Full transcript of an interview with

JESSIE DEAN

on 19 March 2003

by Rob Linn

Recording available on CD

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Mrs Dean, where and when were you born?

JD: I was born at Coonawarra in 1916.

And tell me, who were your parents?

JD: Alice and Ewen McBain.

Tell me about your father and mother, Mrs Dean.

JD: My father was manager of the original wine cellars, which Mr John Riddoch built. My mother happened to be a governess down here for the Morris family. They married in Mitcham where my mother came from. They lived at Coonawarra until I was six years old and then we went to Adelaide, only because it was so wet down here in those days and my father was crippled up with arthritis. He used walking sticks apparently, but I don't ever remember seeing them because he threw them away when we went to Adelaide. (Laughs) He didn't need them any more.

You said your mother came from Mitcham.

JD: Yes.

What was her maiden name?

JD: Hughes. She was brought up by her grandmother, who was Mrs Carruthers. I think there are streets named there by -

There are, yes. I know that name. It's a well known name.

JD: Well, of course, in those days it was a separate little village.

I'd like to find out a bit about your father from what you can remember, Mrs Dean.
Do you know how he came to be involved with wine?

JD: He was born and brought up at Lake Plains, which was a district only between Milang and Langhorne Creek. As far as I know he would’ve gone to Strathalbyn to the high school for his schooling. Then he went to Roseworthy College, and when he came home for a weekend he rode his push-bike.

From Roseworthy to Lake Plains?

JD: Yes. *(Laughs)* Through the Adelaide Hills.

Gosh!

JD: And you wouldn't know what the road looked like in those days either, which was not like it is today.

He was a graduate of Roseworthy, a gold medallist, which meant that he was Dux of the school. I believe his name is on the Honours List in the front entrance hall -

It is.

JD: but I haven't been there since my brother was there, which is a good many years ago.

Well, it is there.
So he was at Roseworthy?

JD: Yes. And he learnt that in the studies there.

You were saying that Professor Perkins was one of his contemporaries. Is that right?

JD: Yes. Apparently they got on very well together. *(Laughs)*

Even after what you told me?

JD: Yes. *(Laughter)* Even after what I told you.

Mrs Dean had just previously told me that her father was guilty of having painted Professor Perkins’ horse at one point.
JD: Well, compared with what the young men do today, it was quite a mild thing, wasn't it? But he couldn't recognise his own horse to go back to the college.

So in other words, your father, Ewen, was really quite highly educated for the time -

JD: Yes.

- and had a knowledge of winemaking, and also I guess horticulture from the college.

JD: Yes. Then when John Riddoch decided that vines grew down here and he built the old cellars—he happened to be a friend of Professor Perkins too—he said that it's all very well to get everything going, but he didn't know who to put in charge to do it, because he couldn't do it. He didn't know anything about it. The Professor said, 'Well, I've got the man for you. Ewen McBain'. So Dad was the first one there that managed the cellars and was winemaker.

So that would've been 1896 I guess, was it? Somewhere around there anyway. That's when the colony was started.

JD: Yes.

Might've been a bit later. Did your father ever tell you about John Riddoch? Do you have any memories of that?

JD: No, not really. There were two John Riddochs, weren't there? Did he have a son John?

Oh, I can't remember his son's name.

JD: Because I can remember my mother, when we were over in Melbourne staying with another(?) sister—this was well before the War—going to Toorak one day to see Mr Riddoch. It would've been his son, I should think.

Did you remember Yallum Park at all though as a child?
JD: No, not as a child. I don't remember anything much about Coonawarra then except that I was really broken-hearted to leave Coonawarra because I had to part with my pet chook, which I called Speckled. Evidently it was a multi-coloured one. I always used to say that I didn't like that man. (Laughs) The poor man! He's dead, but his sons still live about there I think.

Was your house near the winery?

JD: To start with, apparently, they lived in that house directly opposite. Near the Soldiers' Memorial Hall there, do you mean?

JD: No. It's over the road. Alexander Road was -

Near where Rouge Homme was, is it?

JD: There's still a house there. Well, I think there is. Oh, I knew the man very well who lived there after us. He's dead now.

Was that one of the Redmans?

JD: No. Willy (?) Redman came and worked at the old cellars.

Do you remember that, do you?

JD: No. I mean, this is what happened. Dad taught him how to make wine. Then I think his cousins came and got jobs there, too.

I believe that's right. They've told me that as well. So your father had told you that, had he?

JD: Yes.

Hoffmans.

Oh, Arthur Hoffman.

JD: Yes. See, it comes to me in time, when I'm not even thinking about it.

So that's where your parents lived.
JD: They lived there to start with. I don't know how long Dad was at the winery, but then he bought the place that is between Hoffmans and the railway line. The woman there is Collett(?), but I can't think of her husband’s name. They have the camels. That's where we used to live.

If you have any memories, it would be that place I suppose.

JD: Yes.

Did you ever go down to the winery at all, Mrs Dean?

JD: I think we used to go there and play around a bit sometimes. Certainly went there when there was a flower shower on. In those days we didn't have the Institute built, and my mother, having an acre of garden, and a great friend of Mrs Willy Redman who was also a flower woman, demanded somewhere to have a flower show. So Dad had no option, did he? He had to clean out the place a bit so that his wife and her friends could have a flower show. (Laughs)

And in those days, Mrs Dean, were the Coonawarra people quite separate from the Penola people?

JD: Well, it was quite a distance, and it was only a metal road. You know, it was quite a business to get up on your horse and trap and go shopping in Mount Gambier, but then again you didn't always have to because the bread was delivered from Penola.

You said to me at the beginning that your father found it very difficult down here because of the wet.

JD: Well, it didn't agree with his health. He got rheumatism very badly and was on crutches there. That's why he gave it away. When we would go into Penola in the horse and trap, or whatever it was called, there was a drain either side of the metal road and that was always full of water. Believe you/me, the country out here that they called the Atlantic, was. Because since I’ve lived here, the man that used to own some of that country could only go out there on horse. Too wet.
To the west of Penola, would it be?

JD: Yes. But now with the drains and everything else, that's made a big difference. There are five ridges of hills—barely hills, but rises—between here and the sea, which was the old coastlines, and the water, if it fell there, it stayed there. Of course they made the mistake in the early days of making those drains too deep.

Yes, that's right. I recall that.
Mrs Dean, did your father ever talk about his work at all in later years? What he'd done down here with winemaking?

JD: I never heard my father talk about any work that he did.

I mean, say at a vintage time, did you ever remember as a child seeing the wagons come in with the grapes and that type of thing?

JD: No, I don't. We were very strictly brought up with our meals and things and we were not allowed to eat too many fruit, despite the local doctor here who said that we should all be eating plenty of fruit. So I believe Dad fixed him quite well by sending him a whole case of lemons once. (Laughs) I don't think the poor man ever ate lemons again after he'd finished that lot. Dad always said, 'Anything in moderation doesn't hurt you'.

So what was your father's character like? You said he had the gold medal. Was he a stern man, or not?

JD: No. Dad was a very quietly spoken man. I don't ever remember seeing, or hearing, him lose his temper. I don't think he'd know how. Some of his children learnt. (Laughs)

Perhaps it was your mother.

JD: No. They were really outstanding people I feel, looking back on them.

When he went to Adelaide, what work did he do then?

JD: Oh, just on half a dozen Boards.
Oh, was he? Citrus Boards and things like that?

JD: I don't know. There was one whose headquarters were on North Terrace. Bagot, *sounds like, Shakes* and Lewis.

Oh, company Boards?

JD: Yes. That's all he did.

So he must've been known as a good administrator, and that type of thing.

JD: Oh, yes, I don't think he was any fool. He bought a farm just south of Strathalbyn. He also bought a bit of land near Gawler somewhere. We had a big paddock at the back of our house in Adelaide—I think there are about 100 houses on it these days—because we always had our own cow. And we children had our pet sheep. And Mother wanted the chooks, of course. So living in the country, when you go to the city you can't go without all your animals, can you? Dad made us carts so we could harness our pet sheep into it, and all that sort of thing. It was sort of half-city and half-country living as far as we children were concerned.

So where was that in Adelaide?

JD: 15 Bridge Street, Kensington.

You would've had a very large block out there at the time then.

JD: Yes. The house block was big, too. We had a lawn tennis court and all the rest. We weren't hemmed in anywhere. Mum(?) had plenty of room to grow all her flowers and trees and plants—the things she wanted to do.

Mrs Dean, coming back to your Coonawarra years, did you know most of the other local children of the time?

JD: Oh, yes. Mostly the Redman children. One of the boys was my age. He was a wonderful friend, you know, because he was over at the McGilvray’s(?) once when we were there, and he taught me how to eat bread and jam. You put it under the tap first.
Oh, dear!

JD: We were great friends. *(Laughs)*

Was that Owen?

JD: Yes. *(Laughs)* He was the same age as me I think.

This is what the Coonawarra children did. *(Laughter)* So you can remember the families there. I guess it was a pretty basic sort of life for a lot of those people.

JD: Yes, I suppose it would be. I mean, the others went to school—well, I think the older ones would get on the train and go to Naracoorte High School. Of course they always arrived an hour after school started and played around for an hour after it finished to fit in with the train. *(Laughs)* But I don't know. It was the same names. The Charles(?). The Redmans. My mother knew everybody that grew flowers and plants of course. They were all her friends. The Reschkes. And Richardsons were there.

Richardson. That's another well-known name. Was *(sounds like, Sharrams)* out there at all?

JD: I don't remember that name.

Hoffmans were, you've said.

JD: Oh, yes, Arthur Hoffman was there. Well, he was the same age as my oldest brother. And they were mates.

Mrs Dean, you said you went down to Adelaide with your family, and I guess you grew up there.

JD: Yes.

You came back down to this district at a later date, didn't you?

JD: Yes. The other side of Mount Gambier.

So your husband, David, was from a grazing family. Is that right?

JD: David’s home was over at Kalangadoo—Koorine. The Bennett’s are there now.
Keith? No.

JD: No.

I’ve lost it, too. Forget it. So, if you like, you came back down to the area where you’d left your chook behind.

JD: (Laughs) Yes. Came back to collect it from Mr Geraghty(?).

(Laughter) His son is still here I think. Down at Coonawarra.

Did you come through this area at all after your marriage?

JD: After I was married?

Yes. When you were travelling to and fro, did you used to come through this area at all? What I’m trying to get to is that you didn’t have a lot of memories as a child of Coonawarra, but after you were married in the 40’s—was it?

JD: Yes, 1941.

Did you see the area then, and had it changed much, is what I wanted to say.

JD: Well, the area had. When we came down, David got a soldier settlement block, and I’d come into the town to do the shopping in the old ute and every second person would stop me and speak to me, and I wouldn’t know who they were. But they knew who I was because they said that I was the living image of my mother. They were the people that had lived here all their lives.

At Penola?

JD: Well, Penola or Coonawarra. The district, anyway. They’d always stop and speak to me. I’d have to say what’s your name, sort of business, because it was alright apparently for them because they knew who I was because they’d known my mother.

Was Coonawarra in those years from the 40’s still largely a grazing and agricultural area, and not so much a wine area?
JD: Mostly fruit.

Yes. Apricots and those sort of things.

JD: Yes.

**That's my memory of it, even in the 1960’s, that it was like that.**

JD: Riddoch cut it up into small blocks and sold it for fruit growing. Things were very different then. Dad went to see all the different ones when he was inspector of fruit before he went into the winery business. He said when he got there—I forget why the man was digging around his trees with a spade. They usually used a one furrow plough. You know, someone controlled the handles and someone pulled. Dad asked him why he wasn't using his plough. He said it was because his wife had died. Well, she used to pull it and he used to hang on to the handles, you see. So Dad, being a perfect gentleman, went to commiserate with him, and the courteous reply was, 'Oh, she was too light for the work anyway’. *(Laughter)*

**Goodness me!**

JD: It was a hard life for them.

Yes.

JD: You didn't have any tractors to pull it or anything else. They were all starting out. They made a go of it though. The thing that held any of them back at all was the distance to the market.

**Of course. It was too hard to get the produce there.**

JD: Oh, heavens, yes. The idea was alright but, as I say, it's only in the comparatively recent years that it hasn't mattered two hoots how far away from the market you are, you can get the things there.

**So your father, Ewen, had been an inspector, had he, prior to his job here?**

JD: I gather so, yes. From what I’ve been told.
And part of his job was to come down here and see how things were going?

JD: Yes.

Well, that's very interesting.
Over the years, after your marriage, did you see a big change in this Penola/Coonawarra area?

JD: Oh, heavens, yes. Definitely. Well, everything changed after the war, didn't it? Certainly the railways did. I can remember that Dad used to send pears to some people in South Africa.

Yes, that would be right. Oh, yes, they had a big export trade. From here?

JD: Yes. I thought they were pretty good to have things sent to Adelaide in those days, but as for sending them to South Africa, it was quite a business, wasn't it?

Absolutely. So there obviously was some hope there before the depression at least.

JD: Well, you could go down and buy a case of apricots and take them home and bottle them, or make jam with them, or anything else. All sorts of fruit. It was beautiful.

Do you think if your father hadn't had the rheumatism would he not have moved back to Adelaide?

JD: Oh, I don't think so.

So he actually liked it here, did he?

JD: Yes. Oh, yes, he liked it here. It was just that the climate didn't like him.

Did he ever talk about the wine industry at all in any way?

JD: No.

So was wine only just one part of the work he did here, in other words?
**JD:** Well, he was interested in anything that grew really, and especially in grasses and things like that.

**So he had a very broad interest, in other words?**

**JD:** Yes. Well, I know that Norman McBain started doing things here in the South East, but it was my father that was pushing behind him, telling him what to do. And using superphosphate and things like that, which was something new for the district.

**Norman McBain?**

**JD:** Yes.

**Was he a relative?**

**JD:** He was a first cousin of mine. It depended on how you felt whether you acknowledged it or not. *(Laughs)* We got on well together because I suppose we knew Norman very well. He was at boarding school in Adelaide when we were living there and he always came to us for his weekends off.

**If you have one strong memory of your father, Mrs Dean, what would it be?**

**JD:** I think he was the best man I knew at keeping discipline without raising his voice, or even saying very much. To this day, with the wind, if I lose my door and it bangs, I’ll quickly open it and shut it quietly because my father didn’t like a door being slammed. It had to be shut quietly. You can’t help it, it grows on you. But he was a very quiet man. I’ve never heard him say a nasty word about anybody or anything in my lifetime. We kids used to think he was a bit of alright, especially when he taught us that if you get a thing off a gum tree and hollow it out and put a hole this side and put sort of a little sort of bamboo in there, you can smoke it, with dead leaves in it. My mother was horrified. *(Laughs)*

**Well, Mrs Dean, thank you very, very much for talking to me today, even about the pipe. I’ll pass it on. Thank you.**