



INTERVIEW WITH BILL WATSON

(NPA President 1972-73)

Interview on 31 August 1996

REG:- Bill, regarding your early days, where and when were you born?

BILL:- I was born in Glen Innes in northern NSW in 1923.

REG:- Your memories of an early awareness of nature in your environment?

BILL:- I was a country boy in a country town and so we had lots of friends in the country, and in addition I was a boy scout. Boy scouts were very important and so I liked the country.

REG:- So you went camping and bushwalking in the Glen Innes area, the lovely New England area?

BILL:- I don't think I had much awareness of whether it was beautiful or not, it was just there. It taught me to swim and all sorts of things that boy scouts learned. It was very important to me.

REG:- Your schooling was in Glen Innes too?

BILL:- I went to Glen Innes High School and then to New England University College, Sydney University, back to New England for a Dip Ed and that's it.

REG:- Do you remember any environmental courses coming into your studies at any stage: primary, tertiary?

BILL:- I think that I can safely say no. I wasn't studying in the biological sciences at all. My major was physics; I majored in physics and mathematics. I was at University during the war and we were terribly dedicated and orientated to looking at the possibility that we might be able to contribute to that. We were all very patriotic. I was very conscious of the fact that I was in a very privileged position, as all my mates had gone off to the war. That is why I did physics of course, because if there was going to be a contribution to the war effort, it would be a technological one. So I was very strongly oriented towards physics and mathematics. The nearest thing going to environmental matters was I did one year of geology which I enjoyed very much, but that would be the nearest I came to being environmental. It just wasn't an issue in those days.

REG:- Your first job, your work?

BILL:- I first went teaching as a science teacher at Moree High School. I taught for two years and then from 1948 it is interesting in a way, thinking was so different in those days. The war had just ended. It had ended because an atomic bomb had been dropped on Japan. A phenomenon that everyone approved of, let's be clear about that. There was no questioning; there was no one, I think I can honestly say, questioning the rightness or wrongness of it. Everyone realised that it was touch and go as to whether that war was going to be won or not. So when I got physics honours, inevitably I was very interested in nuclear physics.

After I taught for two years at Moree I asked to be appointed to the city so that I could do a masters [*degree*]. The Department said, "No, you are already too well qualified for the job" and so I applied for a job outside the Department determined that I would be prepared to pay my bond. I became interested in going overseas and the first job I applied for was a job as a scientific officer at the Atomic Energy Establishment in England. They said, "Yes, we will give you a job as a scientific officer and we will pay your fare over". I was resigning from the Department at the end of my second year of teaching as I could see that I would be paid enough to be able to pay off my bond. Then about a month before that they [*Atomic Energy*] got in touch with me and said, "Look, we still want to employ you, but there have been restrictions on money and we couldn't



afford to pay your fare so you will have to make your own way to England". I had no money, teachers were not all that well paid and I was only a junior teacher, so I could see that I was not able to go.

I then started to apply for other jobs and it was about this time that the Long Range Weapons Establishment was being established at Woomera. We were all very aware of how we were technologically backward compared with Germany, which had made this vast progress in rocket technology and so there was a great push in Britain to make progress in rocket propulsion. I applied for this job because it was the patriotic thing to do at the time and it involved overseas travel. They said they would send me to the UK for twelve months for training. That was fine, I was still going to be able to travel overseas, so I applied for the job and got it. That's where my early experience was.

I worked in Defence Science then for 27 years. It was a very interesting period because it gave me a number of appointments overseas. I suppose some environmental awareness came into it when I had an appointment for three years to Washington DC. Inevitably we proceeded to explore a lot of the United States and we became very conscious, my wife and I, of the environmental problems which were being given a great deal of publicity in the United States. Frankly, our view was 'thank goodness we don't have these environmental problems in Australia'. We came back to Canberra and were shocked to find that, in fact, Australia did have environmental problems; there was air and water pollution and so on.

While we were in America, Edna, my wife, became very interested in native plants of America as we travelled around. She made a collection of native plants and again, when she came back to Australia, she realised that she knew nothing about our native plants. She started to do courses in plant identification of Australian natives in Canberra. This inevitably introduced us to the idea of walking.

REG:- This was in the 1970s?

BILL:- Yes. Really that was my first impact on any biology. My wife of course went on and studied and, you know, she eventually got a PhD in the field of botany and genetics. That was where really my first awareness came.

REG:- Your first involvement in environmental matters was when you came back to Canberra in the '70s. Your eyes had been opened in America. You joined the NPA, how did you hear about the NPA?

BILL:- I suppose it was because of the native plant person, Jim Webb, who used to give these courses on plant identification and we started to walk, and we joined the Society for Growing Australian Plants.

REG:- Jim Webb was the President in 1965, I think.

BILL:- Was he, he was still lecturing. We came back from America in 1969 and he was a great leader of walks and so on.

REG:- Your role in the Association?

BILL:- I then became interested in the walking. I really had never done any bushwalking apart from the early Boy Scout stuff. I started to talk to people like Olive Buckman who told me about her walking overseas and went home one day to Edna and said, "You know, we'll do a walk in Tasmania. I hear it's feasible". We started to talk to people about that and they said, "Why draw the line at Tasmania, why don't you go and walk in Nepal". We started to train in order to do trekking in Nepal. That is how it happened, at weekends we would walk with the NPA. The NPA was the right place for us to be because they weren't just walking for the sake of walking, but they were also looking at plants and so on.



REG:- *When did you become President?*

BILL:- 1973-74.

REG:- *Do you remember any special issues that arose during that time you were President?*

BILL:- The Association was largely oriented, at the beginning of the period anyhow, to national parks issues and the work that you and Nancy [Burbidge] and Julie Henry were doing on the subject of identifying a park for the ACT. There was a bit more to it than that in that I remember, they had a peripheral interest and kept a weather eye on the progress of the park in Kosciuszko. I remember going up with Julie to the Kosciuszko area and talking to farmers and so on who wanted to introduce grazing. I think there might have been grazing there. They were opposed to the idea of stopping grazing in the national park.

I think it did dribble on there, I think it finally ended in 1973 in that northern end.

I was involved as an observer to Julie's efforts and so on in spreading the gospel about not having grazing in national parks. During my time, of course, the National Parks Association did start to take interest in other things. For example, I remember being on the platform representing the NPA about the Black Mountain issue and the building of the tower there. The opposition to the tower was really headed, I think, more by the CSIRO people.

REG:- *Julie Henry appeared in court on NPA's behalf, she put a strong case against it.*

BILL:- Somehow or other I was involved, perhaps a bit later, because I remember being on that platform, and in addition I can remember other issues starting to rear their heads such as free-ways in the ACT. That freeway that went around by the lake. Now there was a lot of opposition from, I have forgotten his name, a younger man, and he was very interested in the problems of roads and we were dragged in by him, I think a little reluctantly, because it was really going beyond what we regarded as an issue that we should be facing.

REG:- *We had that unwritten rule that we only dealt with Namadgi, the getting of a National Park and Kosciuszko Park, but not to take on any urban issues, that was an unwritten law but often stated.*

BILL:- I think that it was changing because of the Black Mountain Tower which, again, was a sort of national park issue because here was this area of bushland, although it had once been denuded of trees through grazing but it re-established itself over a 50-year period with a lot of diversity. We were worried about it.

REG:- *Your last job here in Canberra, was that still with the Defence Department, during the time of the Whitlam era of Government?*

BILL:- I changed my job when I turned 50. Now I turned 50 in 1973 and around about this time I'd been in Defence Science for 27 years and there was an element of disillusionment about it all because of the Vietnam War. My work had involved me in America of course, cooperating with the Americans about the Vietnam War and I felt it was important. I felt I'd like to do something other than Defence Science before I retired. I turned 50 and I decided to transfer somewhere else. My work in the Defence Department had been really as a studies man, and I was in fact in charge of an organisation which did defence studies of various sorts. Cost effectiveness studies and so on.

I could see that there was a place for rigorous study of environmental issues, many of which could be given much more quantification than they were being given at the time. The new Environment Department had been set up and there was talk of establishing the Environment Protection Act involving hearings and so on. A friend of mine said, "Why don't you apply for a job as a hearings commissioner". I applied for this and accepted demotion and joined the Environment Department. I was initially an Environmental Hearings Commissioner which was a big change but I felt that the techniques were the same. It was a matter of collecting data and trying to make



sense of it. In fact I was chairman of the first environmental inquiry held under that Act which was a Radcliffe proposal in South Australia, and that was the first professional work I did in the environmental field. The other things that were going on shortly after that was the Fraser Island inquiry which was headed by another, John Hookey actually, and I was to head an inquiry into uranium mining. Around about this time there was a proposal floated that we should form a division within the Environment Department for systems studies of environmental issues. Because of my background, I applied for that job and became the divisional head of this new division. Then the Whitlam Government was kicked out and before I could really formulate the Division, the whole world changed.

REG:- The Fraser Government did not go ahead with those moves.

BILL:- The whole department was cut back. People don't realise what the Fraser Government said was, "We are going to cut the Public Service by 2%" and everyone said, "Hooray, hooray, hooray, we've got too many useless public servants anyhow". What he didn't say of course, was that he was going to cut those departments which the Whitlam Government had established by 25%, and so that was what happened. They cut back on all the new departments including the Environment Department and there were successive cutbacks. They formed Environment into Environment, Housing and Community Development, a new composite department and eventually I found myself without a division, without anyone in my division. It was no longer proposed that I head the uranium inquiry anymore in my job, it was my job to identify who should head it. I really had become a bureaucrat now instead of a hearings commissioner. That inquiry went ahead but under By this time it was obvious from the Fraser Island Inquiry that there were many legal issues involved in these inquiries. John Hookey was a legal man and he was coping with these, but they felt there would be more legal challenges in the case of uranium and so they got a legal man to handle it. I was involved in that process of choosing the people that would head it and we found some excellent people to head that inquiry. Shortly after that I became a division head without a division and I had to find another job. I then moved around into various jobs as a stray body.

It was terrible because the last thing that any of the new department heads wanted was a person with a "greenie" label. It was a very difficult time. Very disrupting. In fact, I ultimately took early retirement because I really found it so embarrassing.

REG:- So you went to Sydney then?

BILL:- I was given various jobs to do as fill-ins. They were very interesting. I was deputy to Covington for a while in the National Parks and Wildlife Service, and the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service. That went on for a year. I was invited to help form up the Special Broadcasting Service in Sydney and that was interesting. It was very early days. The chap that headed it was in fact a guy from commerce who knew nothing about the Public Service, and they wanted someone to be his deputy that understood the complexities of Public Service existence. So they asked me to go and do that for twelve months. I did it for about eighteen months and then came up to Canberra and did the National Parks job for a year. I was asked to go back to Sydney and so I went back to Sydney for eighteen months and I retired from Sydney, from the Special Broadcasting Service actually. They were the ethnic broadcasters of today. They existed as ethnic radio before they broadcast, before we branched out into multicultural television.

REG:- This was part of the ABC?

BILL:- No, it was a separate statutory body that was set up to cope with ethnic broadcasting, in both radio and television form. Out of that grew SBS as it is known today. It was interesting but again terribly controversial, because everyone was opposed to the establishment of ethnic television. The ABC didn't want it, the ethnics in radio didn't want it, the Treasury didn't want it. It was interesting, Fraser wanted it because he believed that ethnic people in Australia were disadvantaged. In many ways, compared with Liberals today, Fraser was a liberal. Galbally had held an



inquiry about the situation of ethnic Australians and he knew they were severely disadvantaged in the justice system in particular. He believed that something had to be done about this, and so he suggested many reforms which should be introduced and among them was the proposal to establish a new television channel. And that was Galbally's report. Fraser picked it up and said that this was a great idea. It would never have happened except for Fraser. I might say the Opposition were not in favour of it either because they thought it was a political move on the part of Fraser. It was very unfair, but he was determined that it should go ahead. This new channel was created.

It was interesting but tumultuous times, I might say, because this opposition kept demanding that there be inquiries into the effectiveness of it. Further inquiries continued on. In fact one of the major reasons why they invited me to SBS in the first place was: there was a plan for public consultations, an extension of the sort of thing that was in the Environmental Protection Act, to try and determine what the shape of ethnic television should be. I was invited to join SBS and I ought to be able to hear these public, hold these public consultations. In fact it soon became obvious that the Board of SBS really wanted Galbally himself to head these public consultations. So again, it was another set of public hearings that I didn't hold.

REG:- Have you followed the fortunes of the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service at all?

BILL:- I was very involved in them for that year but I really didn't follow it. I was in Sydney all the time and these things would not bring headlines. I must say by the time I left the Public Service I was exhausted by environmental issues, and it's like many things when you retire, I didn't want to pursue those interests any longer. I felt bruised by the whole process. Frankly, when the Fraser Government was doing all this dismantling, when all the environmental staff was being dismantled, there was no support for the department to survive from environmental groups, I might add, and it was very disillusioning.

REG:- I wonder why the ACF didn't speak out or Wilderness Societies?

BILL:- No and indeed, you should see what feeble statements they make today when these same bodies which were built up again are being dismantled. I think the statement was 'well there is a need for such organisations but of course the numbers can be reduced and so on'. I found this very disappointing. There was no one marching in the streets to say that these branches should survive. Why did it happen? It happened because our job in the environment department was to produce for government what I believe was a more balanced view than that that often comes from environmental voluntary groups. What one had to do was to produce some sort of balance in the arguments and advise government accordingly.

I think what happened in addition, while in my early days in the Environment Department, was that we needed to create stronger environment protection groups and so it was the early days when subsidies were provided to the various national parks and conservation groups; it had all been initiated. It made them stronger, but I think it also made them more one-eyed. It allowed them to be more vocal because a lot of the support that was provided was provided in two ways:

1. there were funds for environmental studies of various sorts; and
2. there were funds for administrative support to organisations such as NPA.

It introduced a whole new era, a different shape to national parks associations. They ceased to be bushwalking organisations and such things, and they became participants in the environmental debate. This was necessary because there had to be a balance to the proposals that were being put forward by industry as they were anti-environment, it interfered with their profits and so on. Then others had to be pro-environment. It's all part of the weakness of our adversarial system of government; somehow or other processes of consultation in our system do not lead to resolution of difficulties. It is a feature of our government, it's a feature of our justice system, it's a feature of our environmental issues, of our sociological problems and of our economic problems.



I think that perhaps groups like the Colong Committee have stepped forward and tried to consult with governments and look at issues on a broader plan than groups like our own NPA and.....

In a way it was a weakness of the Act, of the Environment Protection Act, it should not have been an Environment Protection Act, it should have been an Act which allowed for an airing of the whole subject of environmental, economic, sociological issues involved in the proposal and I think the terms of reference in retrospect should be broader.

REG:- Your life in Sydney, did you go out into the bush still, just for recreation purposes?

BILL:- Of course, walking has proved very important to me. I've walked overseas, Europe, Nepal and all came from my enthusiasm about walking in the National Parks Association of the ACT.

REG:- You no longer belong to an environmental group, you just sit and watch from the side-lines?

BILL:- Yes, that's right.

REG:- Are there any other things that you would like to mention that haven't come up?

BILL:- No, I think that is all. I did want to make the point that I think environmental groups have to somehow or other be more balanced. Of course industry has to be more balanced too, but I do think that industry has come a long way compared to what it did in the past. You take a group like Greenpeace and the whole issue surrounding, for example, nuclear tests in the Pacific; now I don't believe that they have got an adequate background and I don't believe they examine the issues in the broad. I don't think they try and understand what is the background as to why. It isn't unreasonable for France to have nuclear weapons if it is reasonable for Britain and America to have nuclear weapons. When countries like France have been invaded this century and nearly bombed out of existence, I think there has got to be a broader perspective, an understanding of these issues. It gets wrapped up in what it gathers up into its issue, things like whether Australia should be exporting uranium.

I think before people talk about such problems, they should go back to inquiries like the Fox Commission and re-read those findings. Review what has happened since then. How successful the environment has been protected in the Northern Territory with the mining of uranium and how the business of proliferation of nuclear weapons has to be tackled in some other way. It is a separate issue, particularly in this day where the alternative in the generation of energy is such things as burning coal which we know produces more CO₂. They are also opposed to burning of coal and the increase of CO₂ in the world, and I think there has to be a balance, they have to review the whole energy producing problem in the broader context. They have to see, I think, that ultimately nuclear energy will be the only option available to us in the long run and is now the only energy option available to countries like Japan and France. I think what I am saying is, you just can't review, you can't view many environmental problems in isolation, you really have to review them in a very broad way.