

TAPE NO. 4 – MARGARET CLARKE (WATT)

Margaret Watt left England for Fairbridge as a 10 year old with her 12 year old twin sisters Joy and June and 13 year old sister Rosemary in 1940. With the outbreak of the Second World War the party of 30 children sailed via Canada and was to be the last group of child migrants to Fairbridge for another seven years. Margaret left Fairbridge after 6 years in 1946 to be with her mother who had followed the children out to Australia.

This interview was recorded in Margaret's home in Sydney on January 31, 2006



HILL: Margaret, I wonder if you could, if you can recall, the circumstances that led you to come to Fairbridge and come to Australia.

CLARKE: I think because we were born in Nairobi in Kenya, well out of Nairobi on a property – my Father was a hunter and my Mother . . .

HILL: What sort of hunting?

CLARKE: He just hunted wild animals – if he caught them, he also shot them, but he did catch a lot of animals for zoos and shipped them out, but he also had coffee plantations and he made a life with my Mother there and she had nine children. Then when the depression came he went off to England to try and get money but he left us all there and my Mother had to get, somehow, get to England with eight children, because one died, and make a life for herself. So, we went to England in 1937 when I was seven years old, and I was the youngest of nine . . .

HILL: Can you remember the journey to England?

CLARKE: Yes, very well actually. Extremely well. I can remember Athica Bay very well, I remember my black nannies who cuddled us and looked after us and the servants we had, and going to England, we were just sort of shipped by slow boats route through the Suez - a long journey and I just had a polar bear and a doll which was pulled to pieces when we arrived in England because they thought a barmish (?) bomb was in the stomach of this big double-jointed doll. And then Mum was helped in England by Admiral Cochrane who was a great fan of her family's, a long-standing friend, and he suggested we went to boarding school at Esher. Four girls. And the boys were older. And then from Esher, when he thought the war was going to start, he suggested to my Mother we went to Fairbridge.

HILL: Now, did you meet up with your Father?

CLARKE: No. We did a little while, just after we went to England but by that time he had gone off with another woman and had two children, which we didn't know about. And so, Admiral Cochrane looked after us in the way that he paid for us to go to boarding school and then the four youngest, five girls, who were all the younger. And so in 1939 we heard suddenly that we were to leave Esher and go to, we went home for holidays, but we were to leave Esher and go to Fairbridge in London.

HILL: I see.

CLARKE: And we arrived in London a week before the war started.

HILL: Was this your Mother's decision?

CLARKE: With Admiral Cochrane's, yes. She thought that the best thing for us to do was be out to Australia, yes.

HILL: So how many of you were going to Fairbridge?

CLARKE: Well, five of us were going to go – the five of us were there. It was five girls and who were all younger than the boys. So my Mother joined the Army in the ATS as an officer, my eldest brother was in the WRANS, my second brother was in the Air force, and the youngest one joined, under age, in the Fleet [unclear]. And my sister – that was another point about my sister – she was at Fairbridge. The day the war started we all

were to be evacuated, the whole of London, and we were sent, we were going to be sent down to Somerset, and we were put on a train, we didn't know if anyone knew we were going and we were suddenly sent to Somerset. The twins were put on a farm, I was put into a home who made cider with the older two boys and the younger girl, and my older sister was put into another home, Mosley was put into another place and we didn't really see each other. I had a wonderful time down there in Somerset. Then at the last, just before 1940, Rosemary and I and another girl called Rosetta who went to Fairbridge with us, was moved to Exmouth. And we went into a beautiful home and this man who was so wonderful to us, I called him my Grandfather, he was so wonderful. And he looked after us down there. And, suddenly, we were told we were going to be shipped out. So in May 1940 we were suddenly told we were going up to Plymouth to get a ship. We didn't know what happened to the twins and it was just Rosemary and I and Rosetta. When we got there, we were so thankful to see . . .

HILL: The twin sisters you didn't know . . . ?

CLARKE: Well, they were evacuated and were still at Somerset and we were suddenly put on board ship and we found I think it was twenty-four children there to go to Fairbridge on the ship . . .

HILL: All to Molong or some to other parts of Australia?

CLARKE: No, all to Molong. And it was in a big convoy, very secret, that's why we weren't told anyone would know, I didn't see my Mother or anyone before we left, we didn't know if my Mother knew if we were even leaving, and we were on the ship, the Duchess of Richmond in May 1940. And then, this convoy went right up North to escape all the submarines and we went past ten icebergs and two [unclear] came into the convoy and sunk two merchant ships and damaged some others but we weren't touched. And it was the last ship to leave England with children aboard.

HILL: So the convoy was attacked?

CLARKE: Yes, attacked. And then we arrived in Canada and then we went right across Canada. It was an exciting voyage on the train right across Canada to Vancouver and then next minute we were suddenly told we were on the next ferry to go across to Vancouver Island to Fairbridge Farm School in Canada. It was a marvellous place . . .

HILL: You thought you were going to Canada, did you?

CLARKE: No. We thought we were coming to Australia. But that's the route we had to take because of the war. And anyhow we were there and we loved it so much we didn't want to leave Canada. I had a boyfriend there, I was always attracted to boys, and I had a lovely boyfriend called Peter Mare who looked after me, took me for walks, held my hand and always looked after me. And so we cried . . .

HILL: And so you were ten?

CLARKE: I was ten.

HILL: And your sisters were how old?

CLARKE: The twins were twelve and Rosemary was thirteen. I should go back to when we were in London. When we were evacuated, my eldest sister who was fifteen at the time, she was actually run over in the crocodile queues to go to the station. She was actually run over and taken away and this was a big blow to me because she was the one who always looked after me. And that was the one first blow. So going back to arriving in Canada – and then we suddenly heard that we were to leave for Australia on the Orangi and that was in August in 1940.

HILL: The Orangi – who owned that boat? Was it a Canadian boat or . . .

CLARKE: I'm not sure . . . Orangi . . . it was HMS Orangi. Anyway, we got on the Orangi and it was a long voyage and when we got to New Zealand, we were greeted by the Mayor in Auckland, and he took us all, took the whole twenty-four of us to a big banquet, and was very good to us, knowing we were going to Fairbridge.

HILL: What was the voyage like on the Orangi?

CLARKE: There was an Indian crew and they were very good to us and what's more, there was a war, so we didn't . . . although we never appeared to be in any danger on that voyage.

HILL: The food?

CLARKE: The food was good, yes, except we all got nits in our hair and had to have our hair shaved off and Rosemary, who was very proud of her looks, was absolutely terrified that she was going to lose her looks because her hair was all shaved off. And then we arrived in Sydney - and Rosemary and I had run away into the Rockies because we thought we'd rather stay in the mountains - and then we ran away again when we arrived in Sydney.

HILL: Is that right?

CLARKE: Because we hid in the wharf until we were found.

HILL: Why did you do that?

CLARKE: Well we just thought we didn't really want go, we didn't want to leave and when we got . . . I was . . .

HILL: Were you a bit frightened because of the unknown of Fairbridge?

CLARKE: I think it was the unknown and then when we were in Canada, the boys over there used to tease us and say, 'You know what Fairbridge is like, it's right out back and there's spiders on the toilets, red-back spiders in the toilets, and there's bears up in the trees and there's things which hop which you don't know anything about, and there's snakes everywhere, and there's big spiders that can poison you for life.' And they'd tease us with all these stories of the outback and you'd have to walk miles to water and to the toilet. So we had this impression of the outback Australia as being completely different from what it was, so when we arrived we thought we don't want to go to the outback of Australia, so we thought we'd stay in Sydney with this beautiful harbour and the Harbour Bridge.

HILL: Could you remember how you got from Sydney to Fairbridge?

CLARKE: Yes, we went by train and Mr Woods, the Principal, he wasn't the Principal.

HILL: He was the Assistant Principal then . . .

CLARKE: Yes, he was the Assistant Principal, but he came down to meet us actually.

HILL: He came to meet us, too.

CLARKE: Yes, and he took us back on the train.

HILL: Can you remember if it was the night train or the day train? Most of us went on the old mail train, the night train.

CLARKE: I think, look I don't remember that bit. No, it's something I don't remember. I remember being terrified, that's all I know.

HILL: We were all terrified. I think that's why most old Fairbridge kids can remember their first day and their last day. Can you remember arriving at Fairbridge?

CLARKE: Yes, when we arrived we immediately were told we were in different Cottages and I found Rosemary was in a different Cottage, and the twins and I were together for a while but Rosemary I think almost went to the Principal's house soon after, not very long after she was there actually. And then we had a Cottage there . . .

HILL: Did that upset you, being split up?

CLARKE: Not so much, because Rosemary was never close with us, she was always, she wasn't the one who would look after us, she always looked after herself. My older sister who was left behind in England was the one who, when she was . . .

HILL: Can you recall a typical day at Fairbridge when you were there?

CLARKE: Yes, I think the lovely thing of trying to polish the dining room, putting rags on our feet and skating up and down . . .

HILL: Before breakfast?

CLARKE: Before breakfast . . .

HILL: Do you remember the bell waking you?

CLARKE: Oh, the bell waking us up and telling us we'd got to get up and then having to get dressed and do all these chores before we had breakfast and then help to do the breakfast stuff.

HILL: Did you remember breakfast at Nuffield Hall?

CLARKE: Yes. Breakfast in the Hall and then we had, often we had to help with the cooking, and the setting of the tables and I always think it was fun polishing the floor. But soon after I got to Fairbridge, I caught ringworm in my head, so all my hair was shaved off and I went to Sydney Hospital and once more Mr Woods took me to Sydney to go to Sydney Hospital with Roland Bigrigg, and we were in Sydney Hospital. . .

HILL: Roland Bigrigg? Oh yes.

CLARKE: And we were there for quite a long while and the people who looked after us there, there was a lady called Miss Gwen Lewis, and she used to come and visit us and teach us Christian things, and she still writes to Roland and she still writes to me. A marvellous [unclear] for her. And then I was there for a long time, so when I got back to Fairbridge I had to wear, I had no hair, and I wore a cap and I used to tear my hair out because I couldn't stand looking like I did. I also had a speech defect that my tongue was cut in England [unclear] too much, because it was tongue-tired and it was cut so I was always couldn't speak correct words and I used to pronounce things wrongly and people used to tease me, so I was often teased. So what with my no hair and teased with my speech, I sometimes was a mess and I got very shy from the age of ten 'til nineteen. But there was another person at Fairbridge, a Peter Johnson, who then took care of me. And it was always funny, it was always Peters. And this Peter Johnson took me to school, held my hand, looked after me and always was so wonderful to me. And then a devastating thing happened when I was thirteen. He suddenly said to me, 'Margaret - Margie he used to call me - I just feel I shouldn't be with you anymore', and I was devastated. I didn't know why and, at the same time, I was starting to get very naughty and I did a few things and he, about three months after that, he actually shot himself and I have still never recovered from that because I never knew whether he had a funeral or why he shot himself. So it's something that's always been in my mind, this wonderful boy who was so wonderful to me. And then, one day my Father came, he was in the Navy, came out to visit me at Fairbridge and Woodsy was then the Principal . . .

HILL: Can you remember what year that was? It was during the war, wasn't it?

CLARKE: It was during the war, yes, it was in 1944, and he came to visit me and Woodsy was Principal at the time when I was – oh, before that, he had hit me with a hockey stick, because he lost his temper with me and told me I told lies, and I said, ‘I don’t tell lies’ and when someone scolded me for doing something wrong, I used to always cry, but when he hit me, I just stood up to him and I thought, I know I’m in the right and he lost his temper with me and he hit me so hard I couldn’t sit down for a week, but still it was because he thought I told lies and I didn’t. Then my Father came out to see us, and the twins had already left, Rosemary was not there, I was the only one there, and Woodsy said that I was allowed to see . . .

HILL: Where had your sisters gone?

CLARKE: They’d gone to a property – June had gone to a property which was a big story about where she’d gone to a friend of my Mother’s at Coolah, on a property there; and Joy had gone to a property at Narrabri.

HILL: And they were working on the property?

CLARKE: Just working, looking after children. And Rosemary had gone to do Karitane Nursing.

HILL: So these were your older sisters?

CLARKE: These were my older, Rosemary’s the oldest, she did Karitane Nursing and then went on a property, and then Moree.

HILL: Now Woods didn’t want you to see your Father?

CLARKE: He didn’t want me to see my Father for some reason but anyhow my Father came and I said, ‘I want to see him’, so he took me out for the day but, unfortunately, I stayed the weekend at Orange with my Father and my Uncle. And when I got back to Fairbridge he said, ‘You didn’t get permission to stay for a weekend.’ So he hit me again, but I said, ‘My Father rang you up’. Now whether my Father ever rang up, I don’t know, but anyway, I got the punishment for it. After that, I just became very bold and very naughty, which wasn’t me.

HILL: Yes.

CLARKE: I was in the Principal’s house when my Mother rang to say she was coming out here in 1946 and she wanted me to leave and come to Sydney and . . .

HILL: Just before you left, just on Fairbridge, did you in the six years you were there, you went to school?

CLARKE: Yes, we went to school on the property, we used to walk, there was a school on the property which other children came to, and I think that was my best moment, to walk into school with my friend, Peter. That's that best memories I've had and also walking and going out into the paddocks with the long grass, being out there with a few of my friends, and we used to smoke the long grass, we used to light it and pretend we were smoking. That was, to me, very naughty.

HILL: Yes. What are your fondest memories of Fairbridge? Peter?

CLARKE: Yes, and just, the. I think, I thought it was very good for us to work. I think having developed very early, at the age of ten just after I arrived, I wasn't told anything about how your body develops . . .

HILL: Did you miss your Mum?

CLARKE: By that stage I think I missed my sister more – the one who was left behind in England. Because my Mother never really had that much to do with us and I hardly even saw my Father, so I think it was more – and my other brothers, older brothers – were very good to us too. I missed them. But I did miss my Mother. And when she came out here I went and lived with her and it was very hard because we didn't have anywhere to go, we ended up in a tent at Narrabeen at one stage . . .

HILL: Just before you met her and went to the tent, that's the third chapter, it's very important. Fairbridge – you went to school on the property – did you do that until you were sixteen or do you work on the farm as a Trainee – did they call them Trainees then?

CLARKE: No . . . They called them Trainees, yes.

HILL: Did you work as a Trainee?

CLARKE: Only in the Principal's house, looking after his children and doing the housework for him. But up 'til then I'd only been at the school and I only did the Leaving Certificate . . .

HILL: Intermediate or Leaving?

CLARKE: The Intermediate, only the Intermediate Certificate.

HILL: Me too. But when I went there, the school on Fairbridge only took kids to the end of primary school.

CLARKE: Yes.

HILL: And then we went into Molong.

CLARKE: No, we did it all there.

HILL: Did you spend all your time on the farm then? Did you ever go into Molong?

CLARKE: Oh yes, we went, that was another thing that was lovely, we used to go in on a Saturday into Molong. We'd all hitchhike in and that was good fun because we were able to go with a friend or pick up a boyfriend and go to the Pictures and hitchhiked – all the locals knew us, and they used to pick us up. And we also went to different places picking fruit, picking potatoes. I also joined the Guides while I was there and before I left the Guides at Fairbridge, I was a Captain and we used to go swimming in Molong Creek and have great fun and we also used to swim in the dam. And I remember when a boy was drowned in the dam and I just saw his body three days later and it was pretty terrible. And then another time we went to Canobolas and we were camping, and all the younger people on the rafts and raft tipped up with the boys playing up . . .

HILL: This is on Lake Canobolas

CLARKE: Lake Canobolas. And a lot of them couldn't swim, couldn't swim very well, so it was up to us older ones at the time to rescue the younger ones and then I was nearly drowned in Molong Creek because one of the bigger girls panicked and pushed me down underneath her. Margaret Cook - Cookie we called her – she was the one who rescued me. She should have had a bravery award because she pulled me out and pumped all the water out of me and so I nearly drowned there.

HILL: Can you remember the breakfasts at Fairbridge? What you used to eat?

CLARKE: Yes, we used to often have porridge and sometimes have weevils in them. Sometimes I refused to eat it and was told to eat it at the next meal but I always stubborn about that, if I didn't want to eat something, I didn't eat it. We performed plays often, but I was never picked for them because of my speech. But they were good fun and I was picked for other things.

HILL: You've mentioned some of the things that you liked about Fairbridge – what were the worst things about Fairbridge that you remember?

CLARKE: I think the Cottage Mothers not having enough, well not love to us, I know that when I developed and suddenly got frightened about that, it had to be my sisters to tell me and then having these terrible napkins to use and wash out instead, which was pretty awful when you were only ten years old, and so all she said was, "Oh you poor little thing", you know, but no information. I thought that was pretty awful. And then Olive Forsythe, who was the twins' Cottage Mother at a later stage, she was wonderful and really kept in touch and I was even in touch until the time she died – so, it depended on the Cottage Mother, I think.

HILL: That's what everybody says. I was lucky, we had a good Cottage Mother, but a lot of the guys had terrible Cottage Mothers.

CLARKE: And I think there wasn't enough education about things, I know when I was in the Principal's house and one of the old Fairbridgians sent me all these books about life because he thought I was too innocent about sex and about how to conduct yourself, and Woodsy opened the parcel and said, 'why is he sending you these books?' And I said, 'because you don't educate us'. So I must say, that he took the hint and he did get the Sister in the hospital to educate us, educate people after that. Which was something. But there were no sex talks, there was no education and yet, I'm sure if we were caught with a boy, we would have been beaten. That was probably the worst things. And yet I know that the friendship I had with Peter Johnson was very innocent. We just used to, he just looked after me and so even the boys . . .

HILL: How old was he?

CLARKE: He was two years older than me, so he was fifteen when he shot himself. And when we went to the Pictures in town with the boys, it was all very innocent. I had lots of fun, different boyfriends as Fairbridge after that . . .

HILL: When your Mum rang in 1946 and said she was coming to Australia, had you had regular contact with your Mum?

CLARKE: Yes. She used to send us postcards very regularly, even when she was sick.

HILL: Did you write to her?

CLARKE: Yes, we always wrote.

HILL: Yes, we were the same.

CLARKE: And she was, through the war and when she got discharged that's when she decided she'd come out here. So she brought my youngest brother and that sister who was left behind, Daphne. She brought those two with her, because my other brother was still in the Air force. He came out her later on and joined the Australian Air force and then my oldest brother came out, he was in the Marines, he came out here later on too.

HILL: It would have been tough getting housing.

CLARKE: Yes, there was no housing. And my Mother acted as a companion and we lived at Manly and she was a companion driver for a very old lady there who gave me accommodation too. My brother found accommodation and my other sisters were all still working in the country so it was just me and my brother and my other sister. And my sister who was a nurse, trained nurse . . .

HILL: Now you were sixteen?

CLARKE: I was sixteen. She, this is the sister who was left behind, she worked as a nurse in a home called the Peace [unclear] a nursing home. And she worked there as a

night sister and so she was accommodated there and so it was just my brother and I and my mother. Then when my Mother was in between jobs, we landed up at Gordon where she was a companion to someone, then she was a companion to someone out near Strathfield, and then finally we had nowhere to go and we ended up in a tent at Narrabeen.

HILL: Is that right? a tent in Narrabeen? Were there other people in tents at Narrabeen?

CLARKE: Yes, yes, lots of people but a thunderstorm came New Year's Eve and blew the tent away . . .

HILL: This would have been 1946?

CLARKE: 1946, yes

HILL: The end of '46?

CLARKE: Yes. And my brother invited us to a dance and, fortunately we had all our evening clothes somewhere else, so we were able to still go to the dance and we just walked the streets because we had nowhere to go to sleep. And my Mother was looking after Mollie Forsyth who was at Collaroy at the time and then finally my brother and I went to the Housing Commission and we managed to get a hut at Hearn Bay, which was an Army Hut.

HILL: In fact, 1947 . . .

CLARKE: '46.

HILL: . . . my Auntie Effie, who still lives in a Housing Commission house in Revesby, came out and met up with her husband who was out here with the British Army, and they were in Hearne Bay in 1948.

CLARKE: This is '47, '48, yeah. And '47 I think it was and we were there for quite a while and then the Housing Commission gave us a house in Strathfield, which we later bought from them. And that's where I lived until the time I was married, or just after I was married.

HILL: And what work did you do when you immediately left Fairbridge?

CLARKE: I worked, first of all I worked as a trainee nurse at Manly Hospital while I was there for a little while but, because I was so young, I could only sort of do chores. I didn't like it very much. So then I went and worked for the Red Cross Blood Transfusion Service and I was there for four years. And then I trained as a Secretary then while I was there, then I was an Anti-TB Association Secretary, and then I worked for the Commercial Banking Company of Sydney, their Head Office, and I was Secretary to the

Accountant, and then I was Secretary to the Manager to the time I was married and even well after I was married.

HILL: Yes. Wasn't there, was it the Commonwealth Bank where when you got married you had to leave the Bank?

CLARKE: Yes.

HILL: It was the Commonwealth Bank I think . . . until the '60's.

CLARKE: No, well I worked until well after I was married, I worked for the Manager as his Secretary, the CBC. And then my husband actually bought in, the CBC bought into shares in his company actually.

HILL: And if you look back on that wonderful story, that wonderful colourful story, do you think that you were lucky, or unlucky?

CLARKE: Well I think because I done so much of my life after I was married and after I had the three children, and all the adventures I've had, I think Fairbridge made me tough, I think the fact all the other things – going back to England, and everything in my life made me tough and made me stand up for myself – and I think it's brought a lot to my life.

HILL: So, you were enriched by the experience?

CLARKE: Very enriched. And I think Fairbridge, although despite the belting, I think it probably didn't matter, really I think it was a probably a good thing to be tough. Because I always used to cry if I was even told off, so I think to be belted and stood up to it, I think it was a good thing.

HILL: Well that's a terrific story. It's a fantastic story. And there any other recollections that you want to add? How many kids were at the school, do you remember, roughly?

The school burned down, you know, only in the last few years.

CLARKE: Yes, I knew that. No I don't actually. I don't know how many kids were there.

HILL: I did ask you, are you going to the reunion?

CLARKE: Yes.

HILL: Oh good. Because what we'd like to do, we'd like to do a film interview with you on Fairbridge as well, and we'd like you to think of a spot somewhere on Fairbridge, that means most to you.

CLARKE: Yeah, well . . . the paddocks.

HILL: That's fantastic.

CLARKE: Or, behind the toilets.

HILL: Okay. We'll take you wherever you want to go and we'll do a short film interview as well.

CLARKE: I had great fun in the paddocks. And the dam.

HILL: The dam, yes. A lot of people found freedom out there . . .

CLARKE: Yeah, I think, yeah, just to get . . . as girls, we didn't really visit the farm where the animals were that much because the boys were out there but, I think we did go out there but I think just the fact of going out in the paddocks to water them, one time we actually helped beat out a fire, bushfire, in the paddocks . . .

HILL: So the girls were more doing the farm domestic duties:

CLARKE: We were doing the domestic duties, yes, and I think the idea of the Fairbridge scheme was for the boys to be trained as farmers and the girls to be farmers' wives.

HILL: Yes, that's a good note, that's a terrific note to finish on. We'll just get that . . . you remember the School Song – boys to be farmers, girls the farmers' wives? And what was the other one?

CLARKE: we never see, we don't get sugar in our tea. That's why we're gradually fading away . . .

-end-