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Full transcript of an interview with

A. A. ABBIE

On 10 June 1973

By Janet Robertson

Recording available on CD

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Now in retirement. Our guest today in this series is the distinguished medical scholar and a former Dean of the faculty of Medicine at Adelaide University, Emeritus Professor A.A. Abbie. Professor Abbie was born in Kent and educated at a school in Rochester and at the Universities of Sydney and London. In Sydney he was the winner of a Walter and Eliza Hall Travelling Fellowship which took him abroad from 1932 to 1934, and a year later he took up his first academic appointment as Senior Lecturer in Anatomy at Sydney University. He served from 1941 to 1945 with the AIF and near the War’s end he was appointed Elder Professor of Anatomy and Histology at The University of Adelaide, a chair which he held until his retirement in 1970. Professor Abbie has been closely associated, too, with anthropological research. He was for many years on the Council of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies and he has been Chairman of the South Australian Board of Aboriginal Affairs. As a few extras to his many-stringed bow, he was for nineteen years a member of the Flora and Fauna Board of South Australia and as Deputy Chairman for a time and, as a change from things scientific, he was for fifteen years Chairman of the Council of Governors of the Presbyterian Girls’ College at Glen Osmond. For our program today Janet Robertson had this interview with him at his Unley Park home.

Professor, you have rather an uncommon name, with perhaps ecclesiastical connotations. Do you know its origin?

Well, so far as I can discover my ancestors came from France, so there might have been a renegade Abbé in the background.

Was your father a clergyman?

No, oh no. He was in the Royal Navy - quite different. (laughs)

And you were brought up where - in England?

In Kent, well I was born there east of the Medway and the three Medway towns Gillingham, Chatham and Rochester, and so I am a man of Kent. Dad travelled a lot, of course, and Mother travelled with him when we were younger, and when it came to settling down to school we settled down in – actually - in Gillingham and I went to school in Rochester.
Had you been overseas at all before you went to school in Rochester?

Oh yes, for a time my father was attached to what was called the ‘Australian squadron’ of the Royal Navy and so we were out here for a while. In fact, my sister was born in New Zealand. I did a little schooling in New Zealand and we came back to Sydney and I did a little schooling in Sydney, and I went to England and did all the rest in schooling there. It was called Sir Joseph Williamson’s Mathematical School. Sir Joseph Williamson was the owner of Cobham Hall which is now the home of the Earls of Darnley, and I think he was ancestral to them. He founded the school so that the sons of the freemen of Rochester could be taught the art and science of navigation.

And that’s why it was a mathematical school?

Well, that’s what it was called. (laughs)

Did you learn plenty of mathematics there?

No, I was never any good at maths. (laughter) I didn’t learn - they tried to teach me.

But you weren’t an apt mathematician?

No.

Did you decide to study medicine early in life, or how did that come about?

Oh I suppose by the time I was about fourteen, I decided medicine was what I wanted to do. I did pass exams to enter the Navy but by that time I was determined to become a doctor instead.

Was there any particular reason for you coming to that decision?

I think it was probably an accident I had and the doctor was so good and I thought, ‘Well, now, this person is really doing good in the world - I could do the same.’

Where did you originally study medicine - you studied in Sydney didn’t you?

In Sydney, yes.

Was that again because your father happened to be there?

No, no. He had retired from the Navy by then and my mother’s health broke down and the people in England decided she would be better in a warmer climate - she was a New Zealander.
How come then if you'd studied medicine – and you did become a doctor – what prompted you to specialise in anatomy?

Actually when I went through - I was doing my medical course - I got a bit ambitious and did a BSc degree at the same time and it was mostly in anatomy. And then when I graduated I did three years’ residence at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, for which I am profoundly grateful because it taught me the problems that my future pupils would have. Then a scholarship came up and I thought, ‘Well, I’m not really cut out for treating measly kids. I’ll try and specialise in anatomy,’ and I went for the scholarship and got it.

Where did that take you to?

In theory it would have taken me anywhere in England. In practice I chose University College, London because there was a - it was in the charge of a - the head of the department was a former Sydney graduate, Sir Grafton Elliot Smith. So I worked there for two years. I also worked on the Continent in Amsterdam with Arians Cappers [?] of the Central Institute for Brain Research and in Paris with Raoul Antony at the Musée de Soin Naturel[?]. At that time I was mainly interested in the brain and that’s what I was working on at University College – well, actually I started off on the arteries of the brain, blood supply – and then I continued in Amsterdam and a bit more in Paris. Of course, Elliot Smith was a marvel and so was Cappers and Raoul Antony was a very eminent and very accomplished comparative anatomist but he was a little bit temperamental, perhaps. (laughs) I remember him having a row with his research assistant - she was at the top of the stairs and he was at the bottom (laughter) - shouting at each other.

Things were quite lively in his lab?

Oh yes. England was full of eminent people in those days. Apart from Sir Grafton Elliot Smith, there was Sir Arthur Keith, the man who later became Sir Wilfred Legro Clark[?], and then there were people like Sir Charles Sherrington, Sir Gowland Hopkins, the biochemist. I worked in Sir Arthur Keith’s department for a short time at the College of Surgeons.

And how - was there any other way that you came in contact with them?
Well, at the Anatomical Society meetings or sometimes they had material I wanted to examine so I’d ring them up and ask them if I could come down to the lab and look over it. They were great men.

**What brought you back to Australia when you were obviously in a very fascinating position research wise?**

Well, I had been offered a few jobs in England (coughs) but the terms for my scholarship compelled me to come back to Australia for the third year and so I did, and worked at Sydney – and by that time I’d got married and I liked it there so I stayed - in the Anatomy Department. I was thirty-five. I went on the Anatomy staff at Sydney University - I was senior lecturer there - and the War, of course, came in ’39 which was four years later, and I got into the army by ’41. I did get to New Guinea - I didn’t do anything very exciting. They rather suspected, I think, that although I was in the Medical Corps I wouldn’t be a terribly good doctor by then (laughs) so they first of all gave me a job as Registrar of a big general hospital, field hospital, and we got that under way - this was after the Japs had come in. Then they decided that medical people were wasted being Registrars - anybody could do that sort of job - so I got shifted off onto chemical warfare research, a complete waste of three years. I mean, my career was in anatomy, to which I strongly intended to return.

It was towards the end of the War. I had been away and knew there was an expedition mounting to go to Borneo so I enquired what my chances were for that and was told, ‘Not at all’. At just about that time I got a letter from Professor Goldby here asking if I would be interested in the Chair in Adelaide because he was going back to England. So I went to the DGMS\(^1\) and told him about this, and I came over to Adelaide to see the people here and then shortly afterwards they offered me the Chair. So I asked if I could be released from the Army and I was, I was shot out in three days and I think it was mainly because the DGMS was an Adelaide medical graduate.

**What was the University like in those days, because it was much smaller, of course, than it is now?**

\(^1\) Director-General of Medical Services.
Ooh, it was tiny. You could breathe in places around the grounds - it is very hard to do so now. The whole staff numbered eighty only and they were led by that striking person Sir William Mitchell who was Chancellor.

Were you among one of the first professors of anatomy at the Adelaide?

Far from it, I was the - I had five predecessors and I think I am rather unique. I knew them all - Watson, Wood-Jones, Woollard, Wilkinson, Goldby and I’m the sixth so I think I know myself and now I know my successor, Professor Priedkalns, so I have known the first seven Elder Professors of Anatomy here.

That’s rather unusual. How did it happen?

Well, Watson of course had retired, but he lived for a very long time after he retired and he used to go to Thursday Island every winter by ship and stopped in at Sydney and I met him then and we corresponded later. Wood-Jones I knew when he was in the Chair in Melbourne and later in England. Woollard was one of my examiners from my London PhD. Wilkinson taught me some aspects of anatomy in Sydney University and Goldby I knew in Cambridge. I can’t recall the number of students, I do know that in my first year here I had the biggest year they’d ever had in medicine which numbered forty so that you could then know all your students and you could know all your colleagues on the staff without any trouble - but it is completely hopeless now.

I suppose that’s one of the main changes - the increase in population?

Oh yes, the place has become largely splintered up into self-contained pockets and to a large extent, although students really don’t change very much, it’s become dehumanised, I think, on the administrative side.

Were you involved very much in the enlarging - I mean, for instance, the building of your own department which must have been done in your time?

Oh yes. I designed the medical school in Frome Road and I had two - worked with two very good architects who made my ideas practicable. One of them was Walter Bagot, the other was Louis Laybourne-Smith and so that was the building, but it took a long time. It was calculated to take twice the biggest number they ever had, say, would provide fairly comfortably for an annual intake of about a hundred students, so
that means you would have two hundred medical students at a time in the building. I had a little trouble persuading the Council to accept this size and ironically when we did move in, in 1949, we had the biggest third year we’d ever had - 139 in the one year. First year I was here I had only one lecturer and the years were getting bigger and bigger so I remember the first year I not only gave - I must have given about 250 lectures that year as well as going into the dissecting room every day. Things gradually improved as we managed to accumulate more staff and then I could get back to research work again as well.

**What sort of research were you doing during this period?**

Well broadly speaking, we’d come under the heading of comparative neurology. It was the brains, particularly of marsupials and monotremes.

**You also led quite a number of expeditions to study Aboriginal – – –.**

That came later.

**How did that happen?**

Well, when I first got here I found the police expected me to be their adviser on human remains and although I had done a little work with Aboriginal skulls, I felt I had better know more about them. So I got an expedition together in 1951 and we went up to Yuendumu - that was my first time out in the field. We’d been out many times since - we’ve been to Yuendumu, Haasts Bluff twice, Beswick in southwest Arnhem Land, .... in northern Arnhem Land, Yatala - out in the far west here - and up in the Kimberleys.

**What did you actually do on those sorts of expeditions?**

Ah well, it comes broadly under the heading of physical anthropology. Let’s say we measured as hard we could, we photographed as hard as we could and we made all the less precise observations that one makes on say, hair form and hair colour, shape of brow, shape of nose, shape of ears, size of ears and so on - all that sort of thing. The real purpose was that nobody had done it before and we were aiming to get these people before they’d stopped being nomadic - while they were still in their pristine state as it were - so that there would be a permanent record as a sort of baseline for
anybody who wanted to see what changes happen under our - under urbanisation and so on.

You’re also interested – but perhaps it’s fascinated – in evolution, aren’t you, too?

Yes, oh yes. I put my foot in it several times in that field.

How come? (laughter)

Well, nobody would ever agree with me.

Why don’t they agree with you? Have you got very radical views or just happen to be different?

I wouldn’t regard them as radical really because they have been not exactly adumbrated by other people but hinted at. I merely took them a bit further. But by this time the geneticists and taxonomists and the entomologists and the ornithologists had more or less taken over the field of evolutionary theory and so nobody would listen to me. They evolved their theories from the birds and insects and they are applying them holus bolus to man now, which is something I still find a little bit uncomfortable to accept.

Your interests haven’t been confined entirely to university though, have they?

Well I was on the Fauna and Flora Board for nineteen years - they run Flinders Chase, you know. Well, they did; it’s all been changed now. I was Deputy Chairman for three years. I was on the Council of the Presbyterian Girls’ College for about 25 years and I was Chairman for fifteen. Now what else? I was Chairman of the Aboriginal Affairs Board while it lasted for nine years, and of course the innumerable boards you get onto in university.

What sort of work did you sort of instigate or start in connection with the Flora and Fauna Board?

Didn’t start any, actually. What we were trying to do is to get the place habitable - decent roads, decent buildings, adequate fire breaks, things of that sort which were urgently necessary.

You were also on the Zoo Council - how did that come about?
I had been a member of the Zoo - of the Royal Zoological Society - for some years and then the President asked me if I’d join the Council and I was interested in comparative anatomy so I agreed. I suppose I was on it for about eight years.

**What sort of things happened during that time?**

We started this reorganisation of the Zoo - particularly the better accommodation for the animals, which is now coming to fruition very nicely.

**And it is really rather outstanding in the world of zoos, isn’t it?**

Well, I would think that the Adelaide Zoo stands second to Taronga Park in Australia.

**Now that you have retired, how different is your life?**

It’s changed in many ways, of course. I don’t teach now and I miss that, I like the students, I like teaching. On the other hand I have no worries with the university administration which I do like - that’s the biggest relief. I can get on with what’s left over from my own work and I’m on a few odd things like the Queen Victoria Hospital Board of Management and the Aboriginal Historic Relics Advisory Committee, Preservation Advisory Committee - you know, things crop up. (laughter)

**What sort of research are you still doing?**

I’m still finishing off my field work on the Aborigine.
Incidentally, does a scientist live a dual kind of a life? If so, have you had one?

In a way, I suppose. Depends upon what he chooses to work on in his laboratory. I rather remember the American who said - who put up a notice - ‘Here we study nothing that’s going to have any importance to anyone’. Well, a lot of the stuff we do or I have done is not of any importance to anyone - it’s comparative anatomy, comparative neurology. I think from the practical point of view the most important work was the work I did on the blood supply of the brain. It was badly misunderstood when I started it - people were still preaching what had been published by a couple of French neurologists back in 1870 – that’s Chacot and Duray - whereas a lot of what they said was wrong. It was my earliest work. I got onto it quite by accident, I was working on something else at the time and the brain was sort of put in my lap and said, ‘This woman had such-and-such, defective of vision – you’d better examine it.’ So I did and that sort of got me really sucked in and I continued it for years. You are an opportunist if you are a scientist - that’s to say things pop up and you say to yourself, ‘It shouldn’t be like that at all - it should be quite different according to the text book.’ and so it gets - you know, you sort of take it up. But it’s just something that you have seen accidentally, you take it up and you follow it and you get something entirely new out of it.

END OF INTERVIEW