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Dr Gwenifer Wilson MD in interview with Dr Max Blythe
Sydney, 27 March 1996

MB Gwen, Dr Gwenifer Wilson, you were born in 1916, October 12th, at Broken Hill?

GW That's right.

MB So, fascinating parents. A father who was working quite hard. Both parents teachers?

GW Yes.

MB Tell me about them.

GW Well, my mother was South Australian – Ellen Violet Orchard. And my father was George Henry Bruce; he was New South Wales. Broken Hill, you see, is the border sort of. So she was working in Broken Hill, though she was a South Australian.

MB What kind of parents were they? Father I think was rather go-ahead?

GW Father was always writing theses and doing work, but he did a lot of fishing and tennis playing, and later on golfing as well.

MB And Mum taught, but was a quieter lady?

GW My mum, Mum couldn't teach once she married. You weren't allowed to teach once you were married. You had to resign.

MB So she was in the home with you. And you did quite curious things from a very early age, showed remarkable discriminating qualities choosing, choosing newspapers. Tell me … that was about the age of three I think?

GW That was the age of three.

MB You shocked everybody.

GW Yes, that's right! Well, aren't you going to tell people what I did?

MB No, you're going to tell me!

GW Oh, I see! Well, my father came home from the school and wanted the day's paper, and Mum told him it was out in the shed at the back, and so I said 'I'll go and get it.' So I went out and I came back with the paper, and they looked at each other,

and Dad said ‘It’s the right one.’ He said, ‘How did you know?’ I said ‘By the smell.’

MB There’s a different smell from a fresh paper?

GW And they both looked at each other as much as to say ‘Heavens above! What have we got here?’ Well, fresh newspapers do smell different from stale ones, you know.

MB Discriminating stuff actually, Gwen!

GW Yes.

MB Just thinking of those parents and the families that they originated from, were they both born in Australia? Were they migrants to Australia?

GW No they were not, but their parents were.

MB Right. Can you tell me about those two families?

GW Well, my father’s family of course migrated from Scotland. My great-grandmother and her husband migrated from Scotland. And mother’s, my mother’s father migrated from England.

MB So that was the Orchard side of the family? And the Bruce side?

GW Yes.

MB Did you feel a Scottish surge in you at any time, Gwen? Did you feel a Scottish…?

GW When I went to Scotland, yes!

MB Yes, it came back?

GW No! I … I never felt the Scottish surge, but we had a funny system when we lived in all the country towns we lived in as Dad did his theses and got promoted, and we went to yet another town!

MB You had a parade…

GW Five primary schools and three high schools!

MB …parade of schools!

GW Yes!

MB Just … can you take us through that parade? Because it would be quite interesting to take us through the towns though. A whistle-stop tour, almost!

GW Well, it was. We moved from Broken Hill to Maitland, where my sister was born. And then when she was about two we moved to Ulmarra on the north coast, because he'd done another thesis and become a headmaster instead of a first teacher(?). And then he did another thesis and was promoted to Wauchope, which was a bigger school than Ulmarra. And then there was a little trouble they needed somebody to soothe down at Moss Vale, so we moved from Wauchope to Moss Vale. And then we moved from Moss Vale to Richmond. And then we moved to Orange.

MB Yes. So it was quite a career!

GW And in Orange, he became an inspector of schools. So, by then both my sister and I were at university, and Mum moved to Sydney and he used to … he had country inspectorates for a while.

MB Right. So all his thesis writing had actually paid off…

GW Oh yes.

MB …he became a significant figure.

GW Oh yes.

MB Yes. What kind of a figure was he? I mean, I know that he was a hard-working figure, an enthusiastic teacher, but what was he like as a father?

GW I thought he was a very good father!

MB I mean in what way? Was he, was he a colleague? Did he take you to play sport and things?

GW Oh yes. Yes, indeed. Oh yes, he taught us both to swim and to fish and…

MB Oh, he encouraged you to read when mother didn't, as well?

GW That's right. Yes well, she told me reading was a waste of time.

MB That's a strange thing, isn't it?

GW And that's when he…

MB Why do you think she took that attitude? Because you'd be about six, were you, at the time?

GW Well, she wasn't interested in reading herself. She did a lot of beautiful sewing and embroidery, but she wasn't the slightest bit interested in reading, except all the political gossip in the newspapers. But otherwise she didn't read at all.

MB And not to you? So you were warned off a bit from reading. And Father, Father formed a kind of pact with you, and you…

GW Well … I think he wanted to encourage me to read. So he said to me one day that he had a job for me, to go to the piano case in the garage – we had an upright piano and as we moved so often we had a wooden piano case that the piano was moved in – and go to the piano case and bring him back whatever. And so I went to the piano case, and I opened the door of it – it was a lift-up door. And inside was a stool, for someone to sit on. And at the other end opposite the stool was a row of books. And there were Greek legends and Roman legends and an atlas and a … a history book, and all sorts of books. And so I did the job he asked, took him back what he wanted, and he said 'That is our secret. You can go there when you want to read.'

MB Isn't that terrific, though!

GW I thought it was.

MB You started to really get a literary education.

GW That's right.

MB In the piano case!

GW That's right. That's right.

MB And this was when you were about six? Six, seven?

GW Oh he was, he was very good. In Wauchope he and I had to walk to school before…

MB That's where you started school?

GW No, no, no. Ulmarra was where I started school, yes.

MB Ulmarra, yes. So these were little primary schools?

GW Yes.

MB And he was teaching there?

GW Yes.

MB And you went with him?

GW Well, at Wauchope we didn't live next door to the school like we did in the other places, so we had to walk to school. But he told me that … one … as we walked he'd say things like 'One of these days you'll see Halley's comet.' And I said to him 'What's Halley's comet?' And he said 'You'll see it. You'll be getting on in years, but you'll see it.' And sure enough, I did!

MB Gwen, very early on, apart from reading, you wrote quite early, you started to write stories.

GW That's right. When I was about nine.

MB Yeah. You were writing stories. You said you wrote a first one in a tree … up a gum tree, wasn't it?

GW That's right. That's right. Yes, I … we had that big park that used to be the schoolyard, next to us in Wauchope. I used to climb the trees because … I was able to read, you see, again, without being spotted!

MB Was it a kind of, was it a kind of internal compulsion to, to kind of, to write at that stage?

GW Yes. And it always has been.

MB Right. So that's an inside pressure.

GW Mm-hmm.

MB When did you, at school you begin to feel that things were going well? When did you really start to feel set in school and that you were *en route* towards…? I think there was an, an occasion when you decided about a career that was rather special as well?

GW That was in Ulmarra.

MB That was in Ulmarra?

GW Yes, when I was six. Yes.

MB Yes. So that was quite early.

GW Oh yes.

MB A total career decision.

GW Yes.

MB Tell me about that visit.

GW Well, my father was a member of the Masonic Lodge, and so was the local doctor. And Dad had something about the Lodge to talk to him about so he took me, as he often did, just for the walk, to the doctor's place. And it was quite a way back from the street, and when the doctor opened the door he said 'Oh, Gwen's with you. Come through.' So we went through, and there was this gorgeous vista of the Clarence River. Of course the house was right on the bank of the Clarence River. And he told me to play in the sandpit or swing on the swing, but I just sat on the swing and watched the river – I loved it so much. Because, you see, it was nearly a mile wide there. So as we went down the driveway from his place I said to Dad 'I'm

going to live in a house like that one day.' And he said 'Well, you'd better learn to be a doctor.'

MB And that was it?

GW That was it. From then on, I never let up!

MB So you were fascinated by… This was a wonderful kind of time. You seem to have got wonderful conversations with Father.

GW Oh yes, I did.

MB Probably more than with Mother who was…

GW Yes.

MB …domestically quiet, and getting on with things. Is that, is that the right kind of picture?

GW Yes, that's the right kind of picture. And also she was a South Australian, which made her a bit of an outsider at that time in New South Wales.

MB What, a bit rejected by other local women?

GW Yes, that's right.

MB So there was that kind of a feel to that society?

GW And she … for that reason she had a … a sort of close attachment to my sister, who was younger than I was, you see.

MB Yes. Were there just two of you, or…? Were there just two of you?

GW Yes, there were just two of us.

MB Gwen, in that home did grandparents visit, or did other relatives visit? Or was it a fairly quiet, insular home?

GW Oh no, no, no, no, no. Every holiday we went to see the grandparents, who were a bit like we were – moving about all over the place. But they eventually settled in Ettalum(?), up near Gosford.

MB Right. What were they moving for?

GW Mmm?

MB Why were they moving? Was it another career thing?

GW He was a teacher too…

MB Right, it's all teaching.

GW …and he was moved from school to school.

MB It's a great teaching background.

GW Yes, mm-hmm.

MB Gwen, we're just going back to your schools, Wauchope and schools. Were there any primary school teachers who had influence early on?

GW Nothing special, I think, but…

MB Right. But you were an unusual kid anyway, and you got on with things on your own a lot.

GW Well, Dad used to insist that I should write properly, because he was the headmaster and he was a teacher and if his own child couldn't write properly, what else? So it … I had a bit of pressure!

MB Did he spend a lot of time with you? I mean…

GW But on the other hand, he was equally insistent that I was just as obedient at school as everybody else; I got no privileges at school! Although a lot of kids in the class thought I did!

MB And where was secondary education to be? Where were you when that caught up with you? You went to…

GW Moss Vale.

MB At Moss Vale?

GW Mmm.

MB You went to a girls' high school?

GW No. To Barellan High School(?).

MB Right, right. And was that, was that a good turn of fate? Did that work well?

GW Oh, it sort of worked well because I got used to going from Moss Vale to Barellan(?), by train.

MB By train? Yeah. So you got a trip every day.

GW Yes.

MB That's growing up a bit.

GW Yes, that was growing up a bit.

MB So it was a bit heavy. But you didn't stay there all that long?

GW But my mother insisted that I take a thermos of, of hot tea with me each day, and … I had unusual sort of lunches. But by the end of about three weeks everybody else was bringing a thermos of tea!

MB You were a fashion leader, a fashion leader, yeah.

GW Because it was quite chilly, you see, quite chilly down in Moss Vale and Barellan(?) in the winter.

MB Yeah. But you weren't there all that long?

GW Oh well, we were in Moss Vale about three years, I suppose.

MB Oh right. And you eventually transferred to another high school?

GW We went to Richmond, and then I had to go to Parramatta High School.

MB And that school did have an influence on you?

GW And that was a long, long day…

MB Yeah, that was sort of…

GW …because I had to leave Richmond at seven in the morning, and I didn't get back till quarter past seven at night, because the train, the first train for Richmond after school hours didn't leave till 5.30. So it was a long day for a 12 to 15 year old. And I sort of lost touch with the family in a lot of ways, because they would talk about things [and] I didn't know what they were talking about.

MB Yeah, a little bit out of out of phaseness about it all.

GW Yes, that's right.

MB Yeah. But you were growing up. When did the science actually come into your education that was going to take you towards medical school? Did that start in…?

GW High School, at Parramatta High School.

MB Right. And was that, was that good? Was that well taught? Did you get a good start ready for medical school?

GW Oh yes. Yes, I did.

MB And any of the teachers that you remember?

GW Very good, very good science teachers at Parramatta, but even better at Orange. Orange High School, which was the one I finally finished school at, had a very good science teacher and he was … I was doing Honours in physics and chemistry, and he took me after school.

MB Who was this? Do you remember the chap?

GW I can't remember his name now, it's a long time ago.

MB The name's gone, but the influence is still there.

GW Oh yes, indeed. Yes.

MB So that was a nice … was that analytical science? You felt that you were really doing investigative things? It wasn't so much textbooks as working in laboratories as well?

GW Oh yes, it was working in laboratories as well. Oh yes.

MB Did that feel right, quite early on?

GW Oh yes, that felt right from the first day I ever went into a laboratory in, at Parramatta High School. I never felt alien or out of, out of it or anything.

MB But this is an enormous, I mean nowadays we talk about an enormously disturbed education – always moving on, going for a few years, moving on. But it didn't seem to have any dinting and denting effects on your career.

GW Well I think that was because my mother and father took it so much for granted. They never made a fuss about moving.

MB Right. They just got on with it.

GW The only time, the only time I really realised it was when it had all settled down and Dad was an inspector and they had a home in Sydney. And Mum said at last she could have the floor carpeted, because always we had to have mats, you see, because we had to take furniture wherever we went.

MB But were you a bright kid at school? Were you top of your class?

GW I never felt very bright, but I did come top of the class a lot. But…

MB So you were looking for an award to go to university? You were looking for…

GW Oh yes. Yes I, I couldn't go to … well it was, when I finished primary school, in fact when I finished high school it was the middle of the Depression and there was no way my parents could send me to university, I just had to get an exhibition.

MB Were they even cut back in their finances, even though they were professional teachers? That was a hard time?

GW Oh yes. Dad's, Dad's salary was cut in half. And we lived in Orange, and there were always people coming to the door and saying 'Could we do something in the garden? We don't want money, just give us food.' It was a terrible few years.

MB So that made an impact, I suppose. That made an impact on you?

GW Oh yes, that made an impact, because I was 15 and 16 – I was just old enough for it to do so. But I had to get the exhibition! So I had to do ten subjects for the Leaving Certificate.

MB Right. That was at Ordinary Level, and then was that three, three at the more Advanced Level?

GW Seven, seven at Ordinary Level and three Honours subjects that I had to do. Ten subjects altogether, because they'd just introduced the idea of the addition of your subjects; the marks you got would count instead of As and Bs as we used to have.

MB So was that a big day when you got the news?

GW Oh, was it ever! Especially as, especially as I'd got no Honours; I'd got four As and three Bs or something, and no Honours, and … so I'd given up all idea of the exhibition and gone back to school. And then my uncle rang from Sydney to say 'She's got the exhibition.' So the teachers were fascinated and they rang up and found out that I'd only missed out on the Honours by a mark in each case.

MB So they averaged out pretty, pretty powerfully.

GW Yes. Yes, because you got an exhibition if you came within the first hundred in New South Wales, in the Leaving Certificate as it was then.

MB Yeah. So this was about 1934?

GW Yes. About 1934 it was then, yes. That's right.

MB And you were ready to go to Sydney? I mean that really is mind-blowing! Going to university, going to college.

GW Yes.

MB Leaving the family.

GW That's right. That's right.

MB Medical student.

GW Yes.

MB And in the first three years I presume you did kind of academic subjects, before going really into clinical work in the normal conventional way at that time?

GW Well no, in the second year we started anatomy. And of course we had to dissect … and, you know, dissection was a new thing to us all.

MB Did that grab you? I mean was that something that got you quite quickly? You enjoyed dissecting, or…

GW Didn't like the smell much, but…

MB The formalin?

GW The formalin, yes, I didn't like that. But I enjoyed the dissection, and I enjoyed the physiology and so on.

MB Were there any teachers that stood out in that time?

GW Oh yes, a professor called Abbie, he stood out. He was wonderful … for anatomy and physiology. Well he didn't teach us physiology, but he was in the anatomy department and he gave me some extra tuition when I had to have to my appendix out and missed out a bit. But, and then Douglas Miller[1], he gave me my first oral exam, and he presented me with a bone and said 'What muscles attach to this?' And I just looked at him and I thought I don't know what's attached to that. And it was the sternum. But anyway, after that he asked me some other questions and we got on all right and I got through. But we've often laughed about it since!

MB So that was, that was getting into anatomy?

GW Because I was only 18 then!

MB Yeah, you were a youngster!

GW Yes!

MB And a fairly innocent youngster, you were pointing out to me.

GW You can say that again! Very innocent indeed! What … do you want to know about the letters?

MB Yes, that would be nice.

GW Well, they had revues at the university and the first revue which was just two or three weeks after the term started, I went to with some of the girls from the women's college. And one of the fellows said I must write it on the stage, he said I must write him a letter about that. And the other one said to him 'Well it had better be a French letter!' And everybody screamed with laughter, I didn't know what they were talking about!

[1] Later Sir Douglas Miller.

MB Yes! You'd gone up there fairly, fairly green!

GW Times were different you might say!

MB Very different, yes. And you hadn't had a lot of sex education experience or anything.

GW No, no.

MB Mum had been pretty modest about that?

GW That's right.

MB You were saying that it was almost one comment when you went away from home.

GW That's right! 'Don't let anyone interfere with your clothes.'

MB That was it?

GW That was it.

MB A total lesson, but a very substantial point! When you started to get into the clinical arena and the clinical work, who made impact then, Gwen? Who were the figures that made impact? There were one or two physicians I think who made impact in that career.

GW Well, the first one that made an impact ... it never failed, because we were, we all had new stethoscopes and we were just into fourth year and about to have our first rounds with the physician, and he said he would meet us in the front hall of Prince Alfred [Hospital]. And we were all there with our new stethoscopes, and so he took a look and said 'I suppose I can do something with you! Come on, over to outpatients.' So that's when he took us over to outpatients, and he showed us this young man with a row of black things leading from his back to his axilla. And eventually, when we'd all looked and listened and made comments, he said 'Young man, that's fine now.' And when the young man went out he said 'He'll be dead in six months.' Whew! That shattered the lot of us, as you can imagine! After all, we didn't expect to be shown something like that. But he was marvellous because he didn't stick to just showing us medical cases.

MB Who was this Gwen?

GW His name was Eric Sussman.

MB Eric Sussman.

GW Yes.

MB A distinguished physician.

GW Yes.

MB And a good lecturer, I think?

GW Oh, excellent. Yes, excellent. Crowds used to go every time he lectured, especially when he lectured on the exits of the human body.

MB Why was that, that was his special field? He enjoyed…?

GW Well, everybody turned up for that. But…

MB This was the kind of excretory routes and…

GW Yes, that's right.

MB And kind of sexual kind of…

GW Oh no! We didn't hear anything about the sex bits. Somebody asked him about that and he said 'I'm not going to talk about that. You know all about that!' No, he was excellent as a tutor, because if there was an interesting case in the surgical ward or the orthopaedic ward he would take us and show us. And none of us ever forgot him. And he left his library to Prince Alfred, and so when I heard that this had happened I, I wrote to the library so they asked me to come to the opening of it, which was nice.

MB Right. And classically physicians at that time were more significant and more, more rarefied in their status than surgeons I think.

GW Oh no! Oh no, not in Australia.

MB No? Oh, really?

GW Oh no, surgeons were equal.

MB Oh right.

GW I mean they had equal … above everybody else – above all the other specialties, surgery and medicine stood out. There was a professor of surgery and a professor of medicine, and they were, the professors of surgery were very new when I started medicine.

MB Right. But I thought that, in some cases in Britain we had people – physicians – actually diagnosing and then passing people on to surgeons, who were, kind of came second down the line. But that wasn't quite the same in Sydney?

GW Oh well, if they were surgical cases they were passed on of course, but no … I just never noticed any difference.

MB Noticed the difference. Yeah, that's interesting to know. When you actually saw that young man again who'd been diagnosed as having six months to live, I mean you actually saw him eventually come in, and to round that story off…

GW Yes. He took us, took us back to him five months later and there he was, dying. So he was quite right. But I was interested that he'd kept in touch, knew his name, and remembered to take us back. I thought that showed an interest.

MB He was a very thorough teacher.

GW And I also had the privilege when we were doing bedside rounds with people, because usually they'd say 'You at the back there, you can't see. Come on out here.' So I'd have to go out to the front of the group and of course then they'd ask me the questions.

MB So you got lumbered with it.

GW But I learnt!

MB You sure did! Gwen, we've talked about Sussman. Was he the outstanding figure? He was the outstanding figure as far as the teaching was concerned?

GW Well, Professor Lambie[2], who was the first full-time Bosch Professor at Sydney University, he was wonderful too. And so was Harold Dew, the first professor of surgery. They didn't have, they didn't have professors of surgery and medicine until the 1930s.

MB Right. You saw Dew operate?

GW Mmm.

MB Was he as good as people said?

GW Oh yes. And what he didn't know about highbatterns(?) wasn't worth knowing. Oh no, they were excellent people.

MB We're in the later thirties by now.

GW Yep!

MB And you're getting towards qualifying in 1939.

GW That's right.

MB And about to face the challenge of a wartime, a wartime job.

GW Well, we were on our September vacation, and war was declared on the 3rd of September 1939.

[2] Professor CG Lambie.

MB When were your degree results actually declared? Was that just after that?

GW That was, well, we heard rumours that our final exams were going to be one week after the vacation instead of two months. So we were all a bit panicky. But they did keep to the usual time.

MB Right, the usual schedule was kept to. So that was towards the end of the year?

GW Yes. So we got our results in December.

MB December. And you got a job pretty quickly?

GW Yes, straightaway.

MB And money!

GW Money, yes! Four pounds ten a week.

MB And that was a lot.

GW And if I'd been at a teaching hospital I'd have got 30 shillings a week!

MB Where did you go to for that first job?

GW Balmain Hospital.

MB Which you had a long association with.

GW Yes that's right; many, many years. But I went there as a junior resident, because at that time, only eight women got places at the teaching hospitals even if you came quite high up.

MB So women got a low quota?

GW Very low. Only two women were taken at each teaching hospital, so…

MB Right. But with a war on…

GW …it didn't matter where you came, but with a war on, things…

MB You all got jobs?

GW …everything changed, naturally. Well I never went from Balmain; I stayed there.

MB Yeah. Although you did apply for a registrarship when a university post, I think, was cancelled.

GW Oh yes, but that was several years later.

MB Oh right. What we haven't talked about is any thoughts of specialities on the way up?

GW Well, that's why I went back to when I went to Balmain, because that was really the place where I got induced, under anaesthesia you might say!

MB Yes. But when you were qualifying, Gwen, when you were just qualifying and going through your degree course I'm just thinking that you didn't have any thoughts of becoming a paediatrician or anything at that stage?

GW No, nothing.

MB You just went straight through the whole course without deciding to become a surgeon or anything?

GW Well, when I first went to Balmain and was sent down to the outpatients, I said to the superintendent 'Why on earth are they like that? They, you do everything you can for them, you listen to them, you diagnose them and you give them the treatment, and several weeks later they come back and they're no better.' And he said 'Well, you'd better not do general practice.' I decided I wouldn't, right then and there.

MB So you finished up in a hospital job in, in 1940. And then having this incredible experience that all of a sudden converts you to being an anaesthetist.

GW Well, that was the first week I was at Balmain, which was … the second last week in December.

MB When the miracle happened to you.

GW Yes. That was the first Wednesday I was at Balmain, when I was told I was to go up to the theatre and assist Dr Corlette. So I went up to the surgeons' room and this elderly gentleman was sitting there, and I thought oh well, you know, this is a mistake. So I went into the theatre, and I said 'Is Dr Corlette here?' 'Yes.' And they said 'Oh yes, he's in the surgeons' room.' So I thought 'It's got to be the old boy.' So I went and had another look, and he didn't take any notice, but I went back out and they said 'Yes, that's him. That's him.' So I said 'Well…!' So I went in and said 'Excuse me Dr Corlette, I'm Dr Bruce. I've, I've been allotted to your list.' And he said 'Well I hope they've told you that I do every case under local anaesthesia.' I said 'No.' And he said 'Well, come on, you've got a lot to learn.' So in we went to the operating theatre, and during that afternoon we did a radical amputation of a breast and a gall bladder and two lots of haemorrhoids, <u>all</u> under local anaesthesia. And <u>I</u> gave the locals, with him showing me how. And I'd been through less than three weeks!

MB You'd not given a local anaesthetic before in that way?

GW Never! I'd never used it.

MB You'd used rag and bottle? Did you use rag and bottle before, always, in your training?

GW Yes, that's right.

MB Yes, when you'd helped with anaesthetics.

GW Never even seen a local anaesthetic for anything like a gall bladder or a radical breast. But in that afternoon I learnt all about plexus blocks and caudal blocks(?).

MB Was this all by injection technique? Was it all injecting?

GW Yes, that's right.

MB That was some afternoon.

GW That was some afternoon!

MB Did you come off that block of work thinking 'This is this something?' I mean, was that, was that as big an impact as that?

GW I was fascinated. Fascinated. And I went down to the residents' quarters, lay down on my bed and got out my anatomy book, because I'd felt so stupid that I'd forgotten where all the plexuses were and I wanted to look up what he'd shown me and all that sort of thing. So the next week I knew more about it and we did more.

MB And you stayed working with Corlette for a while.

GW Oh yes.

MB Was he a good surgeon?

GW Oh yes, excellent.

MB But it was curious that he was pioneering so much local anaesthetic, wasn't it? I mean, that wasn't fashionable at the time.

GW But when I started doing the history, you see, I found that he'd been lecturing and speaking and demonstrating about local anaesthesia for years and years and years, since about 1912.

MB So he was a great pioneering figure?

GW That's right.

MB And you were lucky to actually cross his path.

GW That's right.

MB It may not have happened otherwise.

GW That's right.

MB A great, a great seminal moment. I think we're going to be changing a reel at any moment now, so we'll just fade down, take a break and we'll come back in a moment.

GW Right, okay.

MB Gwen, we've just been talking about the importance of Dr Corlette…

GW Yes.

MB …both as a pioneering surgeon of some status, but also his particular pioneering for local anaesthetics.

GW Yes.

MB And he eventually, I think, published a book. Am I right?

GW Oh yes.

MB Published, published a book on that.[3]

GW Because the other residents at the hospital got interested in what I talked about at mealtimes!

MB Oh, really! So you went, you went pushing this?

GW Well you see they, they hadn't seen local anaesthesia either, so…

MB Were there tremendous advantages in it?

GW Enormous. It was useful to me through the whole of my anaesthetic career, what I learnt those days with him, because if I had a very very sick patient with a gallbladder it didn't matter how bad the heart was, I could… In fact people used to ring me and say 'I understand you give local anaesthesia for so and so, and so and so,' so I gave quite a lot of anaesthetics, local anaesthesia, throughout my working life.

MB By 19, I think you said by 1941, December 1941, you'd given at least 2000 anaesthetics by then.

GW That's right.

MB So you were really into the job.

[3] Cyril Ernest Corlette, *A Surgeon's Guide to Local Anaesthesia: a Manual of Shockless Surgery*, Bristol: John Wright, 1948; Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1948.

GW Oh yes.

MB No special training, only the fact … hands on…

GW Yes.

MB …training had been taken.

GW That's right, that's right. I didn't even know how to use the gas machine.

MB Were you captured by then? Did you feel it would go that way?

GW Oh yes. Oh yes, I did.

MB That was, it was going to be an anaesthetist job. It was there.

GW Yes, because I'd got intrigued in the gas machine, and I'd gone to other hospitals to see how you use them, and…

MB So the whole inquiry behind the kind of force of your, your writing and your reading was into anaesthetics.

GW Yes, well, 1941 they advertised this job at the postgraduate hospital, which was Prince Henry Hospital which we used to then call 'The Coast', because it was out on the coast, and one of the urological surgeons suggested I should apply for it.

MB Who was that?

GW His name was Bridge, Reginald Bridge(?).

MB And so you went for that. And that was the one that got…

GW Yes.

M …got scuppered by wartime arrangements?

GW That's right. I'd got the job, and then came Pearl Harbour, and the hospital was closed as a postgraduate hospital and opened as a military hospital and they didn't need an anaesthetic registrar, and…

MB So you were back at Balmain.

GW …so I was back at Balmain, manpower for the rest of the war.

MB Gwen, just looking at the state of anaesthetics in that period, it was very primitive at that stage. It was fairly simple, because your stories – and you've written a lot about the development of anaesthesia and the development of techniques over the years – I mean, we're now in an entirely different ball game in the 1990s now. I mean, that was relatively trivial in those days.

GW It was…

MB It was just coming together as a speciality.

GW It was a period of great change, that particular time, because intravenous anaesthesia had been introduced in the middle thirties and that was just gathering way, and cyclopropane had been introduced in the early thirties and that was gathering way and so there was all, there was… And, then another, an orthopaedic surgeon on the staff at Balmain also advised me to do anaesthesia and he saw to it that an anaesthetist was appointed to the hospital. And Dr Andrew Distin Morgan taught me a great deal about anaesthesia in the next six months, because he'd been to England and got a degree in anaesthesia and to America and got a degree in anaesthesia and he knew, not only knew all about the new agents but he knew the people who'd brought them, invented them!

MB So without any planning, you're actually falling on your feet in this discipline…

GW Yes, that's right.

MB …by these encounters.

GW That's right.

MB Gwen, I don't want to take the story very much further without talking about the fact that you were a young woman, falling in love, going to be married. There was a, there was a private side to your life and I just wanted to…

GW Oh yes, of course.

MB I mean, you were going to be married.

GW I married the superintendent at Balmain Hospital.

MB Right. Who was?

GW Charles Bernard(?). So I was Dr Bernard for a number of years.

MB Right. That was in '42?

GW Yes, the day Singapore fell was our wedding day.

MB Well, that was a mark of it, wasn't it!

GW Yes! Yes!

MB That was some epitaph! Yes, and so your honeymoon was on, on that kind of weekend?

GW Yes, that's right. But we had to hurry back to the hospital, of course, because everything was … going mad…

MB So it was a kind of crazy…

GW …in Sydney and all over Australia.

MB …crazy kind of … and then back into hospital work. Yeah.

GW Mmm, that's right. Otherwise I think we might have parted company earlier than we did.

MB Yes, because it wasn't, wasn't…

GW I think ours was like many marriages at that time.

MB A kind of wartime collision course!

GW Yes, that's right.

MB But not to put too fine a point on it, it wasn't going to be a great success, but it was going to endure and you were going to have two daughters in that marriage.

GW Yes … a son and a daughter.

MB A son and a daughter.

GW Yes.

MB Yes, '44, '48?

GW Mmm?

MB Their births were '44, '48?

GW Yes. Yes, that's right.

MB Yes. We've put that marriage in place now. And so you're a man and a wife team working in a hospital, virtually together.

GW That's right, yes.

MB Did that work well?

GW Oh, well…

MB From a point of view of your career, anyway.

GW We, we weren't really working together at Balmain Hospital, we were… He was there and I was doing my work around at other hospitals, private hospitals, by then.

MB So you, so you started to move out and get more appointments?

GW Yes, that's right.

MB So you became a kind of shuttle job?

GW Yes.

MB In the car…

GW I went, I went to Balmain a couple of times a week, and then I gave anaesthetics at small private hospitals.

MB Right. Which kind of hospitals? I mean, I think you've got a number of attachments that were significant at that time.

GW Well, not until … not until after I got the Diploma.

MB Oh, the Diploma. So you shuttled until 1945/46?

GW '44. '44 was the first diploma. And there was a fuss about that, because they didn't advertise the course.

MB This was a diploma that was run by Sydney University?

GW Yes.

MB And they didn't advertise it?

GW No.

MB How was that?

GW Well, it's a long long story! But it was a fellow who'd been invalided out of the war and some anaesthetists at a particular hospital, you know, were sorry for him, and so they persuaded the postgraduate committee to institute the diploma course that they'd been talking about since 1939. They thought they'd institute it for this guy. And there was quite a fuss, because it wasn't advertised and nobody knew about it, or I'd have done it in 1944. So 1945 this same urological surgeon – Dr Bridge(?) – said that I ought to sit for the Diploma exam in 1945.

MB So you did?

GW So, so I did.

MB Yeah. Was that a good Diploma course?

GW Yes, it was excellent. It was excellent, but…

MB A lot of hands-on experience.

GW …but it was funny because 35 of us started it, and most of them were people who'd maybe been in the services and they were a bit out of touch with anaesthesia and thought they'd like to brush up on it. But of course we had physiology and anatomy and biochemistry and all the things you need as a background to anaesthesia and so in the end only four sat for the exam!

MB And you came out on top of that four?

GW Yes.

MB You kind of got the gold medal bit!

GW There were no medals in those days!

MB Gwen, was that course, that course, was it a time when muscle relaxants were beginning to be talked about?

GW Yes, it was.

MB Because there was a big new wave of things.

GW It was in that same year that the first curare was given for an operation in Australia.

MB Oh, really?

GW Mmm, in 1945. And that was, that case was reported at the first post-war meeting of the Australian Society of Anaesthetists in January 1946.

MB When you became a member?

GW Yes, when I became a member.

MB Your first, your first impression…

GW That was the first meeting.

MB Yeah. So that was, that was incredible, again.

GW Yes.

MB You path crossed with an important paper.

GW That's right, mmm.

MB Why had that been, taken a little while to arrive in Australia? Because in America muscle relaxants had been in a little while…

GW That's right. And a friend of Dr Harry Daly's, who was in the American navy, brought him some Intorcostrin, brought Harry Daly some with him from America, but Harry couldn't find a surgeon who'd let him use it.

MB How early was that? In the, early in the forties?

GW It took him, took him three years to finally, he finally persuaded the dentists to let him use it.

MB So it had been there since '42?

GW That's right. That's amazing! It really is amazing, yes.

MB And then it, then it began to…

GW So…

MB And you were there when the paper was read?

GW I was there when the paper was read, and I thought 'I can't wait to try it out!'

MB So you did.

GW Yes, I did!

MB You went straight into it. I mean, you really moved in very quickly.

GW Well, within a year or so, yes. When I knew, when I knew more about it, I…

MB Was that difficult to get into? Into relaxants, was that a difficult…?

GW No, it was very easy. No, Pentothal[4] was a little tricky at first. The first one of those I gave – I'd given other intravenous things, not anaesthesia – and it was a young man, and I thought 'This is a good one – young and healthy and strong.' So I … I'd got hold of one ampoule of Pentothal, because the hospital hadn't got any by that stage, and so I thought I'll give it a go. So I popped the needle in and I said to him 'Now, I want you to count.' So he got to 150. And he said 'I'm still not asleep.' And I said 'I'm sorry, I've run out of anaesthetic.' I'd used the whole ampoule; I'd been too slow giving it you see! I was a bit wary, I think!

MB And so you went back to the conventional anaesthetic?

GW So then I gave him some ether! Which was always tricky, poor man! But anyway, it didn't matter. But of course Pentothal took over in a big, big way…

MB In those later forties everything…

[4] Pentothal is one of the trade names of thiopentone.

GW …in, in the Forces. I don't mean in the Australian Forces, but in the Army(?) Forces there were a lot of deaths from overdoses of Pentothal, or wrong ... misuse, in wrong cases and all sorts of things. So, you know, it was…

MB So it was a horrendous shock.

GW …it was an anaesthetic you had to be careful of. But anyway, I mean, by, by about 1946 relaxants had come and surgeons had changed their whole attitude to anaesthetists.

MB That was a, that was a seminal change, wasn't it?

GW It was absolutely incredible because, you see, it was difficult to, to get yourself an anaesthetic practice because the general practitioners reciprocated – one gave the anaesthetic, the other did the surgery, the next day they did it the other way round. And also, the surgeons were dependent on cases being referred to them, and because they didn't care about the anaesthetic they got the referring general practitioner to give the anaesthetic for them, although at the hospitals they worked at they had a specialist anaesthetist attached to their session. But you never got the anaesthetics. And the private ones, those went to the referring general practitioner. And relaxants changed all that.

MB So this is why in those later forties you began to get anaesthetics as, as a speciality coming together, setting up a faculty. More diploma course…

GW Well there was, there was, of course the very first meeting after the war they talked about postgraduate education. And the steps they took then, the surgeons said no, their constitution wouldn't allow them to…

MB Was this the Royal College of Surgeons…

GW Yes.

MB …in, based in Melbourne?

GW The Australian, Australasian College of Surgeons. And so, but then you see by 1948/49, magic had come with anaesthesia…

MB (?) the speciality.

GW Yes.

MB That's an amazing change, isn't it?

GW So they were interested in having us then.

MB That's an amazing change. Very fast.

GW Yes, that's right. So we were able to found the Faculty[5] then.

MB What date was that, Gwen?

GW When the Faculty was founded?

MB When the Faculty was founded, yes.

GW 1951/52.

MB Right, right. But before that, let's not overrun our story. Your career is the thing I'm talking to you … one of the main issues was you started to get jobs of a, of a specialised nature in a number of hospitals…

GW Yes, that's right.

MB …after the war, after that Diploma.

GW Yes, after the Diploma.

MB Could you just tell me about the reception… I think you…

GW Well, I … I answered an advertisement at Rachel Foster Hospital, which is the hospital for women…

MB Right. That was run by all women?

GW Yes.

MB Unusual.

GW All women.

MB Yeah.

GW Yes. And I also applied for a job at the Royal North Shore Hospital.

MB Which you got.

GW Which I got, yes. Well, once I'd got the Diploma. Both, both jobs waited until the Diploma results were out.

MB Yes. And you also stayed at Balmain.

GW Yes.

MB So you'd got those three, three balls in the air.

GW That's right.

[5] Faculty of Anaesthetists at the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons.

MB And major, major hospital jobs.

GW That's right.

MB And so you had big lists to fulfil then…

GW Yes, yes.

MB …with the anaesthetic jobs.

GW So it was, you know, it was quite an interesting time really.

MB Yeah. But I think your link with the [Royal] North Sydney Hospital came to, came to a rather sad end, rather disappointing end?

GW Yes, it was disappointing.

MB You hadn't had much discrimination in your career, because I think Australia was rather good for, for women in medicine.

GW Well, I'd of course had the discrimination of the president of the postgraduate committee when I was interviewed by him about doing the Diploma course. Because he showed me new surgical equipment that had arrived, and told me all about it, and asked me was I married, did I have children, and so on and so on, and so on. And he didn't ask me anything about the references I was carrying with me, or the work I'd done or anything else. And after about a quarter of an hour, he said 'You don't want to be bothered with this Diploma nonsense. Run along home and play with your baby!' Well, as I went down the stairs I was more determined to get the Diploma than when I went up the stairs!

MB You sure were! Yes. But at North Shore you had this unpleasant experience of applying and being probably the best person for the job, I suspect.

GW Well, I was the only one with a Diploma and… So anyway, I was appointed as the temporary relieving assistant anaesthetist, and then when they required a relieving assistant anaesthetist – that put me up a step, you see – I didn't get it although I applied and the surgeons had all recommended me. And then the following year they advertised again, and the surgeons all <u>wrote</u> recommendations for me that time. And the superintendent sent for me and when I went to his office he said that 'I just want to explain why although you have the qualifications you're not getting that job.' And I … sort of… And I said 'Why not?' And he said 'Because you're a woman.' He said 'You'll never get promotion on this staff, because you're a woman.' I said 'What's that got to do with it?' He said 'Oh, women have all sorts of physical problems, and when they've, when they've had children they've got to look after the kids and take them to school and take them to basketball. And, and then when that's all over they're menopausal. No, we're not going to promote women.'

MB And they appointed your husband?

GW So I stood up, and very pointedly said 'I'm resigning.' And I resigned, then and there.

MB You sure did.

GW But then he accompanied me to the door, and he said 'Well, we thought you might be a bit upset because actually you were the best qualified for the job, but,' he said, 'to make it easier we've appointed your husband.'

MB It wasn't easier.

GW Well, my husband was three years behind me with the Diploma. I wasn't pleased! Especially as, and this is a bit of gossip that they can cut out, especially as when he got on to the staff at North Shore he told me that he wasn't going to do any … any nights or weekends or anything like that at QG(?), he was…

MB Above all that, yeah. Not gonna happen?

GW No.

MB Gwen, you were a busy lady in those years. You'd, you'd got two young children.

GW Yes, that's right.

MB How did you actually cope with that great pressure?

GW Well I had a live-in, usually a younger woman, and … and then I, as the kids got older I had an older woman who did the cleaning but also drove herself to work, and she used to take the kids to school and pick them up again. So it was, it was a fairly big expense. You see, we only got, at the very outside in those days you got five guineas for an anaesthetic no matter how long it lasted or how serious it was. For the same operation the surgeons would get 150 guineas. So it took you quite a while … everything I earned for the first five years I worked went to keep the household going so that I could work. I couldn't go to meetings; I couldn't have a holiday. Apart from everything else, I mean, the surgeons I did have I didn't want to go and leave them to find somebody else!

MB So that pressure continued. It must have cost you a little bit of time with your children though…

GW No, I didn't. It sounds terrible to say so but… You see I didn't really miss them all that much because … I had this girl living in, and I used to help put them to bed at night, and then she had the weekends off so I had them…

MB You got the best of them.

GW …I had them the whole of the weekend!

MB So you were ready for the week.

GW I was ready for Monday when it came!

MB But I could take us through the fifties now, because you've got a career launched, you've got your own specialist job. How did the fifties go? They progressed on that kind of way with you having … I think you got a new job in a hospital when you left Sydney, fairly quickly?

GW Yes, I, when I left North Sydney, Dr James McCulloch said he was resigning from Sydney Hospital because he had too much work to do. So … and he thought I ought to apply there. So I got on to the staff of Sydney Hospital then, and so I stayed at Sydney for quite a long time. And then, also by that time I'd been elected as chairman of the New South Wales section of the Society[6], which meant I was on the executive of the Society…

MB Was that from the late forties, then?

GW No, that was…

MB The early fifties?

GW …that was the early fifties, '51 I…

MB So you've had a long association with that body.

GW Yes. Fifty years this year since I joined, you see.

MB Congratulations! This is a very special year in many respects, as we'll, we'll make clear in due course.

GW That's right!

MB But it's nice to have that, that jubilee kind of flagged up!

GW That's right!

MB Yeah. But the fifties, you had a range of things.

GW Yes.

MB You were representing anaesthetists, you were on an executive.

GW Yes, I was on the federal executive of the Society, because I was chairman of the New South Wales section. And then in 1954 they elected me as secretary of the, federal secretary of the society, and I had to do the newsletter. Writing again, you see!

MB Writing again, yes.

[6] Australian Society of Anaesthetists.

GW Writing again!

MB And you were a busier lady than ever before, I guess.

GW Yes, I was.

MB Yes, that was a busy time.

GW Yes. And it wasn't enjoyed on the home front.

MB I think that caused some bitterness, yes, you had a difficult…

GW That's right.

MB It wasn't easy.

GW No.

MB And by 1958, we'll just come to the crunch of it all. By 1958 you…

GW Well 1957 it was just at an end, the home life. The … a very vital meeting in Melbourne, well I was the federal secretary, I couldn't not attend it, and I was told that if I attended it all financial support would be withdrawn from the household by my husband. And so I just had to give up being the federal secretary. But other things happened, and I decided that…

MB And you went solo. You went solo.

GW By 1957, that was enough.

MB And you went solo for a while.

GW Yes, mmm.

MB And … that must have been quite difficult for you, going solo. It can't have been an easy time. But you continued to work, very full-time work in anaesthetics and give an enormous amount of time to the Society, I know that.

GW Oh yes, that's right.

MB So that became your life-blood in total.

GW Yes, that's right. And of course the Faculty too. I went to Faculty meetings and College meetings.

MB What was the date of the Faculty really getting underway and everything, Gwen?

GW 1952.

MB 1952.

GW 1956 were its first examinations for the Fellowship.

MB Right. And you were associated with that?

GW Oh yes.

MB From very early on?

GW Oh yeah, I was a foundation member.

MB And associated with those examinations?

GW Mmm?

MB Associated with those early examinations at all?

GW No, no. No, I was never an examiner. And…

MB You were just a hard-working anaesthetist, doing some administrative work with the Association and the Faculty.

GW Yes. Well, it was rather funny really, because when I was looking up the … correspondence that's been left to me by various pioneer anaesthetists…

MB No one's had more correspondence left!

GW …in one of them I found a letter from the secretary of the Society, to Dr Gilbert Troup in Western Australia, and it said 'Too many women examiners these days.' And Gilbert's letter came back, and it said 'Too many women and kids if you ask me.' The kids were the Fellowship, the people who'd got their Fellowships you see!

MB Gwen, this hard-working anaesthetist that we've got you to be, going solo now, although without the pressures of a home and children which had been quite substantial. But in 1962 for one reason or another things boil over a bit; you have a duodenal ulcer?

GW That's right.

MB And that kept you out of work?

GW Well, they…

MB That brings things to an end for a time?

GW …they told me I was not to work for six months. And other anaesthetists were very suggestive as to how I should fill in the time. You know 'Do this, do that, do the other' just as long as I wasn't engaged in the clinical anaesthesia, you see. And Dr

Mary Burnell from Adelaide, she said to me 'Gwen, you'll go mad if you haven't got anything to do for six months. Why don't you talk to the older pioneer anaesthetists on tape and find out what, what it was like in their early days?' So I thought that was a good idea. But when I thought it over – I was in Melbourne – and when I thought it over I thought 'Well, maybe I'd better look up what they did in the early days! I'd better go to the nearest library.' So I did. I went to the British Medical Association library in Melbourne and asked the librarian for some material on the early anaesthetists. I meant early specialists, but she didn't know that. How could she? So she brought me a great big pile of brown envelopes about that high, and I'd never been in that library before and I didn't know her, I didn't quite like to say 'Hey, you've given me the wrong ones.' And so I opened the top envelope, and here I sit today because I opened that top envelope.

MB That was an incredible … crossing with chance.

GW Because the next thing I … I opened it, and it was all about the, nobody knew who'd given the first anaesthetics…

MB In Australia?

GW …in Australia. It could have been one of two men. And I've always been interested in detective stories, and I thought maybe with six months an anaesthetist could find out what they hadn't found out before. It took me 14 years but I did find out!

MB You went on an incredible quest, a great odyssey. I mean, it was incredible wasn't it?

GW But … so that was, that was how it all started. And about … later on I heard the, in the library that day I heard the librarian laughing beside me, and she said 'I've given you an extra half hour but it's six o'clock and I have to close the library now.' Hooked! And I'm still hooked!

MB Still hooked!

GW That's right.

MB I mean, this has been the most incredible 30, 34 years now hasn't it?

GW That's right.

MB And you're still on the trail.

GW I'm still looking things up, yes, indeed.

MB Gwen, tell me a little bit about that story, those early discoveries about anaesthesia, which took you to Launceston I think?

GW Well, what I found in the library that day was that nobody had really looked into who gave the first anaesthetic in Australia. They'd written about the first

anaesthetics, about two men – Pugh[7] in Launceston, and Belisario[8] in Sydney – but nobody had ever really looked into it. And I didn't know, I was busy and things, and then one Saturday morning I thought mmm, supposing one got the news first. I'd better look into the shipping. So for the next several years I looked into shipping to Australia in 1846 and 1847, and I found that Belisario had heard the news before Pugh. But the arrival of the news was such a fascinating story that I read a paper on it, and it was really the paper that was responsible for me being asked to write the book because everybody was fascinated with the way the news got here. It came by two routes. It came round the Cape [of Good Hope] with the *Prince of Wales* and the *Niagara* to Sydney, but neither of them published it! They didn't publish it after those, they, when I...

MB None of the newspapers actually took it up?

GW When *Prince of Wales* arrived early in May 1847, having completed the trip in … oh, the usual 130 days from England, they … they didn't publish the news of anaesthesia at all. And I thought that was a bit odd. And then when *Niagara* arrived about a fortnight later then the news did appear. And that was fine.

MB That was in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, or something like that?

GW That's right, the *Sydney Morning Herald*. I had to check that it was still…

MB Yeah

GW And, so, I began to look into the shipping more and more. And then I went to Adelaide – and by this time every time I went to a meeting in another state I was going to the library and spending time there looking up when the news arrived, when the first anaesthetic was given – and then Adelaide, to my stunned surprise, I found that it arrived before it had in Sydney…

MB But no one had acted on it.

GW …via a ship called the *Lightning*. And the *Lightning* was a sailing ship, but she'd come to Adelaide from Singapore. So I thought 'That's fine, Singapore.' And so as I went out after discovering this I said to the librarian 'The ship that brought this news which was published in the paper on the 4th of May, the ship that brought this news came by the overland route. What's the overland route?' She said 'Oh, my goodness! We've got hundreds of books on the overland route!' I said 'What is it?' She said, got out a map and showed me. She said 'They came from England to Gibraltar, to Malta, to Alexandria in little steam ships, and at Alexandria they unloaded it. And the news actually was put on camel trains that went across the desert to Suez where it was picked up by another steam ship and taken to Point de Galle in Ceylon, which is now Sri Lanka. And from Galle, it was transferred to smaller ships, which took it to Malacca and Singapore and Penang, and Hong Kong. And at Singapore, it was put on board the *Lightning*, the sailing ship, for Adelaide.'

MB So that was the journey.

[7] Dr William Russ Pugh.
[8] Dr John Belisario.

GW That was the journey.

MB But no one published it?

GW That was the journey of our news. And that was quite something.

MB But no one, but no one took it up in Adelaide at that time?

GW No, no. They got the news but…

MB They got the news first, but…

GW …but they didn't give the anaesthetic.

MB They didn't win the race.

GW No. No, they didn't.

MB But the race was actually won in Sydney, by Belisario?

GW Yes.

MB A dentist. I mean, that was the first dental use here?

GW He was, he was a dentist, a very noted one. He actually founded the science of dentistry in Australia; he's called 'The father of Australian dentistry.'

MB I think he'd come out from England a few years before, 1841 or some time like that.

GW Yes. And, well earlier…

MB And he was practising in Sydney?

GW …earlier than that, actually. But it was a question of looking into them both, and so I started looking into that. And I couldn't find exactly where Belisario had given the anaesthetic but I did find that he and the man who … Charles Nathan, who assisted him or sort of stood by while he gave the anaesthetic…

MB He was a local doctor?

GW Yes, he was a local doctor and became a noted surgeon at Sydney Hospital. He and Nathan had met together and had a chat together at the Queen's birthday levee at Government House, just a few days before.

MB And then the experiment started.

GW Yes.

MB So he did a dental…

GW Of course, they talked to each other and got together, and decided they'd give it a go.

MB Probably gave each other a bit of confidence.

GW That's right. And so that was…

MB Yeah. And then they started it properly?

GW …that was the last week in May as far as I can make out, and the first week in June, that they gave…

MB In 1847.

GW Yes.

MB And so they were the first. And it was happening in Sydney, not far from here in Macquarie Street.

GW That's right.

MB Not far from here, but that place I don't think exists any more.

GW No, no, it doesn't. No, we don't know where. It doesn't exist any more.

MB Right, but it was given…

GW But we know that Belisario's lifestyle was very elegant and relaxed. He rode his horse almost every day to South Head and then in the afternoon, in the late afternoon when they did it, apparently he drove his wife round, all round the parks and they met all their friends and sat down beside the water to have chats and things.

MB An upper crust kind of existence.

GW And they entertained lavishly, and I've, I've put in my book that it must be … the smell of ether coming into the parlour must have astonished the ladies a bit!

MB Did it make quite a stir in Sydney, the news, when it was published that the dental operations had been done?

GW Eventually. Eventually, because … at first they thought it was just another Yankee dodge and they weren't interested. But when they heard about Belisario, and on the 7th of June Belisario gave a sort of public demonstration, and he asked the editor of the *[Sydney Morning] Herald* and other doctors and they all came to watch him give the anaesthetic and do it. And that was the answer to the question, because the editor wrote it up in a tiny paragraph in the *Herald* the next day, on the 8th of June. And nobody had ever seen it before I did because it was in a column headed 'Sales by Auction', and at the bottom was this tiny paragraph, about so big, that said the editor

had been the day before to watch Mr Belisario giving anaesthetics and he would explain more fully later. Everybody knew about later, which was the 16th of June when he put the whole bit in the paper.

MB But that was the first little crunchy bit.

GW Yes.

MB That was it.

GW Yes. But if I hadn't seen that…

MB You wouldn't have known that…

GW …if I hadn't seen that when I looked at them again in the public library… And I was lucky that time; because I went at night I didn't have to see the thing on computer. Not the way to read a paper – you miss the little bits.

MB But you got it.

GW Yes, but when I went back again… And I got out the papers again, got the papers this time because it was night time. And I sat there … I couldn't believe it, because one of Belisario's patients on that occasion had had a previous anaesthetic. So I had to chase off to the archives, the sailing archives, the shipping archives, to find out whether this man had arrived in time to have had an anaesthetic in England before he came to Australia, and whether there were any ships that came to America that might have brought him to Australia. But I found he wasn't, he was Nathan's brother. So I think Nathan and … Belisario must have persuaded Nathan's brother to…

MB The first guinea pig.

GW Yes.

MB That's a phenomenal story, Gwen.

GW Mmm?

MB That's a phenomenal story, isn't it.

GW Well, it was phenomenal that…

MB And it took you over, didn't it? It took your life over a lot.

GW Oh, absolutely. I couldn't, I couldn't…

MB I mean, you were in the libraries like there was no tomorrow!

GW I couldn't resist it! Well, when I used to go into the Mitchell Library they'd say to me 'Oh, Dr Wilson, not the ships again!'

MB So Gwen, we've got that started in Sydney, in May, in May 1847.

GW Yes, in May 1847.

MB But you also were trying to say where… I mean, you were very interested in where was it first used in surgical operations. That was your other great question.

GW No, I was just interested in whether it was Pugh or Belisario.

MB Oh really? It was just a contest? But Belisario won?

GW Well, Belisario won with the first anaesthetic. But Pugh won…

MB With the surgery?

MB …doing the first operation, the first anaesthetic for surgery.

MB Yeah. Yeah, this is the point I'm really pushing.

GW And that was very soothing when I read a paper in Hobart about the two, because I'd heard from a kind person when I got to Hobart for the meeting that there was going to be a lot of argument if I said Pugh hadn't given the first anaesthetic. So I…

MB Did a lot of people want Pugh…

GW …so I was very glad that I'd been tactful and said that, I honoured them both, because although Belisario's were first his were dental, but that Pugh had given the first anaesthetic…

MB It was only a week or two wasn't it, only a week or two between anyway?

GW Well, I mean eventually, you see, Belisario did his public demonstration here on the 7th of June, and Pugh did his first anaesthetic <u>also</u> in front of the editor of the *Launceston Examiner* on the 7th of June in Launceston. I mean, it's an unbelievable coincidence.

MB Isn't it, isn't it?

GW Two men as far apart as that and as far from Boston as they both were…

MB And no collusion?

GW No collusion at all.

MB It all happened in that kind of synchronage?

GW That's right. And as far as I know William Russ Pugh, who gave the anaesthetic in Launceston… And why William Russ Pugh, of all the, all the doctors in Australia, don't ask me. Why it should have been him I don't know.

MB And at Launceston.

GW At Launceston, which was off the beaten track.

MB Yes, because if it had to arrive in Hobart – the message – it still had to get to Launceston.

GW That's right. Two days by coach!

MB And was this in a, this was in a small hospital there?

GW Yes, it was a hospital that Pugh and his partner had built, and opened – St John's Hospital, Launceston – which is still there, exactly as it was.

MB Really? Is that a museum now? Is that…?

GW No, it's a restaurant!

MB It's a restaurant!

GW And fortunately the restaurant owner is very co-operative, and when a group of anaesthetists go there we get the red carpet laid out because in that same square is Pugh's house, and his laboratory where he made his ether and made his apparatus, and lit his house with gas long before Launceston was gas-lit.

MB So he was an entrepreneurial figure.

GW Oh yes.

MB Of some class.

GW Oh yes. Very much so, very much so. But it's fascinating to go and see this square, because on one side of the square [are] his house and the church where he was married, and on the other side is the hospital.

MB Gwen, I can't resist asking you, you must have checked up on how the message got to Hobart?

GW Oh yes, of course!

MB That was a different ship – it didn't call in at Hobart, or Sydney and have a round trip? It was a different, different ship?

GW Well, I couldn't find that any word of anaesthetic was in any of the Tasmanian papers until after the arrival of the *Lady Howden*. And the *Lady Howden* came to Hobart, and the news still wasn't published. But Pugh got the, one of the London

papers, which had a photograph of the apparatus in it, or had a drawing of the apparatus.

MB Which we've got somewhere, actually.

GW Yes, we've got that.

MB We've got somewhere, actually, a copy of that. You might like just to, just to hang on to that, because I think the camera will probably take that on and we can focus in on it. [Dr Wilson holds up the picture] But that was the *London Illustrated News*?

GW Yes, the *London Illustrated News.*

MB The *Illustrated London News*.

GW The *Illustrated London News*, yes. And both Pugh and Belisario copied this.

MB Made their own apparatus on those lines.

GW That's right, they both copied it. But, but one meeting I went to, somebody said to me 'But that was … that was in *The Lancet*,' and I said 'Well, they didn't take it from *The Lancet*, they took it from the *Illustrated London News* because they both recorded that.'

MB Yes. And that related to, as I say, a London, a London use of ether.

GW Oh yes, it was.

MB Earlier that year in January or something like that.

GW No, December – December 1846. 21st of December 1846.

MB Because the experiments were in Edinburgh but it was London news.

GW Published, published in the English papers on Christmas Day 1846. Yes.

MB So it was a Christmas message to…

GW Yes, that's right.

MB …that got here a bit late but was soon put into practice.

GW That's right.

MB What about the other states, Gwen? You, you got obviously into…

GW Well, they were a bit slower for various reasons. The first anaesthetic in Victoria was given by David John Thomas. But he was in a bit of a thing at the time that the news arrived because he'd applied to be put on the staff of the hospital which

had just been established and I guess he didn't want anything to happen to stop him getting appointed. So as soon as, as soon as the results were announced and he was on the staff of the hospital he gave the anaesthetic. And he really did a good job, because he didn't just give it. He had a very sick patient and he gave him … let him have a night's sleep – the patient had come from the country and been travelling for hours, and he let him have a night's sleep – and have plenty of cups of tea and things like that. In other words he resuscitated him before he anaesthetised him. And he made wonderful comments. He said, you know 'This gives the surgeon the wonderful present of time. He doesn't have to cut off a leg in 25 seconds any more, he can take time.'

MB And did it work or…

GW And Thomas also recommended that the dosage should be judged according to the patient's age and size and… He was the first one to do that in Australia and the first one to make those recommendations.

MB Sensible, analytical, scientific comments.

GW Yes, that's right, mmm. And then in Adelaide, in South Australia, Benjamin Archer Kent gave the first anaesthetic. But his was a good deal later, I think because they were waiting for special apparatus from England.

MB Yeah. They didn't make their own; they waited?

GW They waited! Don't ask me why he waited when he could put up his own prefabricated house and bring a steam engine to make bricks with, why he couldn't just make his own!

MB Because the rest found no problem at all.

GW And the interesting thing about those two ether equipments that arrived was that one had an oxygen attachment. And I rushed straight to the phone and got on to the people in Adelaide and found out that they did have oxygen in Adelaide in 1847!

MB But you, somehow, became responsible for the publication of a … or had a part in sorting out a publication of Archer Kent's biography.

GW Benjamin Archer Kent's biography, yes.

MB What part did you have in that? What actually happened?

GW Yes, Benjamin's son … well, I was talking about all this kit business, because I went to the Isle of the Wight to see if I could find his house and his grave.

MB Oh really? You traced it that far back?

GW Oh yes, I'd traced it that far back.

MB You've spent your life doing these things!

GW Well, it made a fascinating trip to England! And so I … I was talking to someone about this trip, to a lass who was just about to go to England, and I said 'Well you'd better go to the Isle of Wight and look at Kent's grave' – because she was in Adelaide, you see, this girl. And a few months later I had an absolutely excited letter from her. She'd been talking to the neurosurgeon she'd been giving anaesthetics for, and he'd said casually over morning tea, you know, 'Where do you live in Australia? Where do you come from?' And she said 'Adelaide.' And he said 'Oh, my great-grandfather used to be in Adelaide, he was a doctor there.' And she said 'Oh, who was he?' And he said 'His name was Benjamin Archer Kent.' She said 'What? He gave the first anaesthetic in South Australia.' And then the surgeon said 'What!' So I had a madly excited airmail letter from him, of course! This was all some time ago, or I guess I'd have got a fax!

MB Yes. But you, you stimulated the start of this biography, I think.

GW Well, he got very interested in it, because they, the family had no idea. So he looked it all up, and got the family together and they … they found his … Kent's cataract and all sorts of things. And so he wrote the book and he sent it by airmail to me, which was very delightful[9].

MB The anaesthetic that people were giving, Gwen, at that time was pretty simple. It was ether…

GW It was ether.

MB … in a very simple way.

GW Yes, very simple.

MB I mean, it was a simple dispenser, and they were just inhaling the fumes.

GW Yes, that's right.

MB Ether vapour.

GW But you see, it was interesting because they used an apparatus somewhat similar to that that I just showed you for the first one. But, of course, Morton[10] in Boston tried to patent his apparatus and they all thought that was a no-no, a no-no. A doctor patenting something that was…

MB At that time.

GW …to save lives. And so other surgeons tried it just with a handkerchief folded and pouring the ether on.

MB And that worked?

[9] Peter Howard Schurr, Edward Hare, *Benjamin's son: Benjamin Archer Kent MD (1808-1864)*, London: Royal Society of Medicine Services, c.1991.
[10] William Thomas Green Morton.

GW And they used it that way in America for many, many years; they didn't use the apparatus they used in England.

MB Was that rag and … that was origin of the tin, rag and bottle?

GW That came later. That came later.

MB I'm just wondering about the northern kind of states – Queensland and the North?

GW I've never been able to find, and neither has Professor Tess Cromond(?) been able to find when the first anaesthetic was given.

MB But you're still looking, I guess?

GW Well, I'm absolutely positive that it would have been in 1847 because the man in charge of the hospital was a very progressive man, and I'm sure he would have given one. And the same was in Western Australia. The only evidence we have in Western Australia was that … the surgeon for the state, the government surgeon, ordered quite a lot of ether in 1847.

MB So it looks as though it was all on.

GW So it looks as though it was being given there, as I say, yes.

MB And very quickly it took hold in Australia, this kind of procedure.

GW Yes. But then, you see, I was asked to read a paper in England about the spread of anaesthesia beyond Europe. Somebody had heard me read a paper on the arrival of the news here, I suppose, and so then I was plunged into…

MB A lot wider reading.

GW …writing to librarians in South Africa, in Mauritius … in, in Malaysia and Singapore and Hong Kong and India, all to find out what had happened. And that was a fascinating story too.

MB Which put you really on the map, Gwen, in a big way. I mean, in the sense that you were a great historian of anaesthetics.

GW Well, I think that paper was of interest to everybody, because nobody had ever worked out before how it went round the world. And it went round so quickly. I mean, within eight months anaesthetics were given here, in an era when the normal sailing time was between 100 and130 days. And even coming by the overland route, you see, they still had to sail from Singapore. So it was a hundred days. A splendid voyage in the *Lightning* to Adelaide!

MB Yeah, it sure was.

GW Well, that's what, that's what the papers said – 'A splendid voyage.'

MB Gwen, thank you for taking me through those stories, I greatly appreciate that. It's, it's a story I'd not gone through before.

GW They are fun, aren't they!

MB It led to a life of contribution to the history of anaesthetics.

GW Yes.

MB And you published somewhat later, but work was obviously induced from those kind of periods, the sixties and seventies. You published an enormous history, fifty years of anaesthetics, which…

GW Fifty years of the Australian Society of Anaesthetists[11]. But that isn't, that isn't the big book, that's just about…

MB No, and you were mentioning the big book.

GW That comes, that goes from 18… The first volume … goes from 1846 to 1934, when the Society was founded.

MB And this is just in, just about to be given birth.

GW Just about. Next…

MB It's just about to come out next week, and I shall miss it! But that's a vast work.

GW Oh yes.

MB 660…

GW 660 pages is Volume One.[12]

MB And Volume…

GW And Volume Two will be no smaller.

MB And I will refer to this, to this work because the bibliography in the first one, that must have several thousand references. It's the largest kind of just work of reference I think I've ever seen.

GW It's been… It's a little larger than it need be because I got sick of having to look up different sections of references, so I've put the same reference in several

[11] G Wilson, *Fifty Years: The Australian Society of Anaesthetists*, published by the Society, 1987.
[12] G Wilson, *One Grand Chain: The History of Anaesthesia in Australia 1846-1962*, Sydney: Bridge Printery Pty Ltd., 1995.

sections so that people who look in the history section can go back to another section to find the other papers. But anyway, I've tried!

MB Gwen, just moving towards the end of our, of our time of talking together, because we have a limited time. Just moving into that, I just want to think of two or three things that, that really came up. Your career still went on as anaesthetist until retirement age.

GW Oh yes.

MB And you, you worked quite hard.

GW Oh yes.

MB And I'd just like to pay a tribute to your, to your second husband, because we haven't actually given him a fair share of this. You got married again. You might tell me about the date of that, and the support you got from your second husband.

GW Yes. Thomas Edward Wilson was never satisfied unless he was writing and I was writing, and…

MB And he supported you. And I think you wrote something together?

GW Mmm?

MB You wrote something together, I think you wrote a book in…

GW Oh yes, we wrote a book on nursing together. Or he wrote most of it. I wrote chapters on how to look after them preoperatively, during operation and after operation, anaesthetically speaking.

MB When did you actually come together? When did you get married?

GW We got married in 1962.

MB Right. So the kind of wilderness, those quiet years of being alone were over and you've had a partner now for a substantial…

GW Oh yes. Well, it was wonderful, although…

MB It's a very different marriage.

GW …we had to be extremely careful because we argued about commas and full stops, at length!

MB Oh, you were a tough one.

GW Yes!

MB You were a tough lot! Gwen, some of this work eventually became fitted into a thesis…

GW Yes.

MB …which we ought to talk about.

GW Those two books constituted … the Sydney University introduced new rules that you could apply for a doctorate of medicine with published work rather than a new thesis. So I saw this in the university *Bulletin*, and I thought c*arpe diem*!

MB You went for it, absolutely!

GW *Carpe diem*! And apparently it took them about a year to decide because the professor of history didn't go for it at all.

MB But it was history, indeed.

GW Yes.

MB Well, that's a powerful change, you know. So that was a breakthrough.

GW Yes.

MB And congratulations on that.

GW Yes, well, the MD was the first and purely for history. And so, you know, and also I've written about 80 … well, I've spoken 81 times and 81…

MB A lot of papers.

GE …81, not altogether publications, because I didn't always publish what I spoke about, because it's in the books!

MB Gwen, just a final thing, the final … the icing on the cake we call it is … you might just tell me. This year is about to be a great year for you because you, you've got to go to Boston to receive an award?

GW No. I'm, I'm going to Boston to speak at the ceremony which marks the 150th anniversary…

MB Of Morton.

GW …of Morton's anaesthetic in Boston. And then I go to New Orleans to have the laureate, the first history laureate of anaesthesia history in the world, to have that endowed in New Orleans at the meeting of the full American Society of Anaesthesiologists.

MB What date is that going to be on?

GW That's October, October the 20th.

MB Gwen, that will be a great day.

GW But October 16th will be Boston; that'll be 150 years. So it's going to be exciting.

MB So a woman who knows a lot more about that 150 years than anybody else will actually be getting a laureate.

GW Well, I don't know that I know about it, more about it than anyone else, I think I just had to look up so much because nothing had ever been done in Australia before. And Australia was at the ends of the earth, and all the news came here, and all they had to import all the drugs and … and apparatus and everything else, so I had to read up all that stuff from other countries!

MB Gwen, thank you for talking to me about it.

GW It's a pleasure.

MB And have a very good, have a very good October!

GW Thank you very much. I'm sure I will.

MB Thank you very much.

GW I'll have my 80th birthday between…

MB Well, congratulations!

GW …Yale and Boston!