



INTERVIEW WITH Dr ROBERT (BOB) STORY

(Founding Committee Member 1960; NPA President 1963/64; Life Member 1984)

FIONA:- This is a National Parks Association of the ACT interview with Dr Robert Story, one of the founding members of the Association in 1960. This interview is on Tuesday the 30 July 1996 in the home of Robert (Bob) Story and his wife Sybil, also a founding member.

Robert, first a few details of your early life. Where were you born?

BOB:- South Africa, a rather remote farm near Fort Beaufort, Eastern Cape.

FIONA:- When was that?

BOB:- 1913.

FIONA:- Your early schooling then, if it was a remote place?

BOB:- Early schooling was very informal, by my mum mostly and any aunts and uncles that would drop into the house. After that very informal schooling that I spoke of, I attended a school at our neighbour's place with a governess in charge and five or six children.

FIONA:- In that environment, do you have any special memories of that environment that you grew up in?

BOB:- My word, stacks of them.

FIONA:- Such as?

BOB:- Farming amongst the ostriches. My dad was a manager of a farm where I attended the governess's school. He was a general farmer who had studied at Edinburgh University and had a Diploma in Agriculture. His speciality was agriculture of course, and the main crop was oranges, naval oranges. I think he was the first one to bring them into that area. Percy Fitzpatrick had them near Port Elizabeth a bit before that, but he [*my father*] was the first one to bring them into the Fort Beaufort district. The farming was thereafter diversified. Ostriches were the rage then, their feathers were used in women's hats and such like things and we had quite a flock of them. Is that all you want to know about the ostriches?

FIONA:- Yes, I was just wondering were there other wild animals around? Were there lions or anything like that?

BOB:- No, they had gone long, long ago. The only traces of them, the only trace I can remember, was a huge block of stone on one of our neighbour's farms that had been worn smooth, probably by the elephants, because it was very high up. They used to scratch against this rock and the stone smoothed in consequence. But that, I think, was the only trace of big game that we had. There were others, Kudu, and a few wild dogs when I was a child. I don't mean ordinary dogs gone wild, I mean the real hunting dog, the Cape hunting dog (*Lycaon pictus*), buffalo and elephants fairly close by at Knysna and at Port Elizabeth, about 150 miles away.

FIONA:- Were there native South African people living in your area, farming themselves, black people?

BOB:- No, not around there. The nearest place that they had their own territory in was Ciskei, about 150 miles away. There were plenty of natives, but they were servants on the farms.

FIONA:- Was there ever any talk about how the environment had been changed or was that just ignored?

BOB:- That was ignored.



FIONA:- After that, your early years, your higher education, could you just speak about that?

BOB:- I was sent off to boarding school when I was 11-12 years old. My dad had died then and my mother was on the farm alone. She had her brother with her later on and I was sent off to boarding school and spent 1926-1930 at a government school in Port Elizabeth, Grey High School.

FIONA:- Then you went on to university?

BOB:- University in Grahamstown about 80 miles away. That was Rhodes University College then, a constituent college of the University of South Africa. It was one of the colleges but since then it has got its own charter. I don't think there are any university colleges left.

FIONA:- You majored in what at university, what was your course?

BOB:- Zoology and Botany. Biology you'd call it I suppose.

FIONA:- You had to pay to go to that University?

BOB:- Pay, yes indeed. By today's standards, it was very cheap. I got a scholarship at school on my results in matric.

FIONA:- Your first job then?

BOB:- After graduating at Rhodes, I had another two years study at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, under the Professor of Botany, Phillips. From there I got my first job in the Union Government Agricultural Service as a pasture research officer. That was in Vereeniging which is quite a famous place. I don't suppose you have heard of it. Peace between the Boers and the English was signed in Vereeniging. So that's where I went to do my work, that's where the pasture research station was and I was stationed there.

FIONA:- You were working in the environment, but were you distressed or concerned about the changes that European occupation had made?

BOB:- Very much so. World-wide too, I could see it sticking out a mile. I was asked to give a talk at the Albany Museum once. Field botany I'd call it but it was environmental mostly.

FIONA:- This was before the war? Before the Second World War?

BOB:- Before the Second World War, yes. I remember speaking then and saying, "Unless we either keep our population under control and limited we are committing suicide just as sure as the sun is going to rise tomorrow". I have never altered that opinion.

FIONA:- You are a visionary and no one's listened to you. Your early career was interrupted by the war, so how many years were you in the army?

BOB:- Four miserable years, I think it was.

FIONA:- And you were mainly in Europe during that time?

BOB:- In Europe no, first in Madagascar and the Madagascar campaign was quite quickly over, then into Egypt and the Middle East, and then into Italy. We landed at the southern tip and worked our way right up to the north.

FIONA:- When you, Sybil and the girls migrated from South Africa, Bob, what were the first impressions of the Australian environment that you had?

BOB:- Greyness, looking out of the plane the vivid green of Africa was gone. It was the greyness which was very, very striking indeed.

FIONA:- You came to a job in the CSIRO, is that correct? And what division and what work was that?

BOB:- Division of Land Research and it was survey work in company with geologists and geomorphologists (same discipline really), and a soils man. I was the botanist or the ecologist rather.



FIONA:- You worked out of Canberra in the Northern Territory and what other places in Australia?

BOB:- First in the Hunter Valley which is vastly changed now from what it was, of course. It's one of those "developed", areas. From there up to Queensland and up to the Northern Territory in separate surveys. I think there were about six all told.

FIONA:- You were alarmed at the way the environment was being abused? I am putting words in your mouth there.

BOB:- I was shocked. I remember particularly the first time I went up to the Hunter Valley, passing somewhere near Lake George and seeing the eucalypt trees that had been cut down and just left there; I was horrified. I saw that time and time again in the Hunter Valley, trees just felled and left. It seemed such a wicked waste.

FIONA:- You had an overseas appointment also during that period, to South America. Whereabouts was that?

BOB:- Patagonia.

FIONA:- What was your brief there?

BOB:- It was to train by precept and example the people in the Argentine Civil Service who had the same sort of job as I did, that is, surveying in broad terms the vegetation and writing a report. It was a little bit of a disaster actually. My counterpart, I think they call them, and I didn't see eye to eye and it was a real disaster. We could not get on.

FIONA:- Did you feel that your efforts were wasted?

BOB:- Yes I did.

FIONA:- That's a shame, but you did see the country and I suppose your ideas about population control were

BOB:- Augmented, yes indeed they were.

[The following paragraph does not come from the recorded tapes but has been left in from the original transcript notes. It seems to have been added to the transcript later, probably by Bob.]

Well no, they were strengthened. It is such a huge country that the thought of conservation seems silly to those on the land, in the same way that a six-year-old child would think it silly that human beings could ever make any impression on the fish stocks in the sea. There are national parks, and good ones too, but they are concerned far more with scenery and recreation than with vegetation or fauna. Why provide fodder for the government mules when all you need do after the day's work is turn them loose in the national park. Why protect cougars, which are vermin. Why endure the cold of a Patagonian winter when the Antarctic beech trees are in myriads on the southern mountains and, root and branch, can provide fuel.

[Tape continues] However remote, and that is a remote area, way down south, the destruction was there. Not that it's deliberate but they had no idea; they would turn sheep into their paddocks, not really paddocks as they are huge areas, they were measured in terms of square miles. They would just turn sheep in there and the wool is shorn but not even sorted. It is sold in a very rough form; that was then of course, thirty or twenty years ago.

FIONA:- About 1970 or 1969, you were in Patagonia about that time?

BOB:- Yes, I had a cousin in, I still have a cousin, in New Zealand who had been brought up on a sheep farm and he wrote over to me and said would there be any openings there for a wool classifier. I remember I wrote back and said they don't classify the wool, they just shear it off and that's it.

FIONA:- Did they spin it there and weave or was it sent away?

BOB:- It was sent away. I expect there would have been small mills somewhere but I never saw them.



FIONA:- Bob, how did you learn about the stirrings for an NPA in the ACT?

BOB:- I think it was meeting Max Day. I remember early on going to see him, being introduced to him in his office, and I think he made a mention of the idea then. It was anyway shortly after that with Alec Costin and a few other botanists and Nancy Burbidge, very much Nancy Burbidge, that the idea was discussed and thrown up for very informal discussion. We never had a formal meeting at all, until many months later when the feeling grew that it was about time we did, to push the idea of a national park for the national capital.

FIONA:- Were you and Sybil and the girls going out into the bush and bushwalking at that stage?

BOB:- Yes, very much so. Sybil was president of the Canberra Bushwalkers for a while and I and the girls, the young ladies, the young women, were constantly in the bush over weekends and long weekends especially. We did a lot of walking.

FIONA:- So what was it you liked especially about the Australian environment?

BOB:- I think you know as well as I do. The first long walk I did, I think, was with you and Alan Bagnall up to Mount Kelly. It was just the solitude, I think, that appealed immensely to me. You could get away from people which you never can do in Africa.

FIONA:- I remember that comment that you made and of course I did not realise having always lived in Australia, I didn't realise how beautiful we had it here. That solitude. Bob, you and Sybil and the girls lived in a very beautiful environment here in Deakin, near Red Hill. What especially appeals to you about it?

BOB:- The birds especially. The most striking thing for us was the wildlife in the hill just behind us or in front of us, whichever way you are looking, Red Hill anyway. To see the profusion of parrots, the most beautiful birds I have ever seen I think, well I know. The king parrot, they come around and the cockatoos and the small brown birds. The kangaroos. In what other capital city in the world would you ever find wildlife like the wildlife we have here?

FIONA:- I agree. You had a great deal to do with the national park proposal, but were you surprised at how long it took before the park became a reality?

BOB:- I think I have answered that one indirectly not in the least. I've been a civil servant all my life.

FIONA:- You were President of the NPA in the 1960s. Can you remember what were the important issues that were discussed during that time of your presidency?

BOB:- The main things were getting the idea of a national park generally accepted. That was done through the outings that the national parks people used to lay on. Then there was always somebody who would speak about the geology or the botany or the trees or the plants or the water insects even. There was always something laid on. In that way we spread the idea of the desirability of a national park for the national capital.

FIONA:- It was Mr Doug Anthony who was the Minister for the ACT at that stage. You had to present the proposal to him and have meetings with the Department. Do you remember any of that?

BOB:- Yes I do. I remember particularly the one where we met him, Doug Anthony that is, and tabled the report. There were various others (present) and they are rather dim in my memory about meeting various government officials. Speaking about what we were doing and the way we were going. Nancy Burbidge took a great part in that and Julie Henry.

FIONA:- You led many outings through all the years of your membership with NPA. Which ones do you remember best?

BOB:- It is embarrassing to have to repeat this, it was one where I lost the party and myself on the way down to Ginini Falls. Not permanently lost of course, I knew whereabouts we were in general, and that I would get them all back again but that's the one, since you will ask!



FIONA:- You also led walks for the bushwalkers and more than you did for NPA possibly. What are your observations about the NPA since you left the committee? What are your general thoughts on the National Parks Association?

BOB:- It is far more political than it was. We haven't the need, I think, now to propagandise the need for some reserve or national park, but we certainly have the need to put our ideas across to the public in the way of politics and getting the idea of the value of national parks across for their own sake and not for the sake simply of the money you can get out of them.

FIONA:- You and Sybil were very involved with the Bushwalkers. Sybil was President at one stage and you were President of the Kosciuszko Huts Association. Do you think they are as environmentally concerned as the NPA?

BOB:- Yes I do, I think, but in different ways. The Kosciuszko Huts Association are interested in the cultural aspect of the old huts; the Bushwalkers, I think, have more emphasis on the dangers of fire, campfires; while the National Parks Association is interested more in the overall desirability of national parks.

FIONA:- What are your thoughts about the environmental movement as a whole in Australia?

BOB:- Incredibly short-sighted. They run short of water and they build another dam. They run short of water again, they build another dam and that sort of thing. They just go on and on. I use the expression "forever climbing up the climbing wave".

FIONA:- The Wilderness Society, do you think it's using the right tactics to try and push the issues like the forests?

BOB:- I think so, but again incredibly short-sighted. They never mention the population and that is all it is, all it boils down to. Because otherwise the idea of conservation just is not compatible.

FIONA:- Thanks, Robert, for giving your time for this interview, it will be of great value to the NPA.

[For some reason the recorded tape then continues as follows.]

FIONA:-guidelines a bit more?

BOB:- Many fewer field outings now and almost none of them instructional, as they certainly used to be. Far more political. You have to know if you are President now, just what the various Ministers not only say but what they are thinking about and, more to the point, what the electorate is thinking about. You have to know what's on the go as far as timber cutting is concerned and what shouldn't be on the go, according to your own likes of course. I think that is about all I can say off hand.

FIONA:- Bob, walkers' treatment of the bush that they are walking and camping in has changed over the last 30 years, for instance the use of the campfire. What are your views about that?

BOB:- My views are that you have to cater for the idiot, there is always at least one idiot in the party, who will burn down a tree, quite accidentally of course, I don't doubt that, or a hut, or set alight the bush in some way. They just have to cater for that. But if you have a leader, a strong leader, I don't myself see any harm in picking up the wherewithal to make campfires. That is just a point of view of course.

FIONA:- Bob, finally I would like to ask you what are your thoughts about the environmental movement as a whole in Australia?

BOB:- I think "forever climbing up the climbing wave" says it all and battling to keep ahead and it is quite the impossible. Unless they look a bit further ahead than they are. But at the moment, just building more dams and opening more land and being more careful with your conservation doesn't mean a thing while the population is increasing as it is.

FIONA:- Thanks, Bob, for taking part in this interview and what you've had to say is of great value to the National Parks Association.