ORAL HISTORY FILE 012 – GWEN COLE

Gwen Miller came as a 10 year old from Grimsby to Fairbridge with her 7 year old sister Kath and her 4 year old brother Reg and 9 year old Doug, arriving in Sydney in June 1952. An older brother, 14 year old Hughie, joined them at Fairbridge in July the following year. Gwen stayed at Fairbridge for 7 years.

This interview was recorded in Gloucester House at Fairbridge Farm School Molong on February 9, 2006

[There is no photo of Gwen Miller as she did not attend the film interviews]

HILL: Do you have any recollections about where you were born and your family circumstances, and how did you come to Australia, and how did you come to be at Fairbridge?

COLE: I have good memories of my home life in England. It was a large family. My Mother died when my younger brother was only seven months old . . .

HILL: And you were how old?

COLE: I was five.

HILL: Do you remember your Mum?

COLE: No. And that's the biggest regret of my life, is that I don't remember her face or voice.

HILL: Where were you living?

COLE: In Grimbsby, in England. There's quite a bit of family history really because it's a bit different to the others. My Mother – I don't know whether you want to put this in – was an illegitimate child. She was – I don't know whether or not my real Grandmother was a Nun when she had the child, when she had my Mother. I believe they were cousins, and he was a Priest. I think she may have either entered the Convent just after for punishment, but she did most definitely have sisters and brothers that were in the Church. Monks, and Teaching Brothers and also Nuns. And she did eventually join the Convent and they eventually moved, they were Irish, and they all moved to England, and that's where we were born.

And then – but they more or less looked after us – as my Mother grew older, one of these Sisters actually took my Mother in, that wasn't in the Church, and she raised them, but these Nuns were always there. And then she married my Father and they still were about – the Nuns, near where we lived – and everything was rosy. But then my Mother died, leaving ten children. The Church more or less took over our care – my Dad always worked, he worked in what they called the Labour Exchange for the Government, after

the war. But the Nuns were always there. They housed the Nuns, we had a nice home, a large home – courtyard, beautiful grounds – and my Father did look after the grounds very well. I don't ever remember being without. And that went on for five years. But as we reached first year, what we call in Australia, we went off to Catholic boarding school. Again, with the Church obviously looking after that side of things.

But when I was five, my Father met another woman. He told us all sorts of stories in the end, but we know what happened. I remember going to this lady's home and I remember that we all had to behave. And I think the story then goes on that he felt tied down by these children. In the beginning, only four of us came out, the four youngest, but later on, another brother came out, he was fourteen . . .

HILL: Now, can you remember what year you four came out?

COLE: 1952 on the "SS Horman".

HILL: And how old were you?

COLE: I was ten. I'd just turned ten.

HILL: And the others were?

COLE: My next brother would have been about eight – Douglas. My sister next – she was about seven and the youngest baby, Reg, was four and a half, when he came out.

I remember getting on the train . . .

HILL: Can you remember anything about the journey out on the ship?

COLE: Yes, I can remember Knockholt, Kent.

HILL: Tell us about that. You all went to Knockholt?

COLE: I remember Dad coming with us . . .

HILL: You would have been one of the first groups to Knockholt. It started in 1951.

So, you left home in Grimsby, and you got on a train with your Dad and your three brothers and sisters, and you went to London . . .

COLE: I think he went all the way with us, but I don't remember. But I do know that he was on this train at some stage. Yes, we went to Knockholt, Kent.

HILL: What are your recollections of Knockholt?

COLE: Actually, it was nice. I don't ever remember anything awful there.

HILL: Do you remember anything about the time of year?

COLE: Yes, it was about March, because we – Kath and I – had our birthdays and that made me ten and I think that would have made her seven. So we had our seven and tenth birthdays at Knock Holt.

HILL: So, you were the oldest of the group coming here your family?

COLE: Yes, at that stage. And, yes I did, I thought – I don't remember anything awful about that place, I just remember the lovely fields and we were allowed to play in them. I didn't mind that.

HILL: So then – did they buy you clothing, do you remember that?

COLE: I remember my eldest sister making dresses and stuff for us. Because I remember her crying.

HILL: So she didn't come out?

COLE: No, no. She was eighteen or so . . . I don't know whether she was that old . . . yes, she would have been nineteen.

HILL: So you remember going to Tilbury?

COLE: No, I don't know Tilbury.

HILL: The Dock, where you got on the boat?

COLE: No. No, I don't have any recollection of that, but I do remember the boat. But the clothes, we wore this grey suit I think, if I remember rightly. Never saw them again when we hit Fairbridge.

HILL: Now that's the same with all of us. We were taken to . . .

COLE: No, I don't ever recall . . .

HILL: And we're going to try and find out what happened to all that beautiful clothing . . .

COLE: What did we have? We had a little grey skirt and blazer and I don't know what we wore under that. Maybe it was a shirt and tie too, Fairbridge tie. But I remember that.

HILL: What about the voyage on the ship. What can you remember of that, anything?

COLE: I do remember a lot of it. I remember I was really protective of the other kids. I remember that. Whether that was drummed into me before I left, I don't remember anybody ever saying that to me, but I do know that I can remember . . .

HILL: You would have been very nervous – at ten years of age and you've got to look after these three little kids.

COLE: Yeah, but I don't know whether it was just instinct I did that, though. Because we came from a large family, happy family, we did things together. And whether or not when there was just four of us, I just felt that, well okay, I've got to do this.

HILL: At the time did you feel a bit confused or, how did you feel by the fact that you were on your own? That you didn't have your Dad with you?

COLE: Well, I know on the boat I used to think well, when are we going home? You know, when does this turn round and when do we go home? I remember that, thinking, lots of times, and we seemed to be going such a long way. And I thought well, you know, how much longer before we turn round? I remember thinking all that business, but of course, that was shattered as the journey went on. I sort of clicked then that something else was happening because we had this lady that looked after us, and I don't know that she particularly cared about us.

HILL: Well, they were escorts. And what happened, Fairbridge – they were Australians who had been on the grand tour of Europe . . .

COLE: I don't sort of remember her ever sort of worrying about us or anything like that. I remember I had mumps on the ship and I was put in the little hospital there. But other than that, it was just going down, playing and having races and stuff like that I suppose.

HILL: With the other kids?

COLE: Yeah, with all the other kids that were there.

HILL: So you spent most of the voyage, apart from the mumps and stuff, you spent it playing with the other kids?

COLE: The Fairbridge kids, yeah.

HILL: Did you enjoy it? Or were you a bit anxious that you were getting further and further away?

COLE: Well I think, yeah, probably that was more my memories that, you know, when does this thing turn round to go back. Because I don't ever recall anybody ever telling us that we were going away to live. That he was giving us away. So, I suppose I just naturally assumed that it was going to turn round and go back again.

HILL: So, we're on the boat and, do you have any recollections of the food on the boat? Do you remember anything about the food on the boat or the cabins you were in?

COLE: I remember the cabins because we all used to congregate in there and I don't remember – I suppose they had all girls in one and boys in the other – I honestly don't remember, but I know we all used to get together and mess around and that sort of thing. We were always together, the whole group, you know, most of the time.

HILL: Can you remember how many were in the group roughly?

COLE: I don't know but I reckon there'd be even sixteen of us.

HILL: All coming to Molong?

COLE: I don't recall anybody not going to Fairbridge in Molong.

HILL: Because some of those early groups, in the early fifties, some went to Pinjarra.

COLE: I don't think anybody did with us.

HILL: So, can you remember stopping in ports before Sydney?

COLE: The thing I remember most – no, I don't remember getting off at ports, I don't know whether we did or not – but I remember these little kids swimming in the water, you know, when you got near a port. And I used to think those poor little children, because people would be throwing money to them.

HILL: Yes, Bombay, Port Said . . .

COLE: I don't know. But I do remember that . . . I do remember getting off, because I remember – it must have been at Port Said – when I think about it now, it must have been one of those countries, because there was a lot of Arabs . . .

HILL: Aden, you mean?

COLE: Yes. That's right, yeah. And I remember them saying you're not to go on your own anywhere. Don't, you've got to keep together. And I remember all these, what we called strange buildings, nothing like we had come from. And I remember, I do remember that, yeah. That we were sort of, and I can still remember that, yeah.

HILL: Can you recall arriving in Sydney?

COLE: I don't remember arriving in Sydney, but I remember getting on a train to go to Fairbridge.

HILL: Was it the night train?

COLE: Yes.

HILL: The Forbes Mail.

COLE: Is that what that was?

HILL: Yes. We all got on the same train, or most of us.

COLE: And Mrs Woods was there, and Mr Woods. I remember that so clearly. All squashed in.

HILL: What do you recall of that? All squashed in?

COLE: Well, you know, like they were telling us to sit still and this sort of business. Because, when you're a kid, you know, when you see strange things happen to you, I mean, I'm not kidding, this was an entirely different life to what we knew. I mean, you know, our family had never been apart before. We got up, we had breakfast, we went to school, we came home . . .

HILL: But this train trip – did you sense there was something different? Were you worried at the time? What were your feelings?

COLE: No, I just wondered what on earth I was doing there. I remember thinking, what is this woman, why does she keeping saying, laying down, put your head down, she kept saying - that was Mrs Woods - "Put your head down, sit still." And this was a night train, and it was freezing. It was June.

HILL: The same. We came in early June, and they had those old foot warmers, but they were like ice blocks by Lithgow, and it was freezing cold then.

COLE: June 4th. And I remember, and then, we got off that, and I remember arriving at Fairbridge.

HILL: Do you remember arriving at Molong Station?

COLE: No.

HILL: But you remember arriving here on the Farm?

COLE: I do.

HILL: Just up here. So, do you remember how you got from the station to here?

COLE: No.

HILL: What are your recollections of arriving here at Fairbridge?

COLE: Well, again, I nearly died of cold, I remember that. It had snowed. So, of course, it was cold.

HILL: And of course, that came as a shock because you didn't know that it snowed in Australia. Or, didn't you know anything about it?

COLE: I didn't know anything about it. I think I remember vaguely someone saying they've got a lot of sheep over there, or something like that.

HILL: But you knew nothing really about Australia?

COLE: No. That man never told us much. And then I remember arriving at Lilac Cottage and we were taken up to the main room in the Cottage, and Miss Cohen came out. And the girls were all cleaning, on their hands and knees. I do remember that it was a beautiful, shiny, long table, I can remember that.

HILL: You were split up from your brothers, of course.

COLE: No. No. My younger brother, Reggie, Kathy and myself (we're not putting the names in), but yes – we were all put in Miss Cohen's.

HILL: So your four and a half year old brother, and your seven year old sister . . .

COLE: And I was ten.

HILL: But Doug went somewhere else?

COLE: Douglas went to Brown Cottage.

HILL: He was nine?

COLE: I don't know whether he would have been eight and a half. No, he would have been turning nine that month we arrived.

HILL: Okay. So he goes to Brown Cottage. How did you feel about that?

COLE: Well I remember looking, I remember thinking where was he? But, at the time I was too young, at that stage, too young to understand how he might have felt. But as the years went by, I used to think he must have been absolutely heart-broken.

HILL: Because it's the first time your family's split up.

COLE: It was the first time. The only time our family ever split, was to go to boarding school, in high school – what they called "high" school. And because they didn't all go to the same boarding school, "Lincoln", London.

HILL: We'll get onto it later, but it's interesting that you managed nevertheless, to glue the family back together, you're still very close as a family . . .

So, you're at Lilac Cottage, and what were your recollections of your time in Lilac Cottage?

COLE: Well, I think we were fortunate that we had Miss Cohen as a Cottage Mother because, when you're older yourself you can put yourself in their position a bit, and I just think that she probably did her best for us. She had a bad temper, I remember we did get a few good hidings, but she also was good in her own way to us. I remember we used to get, the dish came from the dining room at dinner time if you went to the High School, you know, and then in the morning – to Molong School – and then at night time the Cottage Mother had to cook that meal and give it back to the kids.

HILL: We all had breakfast in Nuffield Hall.

COLE: That's right.

HILL: But Primary School kids and the trainees had lunch in Nuffield Hall, and the whole Cottage had dinner in the Cottage.

COLE: That's right, yes, that's true. And it used to come up in the big Dixie for tea for the Molong School kids to have that hot meal in the evening. Remember – it used to come up at lunch time, and at evening the Cottage Mother had to cook that for their dinner that night. Well, I don't ever recall her giving that meal to us. She always made something herself. It might have been scrambled egg . . .

HILL: Why? Because of the . . .

COLE: Well, obviously she felt that she couldn't bear to look at it to be cooked, I would think, I don't really know . . .

HILL: It was reheating it, was it?

COLE: It was, yeah. It was to be reheated and then given to those children. But no, she always gave us something different. She cooked beautiful meat, beautiful stews for us. And, on her day off, she often would bring a cake home for us. So, she was kind in that way, really kind. But it was a hard life in the Cottage because it was all scrubbing and cleaning. I mean, we never even washed a dish when we were in England, and I'm not kidding, we didn't. And then suddenly we're thrust into this blackening stoves, hands and knees scrubbing with that sand soap stuff, you know, that we had to get down and do

the kitchen floor. And, to this day, I cannot stand a gritty feeling on anything because of that soap, you know that sand soap was gritty. To this day, I can't stand it.

And the blackening the stove and all that. Well, I was a really good child for a long time, did everything I was told, but one day I did break.

HILL: Why did you break?

COLE: Because I was doing blackening the stove in the bathroom and she said I hadn't done something properly, cleaned it out, something, because our Cottage was beautifully cleaned, you could eat off the floors. And, in fact, when Mr Woods had anyone round (to see what was going on I suppose), he used to bring them to Lilac Cottage to have a look. And it was, it was beautifully shiny, clean, the clothes and neatly folded and everything, beds made to perfection. So, she was hard in that way, that she made us do that, but anyway, getting back to this day. I don't know whether she'd just had a bad night or whatever happened to her, but she said I didn't clean something.

I remember to this day turning round and saying to her, "Do it your bloody self!" And it was the first time that I'd said anything to her.

HILL: Roughly, how old would you have been when you did that?

COLE: Oh, I must have been at that age, fourteen. About fourteen I suppose. And I remember her saying to me, "Oh, I see now. The good child's gone forever." I remember her saying that to me. "That child we knew has gone." And I was walking out the door and she said, "You're going to Mr Woods." And I don't know whether I got sent to him then and there, I think I did, and obviously I would have got the cane.

And then we went to the dining room for dinner after that and I must have been still rebellious because I was sitting at the table, and she must have picked at me again for something, this is only within an hour, and I remember getting up from the table and I just was taking off. And I remember her calling out, "You get back here and sit at this table." And I just kept walking. Well, she knew she'd lost me that day. So, I was never the same towards her, ever. I was rebellious from that day on.

HILL: What do you think caused it?

COLE: I think that I had . . .

HILL: Too much regimentation?

COLE: Yes, I think it was still . . . I'd had too much, not even so much that, I think it was that I was protecting the others a lot – by this time, Reginald had gone up to another Cottage, the younger boy.

HILL: Was he with Doug?

COLE: No.

HILL: I told you, Reg was my best friend.

COLE: Well, he went to Mrs Newell.

HILL: Much later, because I came later. Mrs Newell in Mort Cottage?

COLE: Yes, I don't know. I suppose so. But I was very happy. I remember thinking, she's got a little boy. I remember thinking that.

HILL: David. David was the same age as Reg, about the same.

COLE: Well I remember, young as I was, I can remember thinking they've taken him away, but the lady's got a little boy. And I must have been thinking she'll be nice to him. But then I had Kath still, but Kath was getting older. And I think I'd just had enough of trying to please everybody, you know. I'd had enough of it. I just wanted to be me. And I guess, and I suppose, maturity – I was fourteen – so obviously maturity was coming into this, and I'd just had enough of all this, everybody telling you what to do, and picking at you if something wasn't quite right, and I just went . . .

HILL: What recollections do you have about Primary School, when you were at Primary School? Did you enjoy it?

COLE: Well, I don't know that I enjoyed it. It was just a school that I'd gone to. I remember them giving me this work and I said, "I did this when I was away." I remember saying that. And there was a Mr Paul there, lovely man, and he was so kind, but we had an awful [unclear].

HILL: [unclear]?

COLE: No, I don't know what his name was. I saw it in a book not long ago and I thought that was him. Anyway, I was put up a class then, so I had to put my head down then and do the work. But, yeah, I think that was okay. We used to play in the playground and it was just like any other Primary School I think. But we had this crazy Mr Mott. Remember Mr Mott? He became the Headmaster and he had this violin, squeaky violin, young Molly lived on the hill and we always had to sing with this violin. And he had it in the corner one day and I went in and I was pinning it. Pinning his violin and Miss Molly, and I know he came and I know he had a book, and he knocked me with it. Knocked me straight onto the ground. But anyway, I got up and I walked away, not looking at him, and I think I "pulled the shutter down". I pulled that shutter down, and I don't know that it's ever really come up. Because I can walk away from something, and I know that I should be disputing it with that person, but so that I don't get into any rows, I'll walk away. And whether that was from the harm, I don't know.

HILL: Do you think it was?

COLE: Yeah, probably, because you weren't allowed your opinions out there. I mean, you never had a chance to express your opinions. You were a kid out there, came from the street, you know, you were cleaning, and you went to school, you should be thankful for that, that you got something. You weren't allowed to express how you felt, ever. And, if you did, well you just got . . .

HILL: Were you disappointed in Fairbridge after the family life you'd had?

COLE: No. You mean, when I was sixteen?

HILL: No, when you were here, just generally.

COLE: Oh, you mean from England? Oh, well, I mean you couldn't compare it. Absolutely no comparison. It was a whole new world. And that's what I mean. I think . . .

HILL: When you say, "a whole new world" – what were the biggest differences between life as you remember it in England, and life at Fairbridge?

COLE: When I lived in England, I was a child. I was allowed to be a child. We played together, the whole family. We went to school, we didn't have to worry if someone was going to belt us. We didn't have to worry about food. I was a normal child. We were normal children that I hope my children had.

HILL: And what about Fairbridge, how did it differ?

COLE: Well, how can you compare a Fairbridge life where you got up by a bell, you made a bed by a bell, you got dressed by a bell, and you went to eat by a bell? And you didn't even eat in your own home? You had to go to a big hall to eat. How can that be – and then when you came back, you got on your hands and knees and you scrubbed and cleaned. That's not a child's life. My child's life finished when I was ten. Reggie never had a child's life, you know what I mean?

HILL: I do know what you mean.

What were the best or the nicest recollections you have of Fairbridge? What was the best part of it?

COLE: I'm not saying Fairbridge was all bad . . .

HILL: What were the fun times? Christmas? Holidays? Birthdays?

COLE: No, because . . .

HILL: Girl Guides?

COLE: I mean, we celebrated a Christmas, but birthdays came and went . . . the saddest part, I think, was that we all – myself and three younger ones – all believed in Santa because Santa came to us in England. But Reggie and Kath never had Santa, you know, to remember. I suppose because they were so young. Because at Fairbridge there wasn't one, was there? But we did get a gift and I thought that was nice, that they even thought to do that for us. But, you see again, that's childhood gone. And that's why I get angry with people when they say "it's your Father", but they're not if they give you away but you know, he did that to us, didn't he? and it wasn't necessary. It was all, you know, and he hated the Nuns so that all came back into it as well, you know. So . . .

HILL: Because it's not common for Catholics to come to Fairbridge.

COLE: No, we were the first, and then another boy came and I can't think what his name was – Leonard, John Leonard, I think his name was – yes. He was the other one. Someone did tell me there was another one after that.

HILL: Because of course the Catholic kids went to Catholic child migrant schemes.

COLE: Yeah, thank God we didn't, maybe. But Mr Woods did see that we went to the church and that, but you see, the Nuns must have still been in touch in England with the Nuns in Molong. Because I used to get letters from them.

HILL: Did you go to the Catholic Church in Molong?

COLE: I went to the Catholic Church in Molong. They paid for a taxi. They used to take us to Church in Molong and a taxi brought us back again, every Sunday. And, if we had Holy Communion once a month, the Nuns fed us our breakfast and it was the best meal we ever had while we were at Fairbridge, the Nuns' meal.

HILL: What do you remember of the food at Fairbridge?

COLE: Oh, well. I still can't eat . . .

HILL: Can't eat what?

COLE: Well, old Bob Gibson, the puddings he used to make. You know those horrible, what they call noodles today? You know, and people eat noodles with meat and veges and that? Remember he used to put them in a big silver bowl?

HILL: He was the Chef, wasn't he?

COLE: Yeah, and all milk with them. And then those really big thick globs of cream on the top. That. And then, and those frog's eyes. All the puddings.

HILL: Yes, the frog's eyes.

COLE: Yeah, and then we had a big silver bowl of jelly with the cream stuck on top? I never eat anything like that. See, I can't eat Pasta because that, to me, is Pasta, what he used to put in that milk pudding.

HILL: What about breakfasts? What do you remember eating for breakfast?

COLE: Well, we ate because we had to, didn't we? You know, the maggots and stuff. Things like that.

HILL: It's amazing how many people remember the maggots in the porridge.

COLE: I remember we used to love it when we had cornflakes.

HILL: How often did we have cornflakes?

COLE: I think that might have only been once a month, would it be? Or maybe on Sunday?

HILL: Somebody said Sundays, but I don't remember it that frequently. I remember it at Christmas.

COLE: Oh no, there was a lot more often than that. Maybe every second Sunday maybe? But maybe I thought only once a month because we had Communion once a month, and I suppose, knowing my luck, they probably had the cornflakes on the Sunday I wasn't there.

But no, the meals, well like I said, our Cottage Mother was a good lady like that. She did try and look after us. And she looked after our clothes.

HILL: Were you close to your brothers and sisters at Fairbridge?

COLE: As close as I could be.

HILL: And I think too, that while a lot of families became again, loyal to each other after Fairbridge, they found it very hard while they were here. Did you find it difficult?

COLE: What – to be with them? Well because you couldn't do a lot together, I guess in that sense it was hard. But in the dining room, if anything happened, or if anybody did anything against one of them, well I was always there. Like Mrs Leckie. I remember her hitting Reggie. Their long table was right in front of me, across. And I remember seeing her hit him.

HILL: How old would he have been?

COLE: He was a little boy, I don't know how old.

HILL: Five or six?

COLE: I don't know. He must have been a bit older, because I was in my rebellious . . . he must have been nine or ten. And I remember getting up from the table and picking up the Cottage Mother's plate, and I remember going over her head and dropping it. But they nearly killed me. Mr Woods. I remember getting a caning from him, but he had to control the children. And, as I'm older now, I understand that he had to do something about it.

HILL: Of course he did, but you know, we were talking about this the other day, unfortunately whenever Woods had to choose between staff and the kids . . .

Just tell me this story about Fanny Johnson.

COLE: Well, I was a trainee at the time, and you know how you used to have to pander to the Cottage Mother with their little table and stuff like that – and they had tiny sugar bowls?

HILL: In the Nuffield Hall?

COLE: Yes. And they had a tiny sugar bowl. Anyway, she complained that she didn't have enough sugar in her little bowl, so I got called in, because I was on that duty, I suppose, trainee in the dining room, and I had to fill that bowl and told to make sure that every Cottage Mother had enough sugar. But Mr Harrop was on, and not Mr Woods, thank God, so anyway . . .

HILL: Why did you say that?

COLE: Because I went back to the kitchen and I got a bowl that was about ten times bigger than her sugar bowl, and I filled it to the brim, and I took it to her table and I sat it right in front of her and I probably said, I don't remember, but I probably said, "I hope that's enough", or something like that to her. Well, the next thing Harry comes to me, Harry Harrop. And he said, "I want to see you outside." Oh, he was very stern. And I went outside. Mrs Johnson's standing here, and told him all about it, and he said, "Come outside!"

So, anyway, out I go. Well, he could hardly contain himself for laughing. He said, "Now Gwennie" – he always used to call me Gwennie – he said, "Now Gwennie, if you keep doing these things, this is when you're going to get into a lot more trouble than you're already in." I tell you, when that veneer went from me, I was rebellious. No one was going to hurt me again. I'd been hurt by what had happened to me, and nobody was going to hurt me again. And honestly, he was almost pleading – "Gwennie, don't do those sorts of things. Don't do it again. Go in and apologise to her and say how sorry you are to her." "All right, all right," I said. And that was the end of it with him. No

cane, nothing. He thought it was hilarious, obviously, which I would have done if I'd been an older person. I never went back to apologise. You know, that's the difference sometimes, you know, what would happen.

HILL: Fun times. Were you in the Guides, Cubs?

COLE: I was in the Guides, Sports Captain of the hockey team.

HILL: Did you enjoy that?

COLE: I loved anything sport. I was all into that, all into the sports, yeah. And I was happy at the sport, yes. That's what I say, a lot of Fairbridge isn't all bad. I think a lot of it is how each child coped with it, whether they think it was bad. And as you got, maybe when I was there I thought that, but a lot of years apart, I've had my own children . . .

HILL: Have your attitudes to Fairbridge changed over the years?

COLE: I think it probably has. Simply because I can now put myself in some of the, like my own Cottage Mother. I cannot put myself in Mrs Hodgkinson's place, or Mrs Johnson's, or the mad woman who used to make them scrub shoes and hang them on the line. No, I can't do that. But with my own Cottage Mother, I can. Because, it must have been hard for her to look after so many children and keep the house clean, all with different personalities, different hang-ups, feeding them, like she did us without resorting to the junk they sent to us, and that sort of thing. So, yes, I can myself in her place and think she was a good woman.

HILL: What were the worst things about Fairbridge? You've described it wasn't all bad and . . .

COLE: I don't think it was all bad, no.

HILL: What would you say were the worst things about it?

COLE: Well, obviously, the worst thing is there was sort of no love or attention and I don't think anybody ever would have put their arm around a child out there, even my little brother probably never ever had anyone's arm around him. I don't recall hearing anybody ever say to a child, "You did very well. That was really good, what you did." I don't remember ever. It was always, everybody focused on "that naughty child", you know. I didn't hear anybody ever say, "She's a good child" or "He's been a good boy." "Something must have happened to make him like he is." Do you understand what I'm saying?

HILL: Not only that, it's profound, what you're saying, and you wouldn't believe the number of people who have said that nobody ever put an arm around a kid. See, my view about the failings of these institutions . . .

COLE: There's no doubt, absolutely no doubt in my mind, that Fairbridge, being put in Fairbridge – and I'm not blaming Fairbridge for this – but being put in Fairbridge, had a profound affect on the Miller children's lives.

HILL: A negative or a positive one? A good or a bad impact?

COLE: No, it would be a bad, and something inside that – we've all got a way that I suppose well, like me saying I don't want my name, I don't want my children's names, you know. I don't know what it is. But it has left us all different in some ways. I mean, I can say what's different about the others, but I don't feel it's my place. And see, we had an older brother come out here, Hugh. He went to Brown Cottage.

HILL: How long after you did your older brother come?

COLE: He was out there within thirteen or fourteen months.

HILL: And how old was he when he arrived?

COLE: He would have been fourteen. Because I think my Father, yeah he did, my Father tried to get him out with us. But they said he was too old. And he was already in boarding school, so they knew he was being cared for. You know, they didn't believe Dad's hype in a lot of things, I don't think. Hugh was already in a boarding school. Why would a man want to get rid of a child who was already in boarding school? All he had to do was care for the kid, and his Grandmother would have done that, who was a Nun. He went to her school where she taught. But, getting over that, he eventually did come. But he came because he was heartbroken when he came out. That was the story, that he came out for that reason. They rejected him the first time.

HILL: And he would almost have gone straight into being a trainee.

COLE: He would have been.

HILL: Now, what are your recollections of being a trainee?

COLE: Oh, I just think it was plain slavery. I mean, I did work there at that age, where a child, a girl especially, should not have to do. I mean, those laundry baskets were full of wet clothes, at our age, when we were still forming, our bones and you know, that sort of thing. Yeah, I mean the work we did here really was horrendous for our ages. I mean, scrub, clean. I can remember the laundry because it was so heavy for me. And I was never a big girl, you know. And then you'd go to some places and like with dairy, or farmhouse, you know and you'd just scrub, clean, for them and that sort of thing.

HILL: And when you left Fairbridge, what happened to you? Where did you go?

COLE: I went to a doctor's home, and wife and family.

HILL: As a domestic?

COLE: As a domestic. And, I'll tell you, the first night that I left Fairbridge, I think it affected me deeper than leaving England.

HILL: Now, most Fairbridge kids say that, despite all the problems of Fairbridge, they had camaraderie with the other kids. And there they had terrible loneliness, it affected women as much as men, but of course, the women were exposed to threats of sexual abuse too. But tell me, this first night at the doctor's.

COLE: Well, I went to their home . . .

HILL: Whereabouts?

COLE: In Parkes. And they . . .

HILL: Fairbridge found you the job?

COLE: I guess they did. I remember them showing me my room.

HILL: And you were seventeen?

COLE: I was sixteen and three quarters. I hadn't turned seventeen. And they showed me my bedroom and I don't know what I did between then and going to be at night. But I remember going back into that room at night and the incredible loneliness. It was terrible . . .

HILL: Yeah, it's funny you know, when that . . .

COLE: Well, I slaved there morning 'til night. Morning 'til night. She even went overseas, the wife, and left me with three children and a doctor to look after. And I honestly, I worked from anything from six o'clock in the morning until they finished whatever they were doing at night. She was a woman that just had kids, was married, and the rest of the time just swanned about.

HILL: So, you were a cheap servant?

COLE: Oh, yes, a cheap servant, my God. I did get five pound a week, I think. I remember getting something like that. But, I was sick all the time. I used to come up in these terrible boils and things after a while when I was there. And styes on my eyes. And his surgery was right next door to the home. And he was in, I think there were two other doctors in him, but anyway there was this other doctor. And I remember going over to the doctor and seeing him. And he used to give me things, whatever I needed. And anyway, he used to say to me, "You mustn't do as much. Sleep in in the mornings."

But, anyway, looking back again, you realise he would have known a lot more than I thought he knew. And, anyway, one Sunday I went to church, because I still used to go to the Catholic Church, because I never got a day off for months when I was there, ever, and whether he mentioned something, I don't know. But, one day they said to me, you can have Sunday off. And so I started to go to church, and I fainted in church and, it turned out, I had the measles. So, anyway, the next day I went to him again. And he said, "You know, you must rest up. And you have to go home and you have to go inside and go to bed."

Well of course, no way was I allowed to go to bed. But he came in, I remember him coming in, either a day or two later. And he said, what was he doing? And I don't know what I was doing at the time, but I know I was working. And, anyway, nothing happened. He didn't say anything to me, and the people I was working for, the doctor and his wife, so he obviously didn't say anything. But, within a week, he sent his secretary and she said, "Doctor wants to see you." So I went in and he said, "Would you like to be a nurse?" And that's how I got to become a nurse.

HILL: The break. The break. Was that the big break?

COLE: And, at that hospital, he always used to come and spend time and say, "Are you all right?"

HILL: What, this is the doctor you worked for?

COLE: No, this was his partner. It was the partner that came in, a beautiful man, his partner.

HILL: It was the partner that rescued you? I see. Oh, isn't that good . . .

Did you feel that Fairbridge really didn't equip you for much? I mean, that you ended up at sixteen and three quarters . . .

COLE: I didn't know anything about the world. I mean, we had boyfriends at Fairbridge, but boyfriends to us were somebody you went to the Pictures. You know, you might kiss them behind the bush on the way home, especially if it was Gowrie Cottage or something like that that was close by, you know. But that was the extent of the relationship with a boy.

Do you know, I never, I'm not – this is no word of a lie – I did not know how you got babies. I honestly didn't until I went nursing. And see, I was, with being nearly twelve months, I would have just been almost eighteen when I went to that hospital, I didn't really know how to conduct myself or anything. I didn't really know anything about money when I left. But it wasn't that that got me. I just didn't know how to behave in front of other people. Social contact. I didn't know anything about it because you were just kids and then you were thrown into this other job. We never, we didn't sort of go

anywhere where you could, you sort of, you'd be half grown up and half a child still, but treated like a baby if you know what I mean.

So, yeah, I'm not kidding though, I was absolutely terrified, I did not know. And you see, I got a really nice boyfriend when I was at this place, at the doctor's, and he really was a wonderful man but I was absolutely terrified to go too close to him because honestly did not know anything about sex or anything. See, it was all right for the boys, they were up at the dairy, but the girls didn't have anything like that. And I can remember to this day being absolutely terrified. But when I went into the hospital, things must have just sort of . . .

HILL: You learned very quickly.

COLE: Yeah, just different because they were mainly female wards.

HILL: Finally, looking back on it all, what do you make of it, the Fairbridge thing, for you and your brothers and sisters?

COLE: Well, I wish it had never happened. I never forgave my Father. He did come out, I must tell you. My Father did come out, several times. The first time he came out, he was at the Farm for a good six months.

HILL: Is that right?

COLE: He lived in that place past Gowrie and New Cottage.

HILL: Staff quarters?

COLE: Yeah, that one. He lived in there. But I don't know that I had much contact with him. I suppose the others did, but I think almost ignored him, I don't know. Well, he lost the chance of a Father-children relationship, didn't he?

HILL: How long after you came did he come out?

COLE: Well, I think I was maybe, I think I was a Fairbridge trainee.

HILL: So, it must have been at least four or five years.

COLE: Oh, easy, yeah, it would be. I was ten. Yes, five or six years. So, I mean, I had no feeling for him at all. And he came out again, and he actually stayed with me twelve months before he died. And, he still wouldn't tell us the truth about family. I wouldn't throw him out or anything. I wouldn't dare do what he did to me or the younger ones. But he was never a Father. I mean, when he was home he was Dad, you know. Dad used to cobble our boots, do the gardening, take us to the beach, he'd read the newspaper while we were playing in the sand – we lived near a beach. But, when he went out there, he was just somebody that came out. He lived there for six months. I had no feelings for

him and when he died, he'd had a long life. I don't feel I ever owned my Father anything for doing what he did. And I mean, I told him once, I said, "If there is a Heaven," I said, "our Mother would be crying every day still for what you did, because you gave her children away." I remember that.

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