, and she knew that – – –. I was fairly raw material when I came to writing, but I could be worked over. And another thing was I was amenable. And we liked each other. All my editors, right through my whole career of children's writing, have been women, and they've been remarkable women and some of them top women in the profession. But we've always got on well because, as Jean says, 'When people know their brief it's always wise to listen to them, because that's what I tell children.' So I said, 'Yes, dear.' And anyhow you had to listen to Olive's brief because you got it straight. And we

¹⁰ Reference to Rumpole of the Bailey, an irascible barrister character created by English author John Mortimer.

became very close friends and I wrote – some of my best work, she really inspired it. In fact, I wrote a second book on the Murray, and I wrote another one called *The spirit wind*, which is probably the finest book I've written, which *The Times Educational Supplement*, *The Times Literary Supplement* said had undertones – it's a sea story – undertones of Melville and Rudyard Kipling, which rather made me lie down with a wet towel on my head.

But Olive decided that she would see that I got more knowledge about writing, so I went down to stay with her in her little cottage in Henfield. Those death watch beetles which were a terror in old cottages, the noise they made at night I thought the place would fall down on us. 'Oh, don't worry, that's the death watch beetles.' We went to see Walter de la Mere's daughter, who lived nearby. She was very upset because her lawn had little furrows running through it and I said, 'Are they treating the lawn with something?' And she said, 'No, that's the badgers. They come in after worms and they shuffle along with their noses.' But Olive took me walking along the English countryside, and being stout and out of condition, and she being a vigorous walker – as so many English women are, because they've got a beautiful country to walk through – so we walked up and I began to pant and pant, until we came to one of those outdoor seats the British have, they're wooden seats and they would stand a hurricane. We sat there, I remember this. We looked out on the South Downs and the valley below, there were little villages and little cottages with wisps of smoke rising from them, a little church spire. It was all, seemed to leap out to me out of pictures I'd seen. And Olive said, 'I want you to take in this landscape, because it's very old, it's been written about by people through the ages. And,' she said, 'you're a modern writer – you're a journalist, I know, and we'll have to break you of some of the bad habits,' she said, with a smile, 'but I want you to feel the wind on your face here coming from the Downs and from the Channel beyond, and to know that books are living things when you're creating them. And the purpose of a publisher and editor and a writer is to work in accord. It's your individuality and your imagination that is going to make the story. It's our guidance and our knowledge and understanding that's going to shape it in the right way. And we are publishers, we have to show a profit and we have to write books that sell.' And so we sat there. And I think we sat there for a couple of hours or more, it was getting a bit chilly and my exhaustion was slowly subsiding, but what she told me there on that windy

hillside, looking out on the South Downs, again imprinted itself on my mind as a writer, and I came to understand that writing is such a universal thing. Although each country has its literature, although each writer has their style, although each publisher has their ups and downs, it is indeed a great fraternity and one's so privileged to belong to it. And while this didn't detract from what I did, it certainly taught me a lot.

And she always edited all my books, even when she retired, and I remember Marilyn Malin who was her successor, who came out here to see us ---. Marilyn was terribly fond of *The river kings*, they all were. There was something about it -- well, I suppose there was, because when they made the mini-series, although the mini-series is very different to my two books on the Murray, they did keep to the type and they kept to the characters, and although in films -- they're episodic books in a way because they were glimpses of life, and in mini-series, as you know, you've got to have an ongoing, exciting plot. But I remember we took Marilyn to the Murray and she stood on the cliffs, and as if by signal or from the production director, suddenly a great flight of cormorants came along the river in a huge 'V', they stretched right across the river, and the river was calm and there was their reflection, and so you had this enormous flight of birds and beneath you had their reflections, and she said, 'I understand now why you write about rivers.'

So my association with Methuen continued for six books, and they were all quite different from each other. One book I wrote, called *Chase through the night*, was made into a mini-series, and it's interesting to note that one of the principal actors in it was Nicole Kidman. She was sixteen years old, she was a long-legged girl. It was set in the Outback about three bank robbers who take over a little town and they're confronted by a group of people there, including an old, blind Aboriginal man who has a sixth sense.

And it's interesting about this book, if I may sort of divert a little bit. I'd gone up to Normanton, the Gulf country, the Gulf of Carpentaria, to do a series of stories, and I stayed in Normanton and I interviewed people as they came in, and they said, 'You want to go and see old So-and-so, he's an old Aboriginal man, he's crippled up now, he was a stockman, but he's interesting.' So I went up to this little house in the evening, it was coming near the beginning of the wet season and you got those distant thunderstorms and the play of lightning in the distance, a sort of kind of edgy feeling,

and he *was* crippled. He sat there, he'd been a stockman and a rider. But he had a wonderful way of expressing himself. And he said, 'I loved riding,' he said, 'and I had these wonderful dogs with me,' he said. 'They're all gone now and I'm the only one left.' But he said, 'The bush and the land speaks to me.' And he said, 'You're a bit of a writing bloke and you want to think about this.' And he said, 'Sometimes I sit here at night with the thunder going on in the distance, and sometimes I'm back on my horse again. And I hear the old dogs running,' he said, 'and I see the moon coming up and shining in the billabongs,' he said. 'That's what I think, that's what keeps me going.' And it's a strange thing, it was another ten or twelve years before I came to write *Chase through the night*, but the man in it, Narli, was based on this old man. And I remembered – it kept hammering through my mind over the years his saying, 'Sometimes at night I'm riding my horse again and I can hear the old dogs running and I see the moon coming up and shining in the billabong.' And I suppose for a writer phrases and sentences are like a powder trail, they can ignite your enthusiasm and to writing the story. And that was a very – – –.

Aboriginal people, I might say, on the Methuen novels had a great effect on me, because *The spirit wind* is about an Aboriginal man and a young boy who jumps ship at Port Victoria from one of the square-riggers. And I, on another trip, was – – –. I'd gone up to Arnhem Land with the Army and Navy to do some stories. They were re-surveying the coast, and I was in a frigate called the *Gascoyne* – here is another example of how the sea has influenced my life and my poetry – and we rode along and we were following the charts of Matthew Flinders. In fact, the Navy said he was such a brilliant navigator in many areas the place hadn't been re-surveyed since he'd been there. And here again was this mystery of landscape that's affected my whole life. You know, up there are mysterious islands. And we went out in an open boat, a jolly-boat, not the kind of boat you want to use up there – I remember we went to pick up Army surveyors from one island and we nearly capsized in one of the treacherous currents there. And I had this terrible boil on my bottom, which amused the sailors for some reason or another – we got on very well together – and they said, 'Sit on the gunwale, Max, and we'll use you as the navigation light.' And they thought we'd been lost at sea because the wave had dampened our radio set and it took them a while to get it back, and we finally contacted them as we were coming in. They said, 'Oh, you're safe,' because they had to send out the Air Sea Rescue. And

they said, ‘Max has got a terrible boil.’ And as I climbed up this awful ladder, Jacob’s ladder, there was this surgeon greeting me at the top with his scalpel in his hand saying, ‘Anyone for the Lancers?’ But that’s a side thing. But that was part of it. But why I’m telling you this story, I flew with a helicopter pilot 150 miles over Arnhem Land. We landed one night on a strip by an Aboriginal settlement, and that evening one of the Aboriginal men who spoke – he was a very good, fluent, imaginative person – came down, and he and I talked half the night, and he said, ‘I’m the song man, and I tell people why grass grows and why the stars shine and why the fish come, and,’ he said, ‘this is all in our mythology.’ And there in the Arnhem Land night, you know, with the stars out and the silent helicopter there, the pilot sleeping beside it, and this marvellous man, and it had such an effect on me when I wrote *The spirit wind*, and its principal character, one of its principal characters, is an Aboriginal man. It was this man’s marvellous magnetism that had transmitted to me and I was able to put it in the book, and that’s why I think that the London reviewers, like the *Times Literary Supplement* – which doesn’t spare the whip on authors, I can tell you – were so impressed by it.

So these were the kinds of impressions that came to me in writing. And it was such a – it made such an impact on me.

I feel another question possibly just destroys that bit of magic you’ve just woven, getting back to a different level, I guess. How did you treat with the publishers? You’ve said Methuen published six of your books. How does a shy, country lad, who’s come from a local little newspaper, treat with these multi-national publishing companies.

Well, I’ve been lucky enough to have some of the best agents in the English-speaking world, that’s how I did it. Because Ursula Winant handled my books, and she had people like Beryl Bainbridge and some very great writers on her list. I felt very humbled to be accepted by her. But she could see in my work – and she was the spearhead, always. And when she died, sadly, another – my present agents, John Johnson, took over, and they recently won an award for the best small agency in Britain. And the secret was I had magnificent agents, who were literary agents of the highest order, they knew what – – –. In fact, when Margaret Hewson, who was one of the partners, who sadly died, when she died she had major obituaries in all the top British newspapers. So I was very lucky, I was able to be ‘gathered in’ by people who knew the business backwards, and they did all the – – –. They took a liking to

me for some reason or other, perhaps because, you know, I had a big appetite and I was a fairly good boy, and although I stood on my dignity they knew, good agents know, not only do they know how to treat with publishers – and Margaret Hewson was brilliant at it, and when she said, ‘It’s Margaret Hewson here, dear,’ every publisher’s ears pricked up like an Alsatian, ready for the onslaught. But they were marvellous people, they knew so much about everything. And of course how lucky was I to have this, because they were the people who went out and fought the battles, and they were the people who found the European publishers too, because I’ve been published, as I said, in Polish, Danish, Swedish and German, because they made *Chase through the night*, as I said, into a film, and a good one; and the main German networks took it and one of the top German publishers published the book. And they used pictures from the actual film. So I was lucky that I had great agents and these were the intermediaries, and they still are, as a matter of fact. So this was – – –.

And of course they read my contracts, which got more and more complicated, you know. Publishers cover every bolthole and wait with a shotgun if the author gets a bit – – –. But with my agents I sometimes feel that they didn’t have so much the shotgun, but they had what I’d call ‘friendly persuasion’, which is like being a pirate and suddenly a British frigate comes round the headland with its guns rolling out, and Captain Hornblower in charge. So that was the great thing. And they knew their markets, and I knew what I had to write, and so that was a great advantage.

And there was a great learning curve, if I may use that old expression, because they were so sound in their advice, and it was wonderful when you’d written a book, it’s the apprehension: it doesn’t matter how great an author you are or how experienced you are, it’s your next book, it’s the new manuscript, that you’re going in to bat again on a wicket. You don’t quite know whether it’s going to turn or not. And so therefore the first test is to send it to your agents, and they’ve got this inherent instinct, and then it goes to the publishers. You wait for that letter that comes, and especially the one that came for *The spirit wind* because they were over the moon about this. It was runner-up for Children’s Book of the Year, and I think it earned me about – this was back in ’73 – I think it earned me about 700 dollars then, that wasn’t a bad fee, quite apart from, you know, it ran into three hardback editions and two paperback. I’m not a millionaire, but I think I am as far as the feeling of achieving

something and making characters live that's come out of a farm boy's mind with some help from a lot of people along the way.

When did you stop working regular hours at *The Advertiser*?

Well, I worked up until my actual retirement in 1984. So I wrote all my books while I was – all my novels – while I was working. And the next stage came about quite accidentally, that Penguin's top director of children's publishing came out to Australia. He was a man, I'm just trying to think of his name. And he was a great friend of Ursula Winant. And sadly he died of a brain tumour, he was a lovely man. And Ursula said, 'Patrick's' – was his name Patrick? – 'he's coming and would so love you to take him up to the Murray,' because the Murray by this time had got a big hold on my people in London. They knew it was my religious shrine, you know? So we took him up to the Murray. And I'd written two or three poems and I showed Patrick one. The first one I wrote was about our poodle, taking it for a walk, and this poem's been anthologised out of its mind. Patrick had a look at it, he said, 'What do you feel about trying a book of verse for us?' He said, 'What we'll do, you'll write a dozen and if we think it's got promise you can keep going.' So I did that and what I did, I would send over a rack of poems and they'd say, 'Yes', 'No', 'Maybe'. And they used to play jokes on me and mark six out of ten, you know, which amused Jean hugely, being a teacher. But they knew that I had a skill at it, because I guess I have – I've written twenty-two books now, a lot of them have been poetry books – and finally I finished it, and they said, 'What are you going to call it?' And I thought about it, we had this lovely-looking white poodle and I'd written this first poem that had ignited this. And I said, 'I'm going to call it *Songs for my dog*.' And they said, 'That's a brilliant title, because the British see the word "dogs" – – –.' And of course it got tremendous reviews, this book did, everywhere. Everywhere. Everybody reviewed it – I mean, books of poetry.

And then I wrote a sequel called *Wry rhymes for troublesome times*. And the anthologists have never left them alone. With anthologies, if you go into one anthology you're likely later on another anthologist sees the poem in this anthology and thinks, 'I'll have that for mine,' so you get a kind of domino effect.

And then – I was still – no, I'd left; 1984 I retired from *The Advertiser* – and for a while I retired from writing for them, but of course the story is I went back and have

been writing for them ever since. But I began to – the next poetry book I did, because there was a wonderful local publisher called Omnibus, and Jane Covernton and Sue Williams, they established it, and they began to publish these marvellous children's books and anthologies. And they did it so well that in the end they linked up with Penguin to publish them, some of them – Puffin, of course, which is a great children's imprint. Omnibus is still going, they're now owned by Scholastic, and I'm still writing for them. So I wrote this book called *A paddock of poems*, and it's really got some of my best verse in it. It's very Australian, and it was the first book of its kind to be an Honour Book, which is one of the awards from the Children's Book Council, because poetry hadn't made it before. So that was a great stepping-stone. And it's interesting about this, that the Americans took it. It didn't do well in America but the critics loved it, and it was published by a great – the great Little Brown, the great Boston publishers.

And then Ray Martin heard about it and he was conducting his very famous midday program for Channel Nine, and he decided he'd have me on his program, you see. I'd never been on television before, and Penguin and Omnibus were over the moon because you know what television can do. So Jean and I were flown – – –.

END OF TAPE 3 SIDE A: TAPE 3 SIDE B

'– – – so you can see Sydney.' This is, you know, a poet thinking about a golden harvest, you see. Out came the vouchers for a taxi. There were a handful of them. Jean and I spent all day going everywhere. We must have cost Channel Nine a fortune. Anyway, we duly went on the Ray Martin show and it was a huge hit, really was. He loved the poetry, he kept quoting it right through. Jean was in the audience and so there she was – – –. Well, of course, the book had already won an award so it went into and sold forty thousand or something, which for poetry is a roaring bestseller. And from then on I really began to write poetry for children.

And the thing about it was that – I mean, I didn't have a roaring bestseller again, but was pretty successful. A British anthologist – he's at Oxford University Press, its top anthologist – John Foster saw my work and began to put it into anthologies. And so this spread right across the British publishing world, all the other publishers used my stuff in their anthologies. And I think John used me in twenty to twenty-five Oxford University anthologies for children's poetry. And it's still being

anthologised. The Americans began to pick it up – because my books, *The river kings* was published in America by St Martin’s Press, who liked it immensely, but it just didn’t ‘go’ there – but the Americans began to pick it up. And there was an American publisher in Detroit who did special books on what they considered notable world authors and they asked me to write an essay for it, because this was a huge step forward. But the anthologies – and my agents were delighted because (laughs) poets didn’t earn much money – I mean, you know, poets, you don’t get too much out of poetry – but a nice little sum came. And of course I am a rhyme and rhythm man, it goes back to my grandfather’s advice that everything’s got a rhythm, including life, and I began to experiment in poetical form, and rhythm and this kind of thing; and as I was now retired – – –.

But then I began writing for *The Advertiser* again, first of all an occasional piece, and then some young editor said, ‘Why don’t you write a weekly piece?’ and so I began to write a weekly piece, and I’ve been writing – – –. And then finally, when I won the Walkley Award at seventy-six, which shook up the journalists’ world a bit to think an old greybeard – even though I didn’t have a beard – should achieve such a feat – – –. In fact, I received the first national award of the Primary English Teaching Association of Australia for writing poetry for children. But I found a great delight in it because I found that children liked it very much. And there was an incident recently where one of my great-granddaughters, one of our great-granddaughters in England – their twin mothers are Oxford graduates: one is a PhD and a world authority in HIV¹¹ and women and children; the other’s a solicitor with the Queen’s lawyers¹²; so their mums are pretty smart – but at her pre-school, or at her kindergarten or early school, they read out a poem and she stood proudly and said, ‘Max Fatchen is my great-grandfather,’ and it was like winning an Oscar. So I found, again, my writing veered away from novels and probably today I couldn’t write one. And so I began writing poetry and it began appearing everywhere. And a lot of it was based, as my pieces in *The Advertiser* are, but it all came from that deep-seated retrospection of being an only child and being a thoughtful only child, going out, having his own thoughts and dreams and watching things that his father drew to his

¹¹ HIV – Human Immunodeficiency Virus.

¹² Queen’s Counsel.

attention or his mother did or his grandfathers did. And so there was a long thread of connection right through my life with that area, and particularly to my poetry because, with verse, you are – I like creating images, and this is what Ursula Winant saw very early: she said, ‘One day your books are going to be filmed,’ she said, ‘because you’re so visual in your writing.’ And this came from an expert, it didn’t come from me. But I love creating pictures with words, and of course your mind is a picture gallery, and when you’re writing a book or something you walk down the picture gallery and you see the picture you want and you stand there and create it again. And that’s so with verse. Only the other day I had a letter from Pan Macmillan – I know they’ve used some of my poetry, but they are a very powerful group – asking me to submit stuff, and here I am at eighty-four and they’re still asking me to submit it. But it’s the love of it.

How much time do you spend writing at the moment?

I would spend probably five or six hours, at different kind of intervals because, as you know, Jean and I are both rather handicapped and she understands, you know, and we still support each other. And anybody tell you age is going to – well, perhaps people haven’t been as fortunate as we have, but age is, if you’ve got a reasonable command of your senses and mind, age is not an impediment – of course you’ve got to have the markets and the people – but the thing that fortifies you right through your career is your passion. You’ve got to have the passion. And I always told my young journalist friends and writing friends and anybody else, and I’ve helped a lot – and I was recently made the first honorary member of the South Australian Writers’ Centre because I’ve helped a lot of people – because I want to, because I want them to know how wonderful it is, but it’s also frustrating, it’s also challenging, you’re going to have a lot of disappointments, but if you’ve got the passion and you’ve got the flair you never know where it will go. And that’s why age is merely a compilation of experience. And if the passion’s still there, and as my doctor says, ‘It’s a great therapy.’ And I’ve got a wonderful doctor, young doctor, who doesn’t mind having a dig at me and I don’t mind having one at him occasionally. But this is the important thing about writing that pervades your life, that you’ve got to have the passion there.

You've had three children. None of them have followed you into the world of writing, other than possibly Tim with a PhD.

Yes. Well, no, they haven't. But the thing about them all is that they are very good at expressing themselves. They write lovely English, you know, and they speak well, they're very good at expressing themselves. And Michael, of course, is one of P&O's senior captains. He can express himself very well – I've heard him on the bridge when somebody hasn't been quite 'up to speed': he can express himself very well. But they've gone their way. And Jean's always encouraged individuality in our children. And I might say they've all got a marvellous sense of humour, they really have got a good sense of humour, and I suppose I'm an alleged humorist – I put the 'alleged' in there to be careful. But I remember Michael took us on a trip on the *Pacific Sky* and we were in Hobart and we were meeting one of Jean's great friends, and the place is swarming with Americans too – she's a big ship, she's forty-four thousand tonnes – and suddenly this booming voice came from the bridge to this friend whose children have grown up with us, saying, 'Ruby May, what are you doing talking to those disreputable South Australians?' Of course, it was Michael on the bridge. The Americans were aghast, you know, they were really aghast.

And one interesting thing about this trip, which is tied up with my poetry and writing, one of the Americans aboard was a great American band leader called Les Brown of the Band of Renown¹³, who wrote, with his arranger, *Sentimental Journey*, which has been very famous, and he was still – he died later – he was still conducting, his band is still in existence. He took a great liking to me and *vice versa*, and I wrote a poem for him about what his music has done. And when they gave him a big function in Hollywood and they brought out a special volume to which four American presidents contributed – because he was Bob Hope's musical director for fifty years – they made the centrepiece this poem that I'd written for him. And so he wrote a waltz for Jean and I and he faxed it from Hollywood, and when he came around again with his wife on another trip he sat in the lounge on this beautiful liner on a grand piano and he played our waltz, and I thought that was a wonderful piece. He died soon afterwards. He was a wonderful American because he headed a lot of

¹³ The band's formal name was 'Les Brown and his Band of Renown', and currently performs as 'Les Brown's Band of Renown'.

those charitable and helping organisations that helped musicians and writers and film stars and everything because, as you know, it's a cruel industry and people can destroy themselves and he knew it. He was a remarkable man. And it's characters like this that you meet along the path of your experience, and it makes such an impression on you.

You're a world-renowned writer, you live in this little 1950s place in Jane Street in Smithfield. Why are you now not up in Burnside or in the eastern suburbs, in the tiers?

Well, people have asked me this, and I've said to them, 'Why should I leave?' This is my place. I can look out on the plains where I grew up, even though it's been covered with houses. The Angle Vale School is still there – it's now three or four hundred children, it was thirty-four in my day. They named their beautiful new resource centre after me, and they named a street after me, too: 'Max Fatchen Drive' – and there are a lot of very beautiful homes in it, I couldn't afford the garage on them. But the important thing is this is my place and I belong here. I know in some of the suburbs we've got people who do naughty things, but then of course the world's full of naughty people [when] we look at it. But I like to stand on my verandah and, although the view's been somewhat obliterated by the houses, I know out there are the plains where I once ploughed and where I wandered as a child. And old though I may be, and I've been around the world and I've seen things like the last press conference of Kennedy, I've covered the atomic bomb at Maralinga, I've seen rockets fired and I've been on great ships, there is still down inside of me the feeling of belonging and of the boy who came to the plains and the little Methodist community which, in its way, was a very powerful force in my life – and my parents and my wife and my wife, they're all, although most of them are far away. And there are my books, and everywhere people, children, somewhere are reading something I wrote. And I've got a lot of awards. But the ultimate reward is to satisfy your calling and to maintain the passion or, as Gough Whitlam once said, to 'maintain the rage,' but maintain the passion and that's what I do, and I guess hopefully I will until I do quit the planet.

And it has been a great privilege because it's the people I've met, so many wonderful people. I mean, I can tell you about rascals and disasters and things like that, but I can also tell you about great human exercises like fighting the Murray

floods that I saw the towns do. Great people I've travelled with – I knew Bradman and Jack Fingleton, and Jack Fingleton was a beautiful writer. I had an opportunity of going to Britain as a guest of the government there, but I also had the opportunity to sit with the song man up in Arnhem Land and the old, crippled stock rider. And all these things amalgamate into a wonderful life and something that, through writing, you share with other people so that not only do you want to make a living out of it but you want to make a ripple that fetches up on some distant shore that you don't know about that has an influence.

I might leave it there, Max: that's a perfect way to finish, I think. So thank you for that.

Is that all right?

I think it's marvellous.

Oh, well, that's because I've got a good tutor here.

There's that old blarney coming out again.

(laughs) Yes. And the other thing is that – how much have we got on tape then?

END OF INTERVIEW.