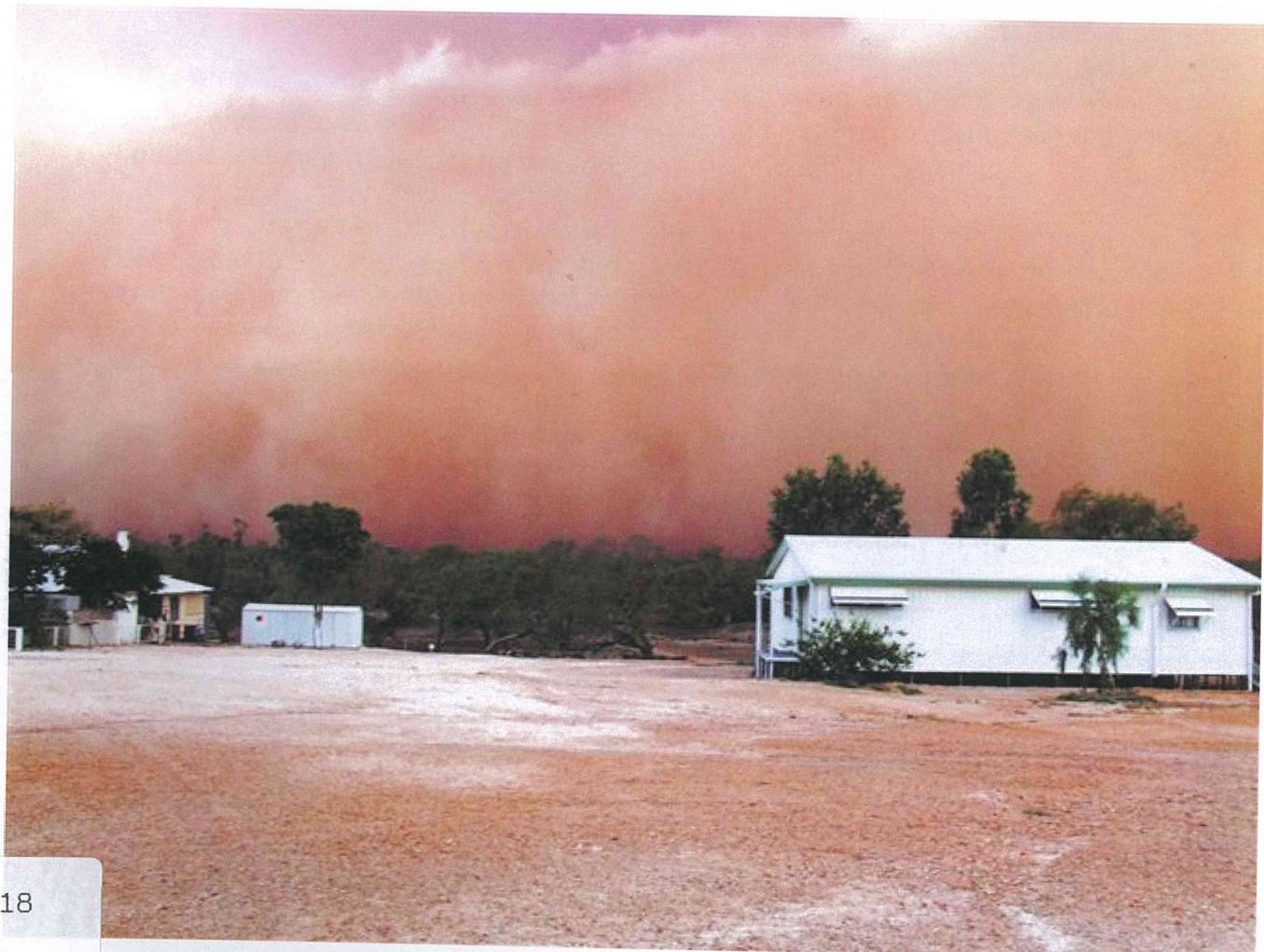


Durham Downs – a Pastorale

The story of Australia told through the lives of two families, united in their passion for three million acres of land: Durham Downs.



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Concept document produced with the assistance of the Pacific Film and Television Commission and Film Australia.

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Braided channels :
documentary voice from an
interdisciplinary,
cross-media, and
practitioners's perspective

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Synopsis

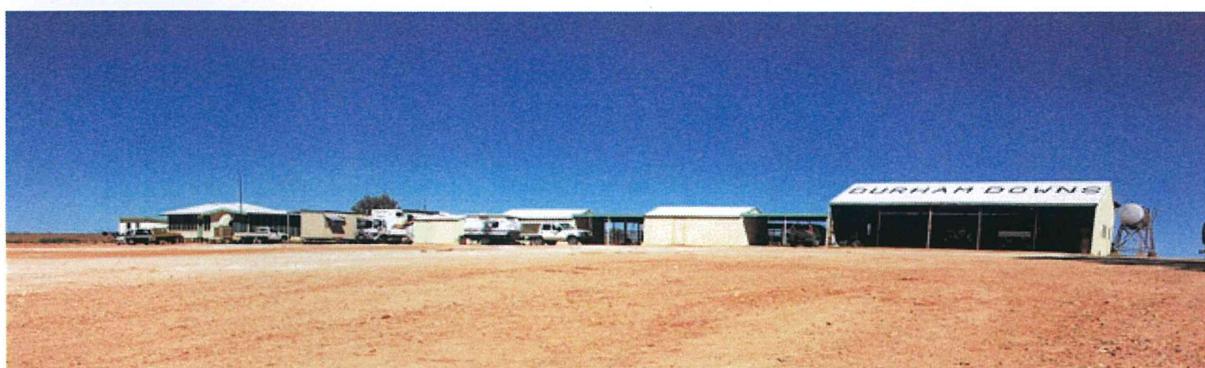
Durham Downs – a Pastorale is a 1 x 52 minute documentary that explores the love of land and sense of place that this ancient landscape **in far SW Queensland inspires through the story of two families**. The film follows the lives of the Ferguson family, retiring managers of Durham Downs Station, as their home passes on to the next family of employees of S. Kidman and Co., the Station's pastoral lease-holder. As they end a thirty year association with the property and an at least five generations association with the area, the Fergusons are grieving for the loss of their home and trying to make sense of who they will be without Durham Downs.

Running in parallel to the Ferguson's story is that of the Ebsworth family and the Wangkumarra people. Moved from their traditional home in the 1930s, and having worked for the Station over generations, oil and gas exploration of the land is creating new opportunities for them to relate to their land. In August 2008 a big mob are returning as a part of their ongoing claim under the Native Title Act. For the Ebsworths, like the Fergusons, Durham Downs is an integral part of their family history and cultural heritage. We follow their visit as they recount their memories of the land and their hopes for the future.

There is no antagonism between the two families. This film gently and compassionately explores how we make sense of our lives and how our environment is intimately connected to our identity. Indeed, the land itself is a character in this film, as our contributors recall their lives on the land and their histories, and evoke for us the land itself - the seasons, the landscape - and what it has meant to them.

This beautifully-shot film challenges **simple** notions of black and white relationships to land, and instead allows the love of land and the challenges of surviving on it to unify the voices in the film. Our contributors recount their experiences of this property – with its floods, flies, intense heat and iconic beauty - with humour, courage and humility.

As well as interviews and observational footage, *Durham Downs* uses extraordinary archival material featuring the property over the past century that deepens the context for these modern-day stories. Meticulous research has revealed a wealth of evocative, revelatory material to make sense of how the Fergusons and Ebsworths lives have become so braided into the channels of the Cooper Creek at Durham Downs.



Detailed Outline

Durham Downs: A Pastore begins with a montage of the land as a character of many facets, a dominant force in the lives of the human characters we will meet. Sweeping aerial top shots of Cooper Creek spreading for a hundred kilometres when in full flood, ground level shots of gibber plain stretching to the horizon, oasis like waterholes thronged with birds, water flowing into gaping cracks of the land as flood replaces drought, time lapse of clouds endlessly flowing across the land only rarely bringing rain, detail of deserted gunyahs and pastoral settlements alike, colourful maps showing a topography dominated by braided channels. Film Australia archive from the 50's gives a potted guide to this landscape, technically desert but periodically flooded with rains from the north to form the 'finest cattle fattening region on the world'. Amidst this montage we hear voices describing their feelings of love and longing for this landscape, counterpointed by the incessant buzz of flies, lowing of cattle and an overall sense of emptiness. Only after we are familiar with the face of the land, do we identify the faces of its sparse inhabitants.

"**Hope**" Ernest Ebsworth is the first face we see, as he walks through the arid landscape, telling us this is Wangkumarra land. As we go with him through this harsh and remote area, he tells us the Wangkumarra stories of the land: the 'white lady' as the mother of the Wangkumarra; of the creative power of the pelican; the willie wagtail as a portent of hard times. He is excited by these stories and obviously happy at being here.

John Ferguson's whole life has been spent in the Channel Country and is characteristic of the people of the area. Known for his love of hard work, horse racing and drink, he is nearing the end of his thirty years managing Durham Downs for S. Kidman and Co. He describes the vagaries of this country and both the trials and rewards that it can bring. His words are interspersed with contemporary and archive stills of Durham amidst flood, as well as stills and footage of John at work.

John's thirty something daughter **Fiona**, shares his love of Durham Downs. She tells us 'to be the manager of Durham was really something', and that she grew up feeling like 'the princess in the big house'. As we are shown around the family home, however, it's apparent that her princess' castle is no castle by middle-class, urban standards, with fluorescent tubes lighting its simple, aging interior.



Left:
John and Jasaleen
Ferguson.



Right:
Hope and Mandy
Ebsworth.

In spite of her love for the property and its central role in her identity, Fiona tells us she is not interested in being a 'manager's wife' – her only way of ensuring her future on Durham Downs. Instead, she has taken up the better paid alternative working for the oil and gas exploration companies which are expanding rapidly in the Cooper Basin.

The extended Ferguson clan all gather at the wedding of Fiona's sister **Trish** – with Fiona as chief bridesmaid and caterer. We see the wedding parties nervous preparations – ladies dressing, wrangling unco-operative hair; groomsmen dowsing themselves in Aerogard to stave off the ever-attendant clouds of flies. The wedding is attended by virtually the entire population of the district, and Trish arrives side-saddle on a white horse, led by her dad, into the midst of the one hundred and fifty guests gathered on the lawns of Durham.

Amidst wedding preparations in the huge station kitchen we meet **Mandy Shervington (Hope Ebsworth's niece)**, who is 'slaving' for the Fergusons for this event. Mandy's teenage son **Tray** is a quiet waiting presence in a utility outside amidst the feverish activity. Mandy tells us that this is her grandfather '**Nocka' Ebsworth's** country, that he was born at the Nockatunga waterhole.

We enter a montage of Durham in the 1920's. Beautiful and telling pictures reveal Aboriginal people living semi-traditionally whilst still supplying crucial labour to the pastoralists.

We meet **Edith McFarlane**, now 103, who was governess in the 20's at Durham and a witness to this epoch. She recalls how property after property transformed, initially having hundreds, sometimes thousands of Aboriginal people living there, then gradually moving them off, employing many fewer Aboriginal men in ringer's quarters.

She also remembers a more elegant life for non-Aboriginal pastoral workers – white frocks, a luxurious vegetable patch with a Chinese gardener. Edith fell in love whilst at Durham and married the manager of the next door property. **John Ferguson** recalls earlier generations of his family in the Channel Country and how they intersected with these histories.

A land montage shows the waters receding. In time-lapse clouds scud across an endless blue sky above red rocky hills. Beside the channels, cracks appear and widen in the drying ground.

We cut back to **Mandy** preparing for Trish's wedding, and discover that she grew up not knowing Durham because her people had had to leave the Channel Country in the early thirties. She tells us how she now takes every opportunity to work in the area so she can get to know her country. **Hope Ebsworth** provides more detail to

this history, talking about the removal of families, what that was like and where they ended up. He compares it to competition over water during a drought.

This introduces us to a montage of Durham in drought, barely a blade of grass to be seen, cows struggling to survive by muddy waterholes, huge dust storms massing. Edith's voice tells us of the especially savage drought of 1925 when she first arrived. Archive from Back of Beyond, with a howling dust storm amidst sandhills.

In voice over, Edith remembers finding skeletons in the sandhills after a violent storm in the 1920's. In vision, she tells us how the scattered, skewed bones were obvious evidence to her of a massacre long before. Archive from a 2005 7.30 Report shows the Wangkumarra driving across the Durham plains amidst severe drought to confront a site in the Chookoo sandhills on Durham unearthed by 'seismic' crews working for the oil and gas company Santos. This site also suggests a long ago massacre. Fiona confirms that she grew up knowing of many 'graves and bones' in the sandhills, but that 'no-one ever talked about it much'.

Mandy talks of the difficulties of growing up in Bourke, far from her Wangkumarra lands, and of how working on and around Durham has changed her life. **Mandy and Hope** are preparing to bring around twenty young Wangkumarra from Bourke and Dubbo back to Durham for the first time, hoping that their lives too will be improved by knowing their country. In preparation for this big trip we find **Hope** with Mandy's son **Tray**, showing him the Wangkumarra's traditional sites (Cut out at Durham Downs because the key footage with Tray is at Tibooburra).

We cut back to Fiona on the property. She is increasingly anxious about her dad's impending retirement and their own leaving of Durham. To her and her mother Jasaleen, it is devastating. At this point, John is more philosophical, certain that the land and the pastoral business will go on, himself a 'horse put out to pasture'. This is juxtaposed with Fiona, who can't imagine returning to Durham, because to be a visitor to her home would be too painful.

We see the **Fergusons** as John retires from Durham in December 2007. The corporate whims of the pastoral company means that the timing was sooner than they had hoped. Fiona is again chief caterer for her father's retirement ceremony. As they leave Durham as home for the last time after Christmas 2007, Jasaleen is too upset to appear on camera.

We watch the land recede in the rear view mirror of a 4WD and then cut to mining vehicles with drilling rigs trundling across the dusty tracks.

We watch **Mandy and Hope** at work on Durham as cultural heritage monitors, employed by Santos and other exploration companies to reconcile respect for sacred sites with the demands of contemporary resource exploration. Mandy's

confidence has grown, increasingly knowledgeable about the lands her family was once forced to leave.

Relaxing in camp Hope explains the legal processes the Wangkumarra are engaged in to assert their native title. April 2008 emerges as a key deadline for the Wangkumarra to have their latest native title claim registered, strengthening their power in negotiations with Santos and other mining companies. One obstacle, he explains, is sorting out the exact **Ebsworth** family genealogy to know who should be in the claimant group. A rostrummed document – a letter from 1898 - in huge magnification describes the sexual abuse of Aboriginal women at Durham by shearers, highlighting one of the complexities to unravelling family histories. Another obstacle **Hope** explains is that the Wangkumarra claim area crosses over that of the Boonthamarra, beyond Durham's borders, but affecting what happens within. **Edith MacFarlane**, looking back on her memories of the Channel Country, remembers how different clan and tribal groupings got mixed together through working for the pastoralists and as an outcome of the government polices of the day.

Rains from far to the north of Durham begin to bring a life-giving pulse of water to parched earth. Accompanied by a subterranean rumbling, water spreads slowly across the land, flowing down into cracks opened up by the drought. In voiceover, John tells us it is not enough water to make it through to Lake Eyre however. It will diminish somewhere around Innamincka.

Mandy, as well as her cultural monitoring for the mining company, has taken up work as cook for the stock camps on Durham, under the supervision of the new manager, **John Cobb**. He is the man Jasaleen once wanted Fiona to marry, to maintain the Ferguson Kidman dynasty. Meanwhile, **Fiona**, now heavily pregnant (due mid May 2008), is filmed working in the kitchens of the Balera gas processing plant, an unearthly structure rising up out of the desert just beyond the Durham border.

We find the **Fergusons** setting up a home in much tamer surroundings on the outskirts of Toowoomba, having carried with them lots of the industrial detritus of Durham. Jasaleen in particular is hurting, for John his race horses are a welcome distraction.

We check in with Hope as the Wangkumarra claim travels at snails pace through the Native Title Tribunal and the Federal Court, and as he and others attempt to negotiate mutually agreeable borders for their claim with the Boonthamarra. In August 2008 we watch the Wangkumarra mob from North West NSW, led by **Hope and Mandy**, return to their traditional lands. Out at Durham, Hope meets up with **William McKenzie**, a senior 'law man' from Alice Springs. William is not Wangkumarra, but travelled this country with elderly Ebsworth relatives long ago. The trip marks an emotional highpoint for Hope, Mandy and the Wangkumarra – a renewal of connection with the young people in a future of strengthened cultural identity and continuity.

Spring arrives at Durham after some rain and with it a carpet of flowers.

John and Jasaleen, begin to adjust to life beyond Durham, John with his racehorses, Jas building a new garden. **Fiona** is absorbed by her baby and partner Adam and their land near Quilpie. As possible Fiona researches and writes a book about her father and about Durham Downs. As part of this she tries to finally find the truth behind persistent rumours that her family are in fact part Aboriginal. She travels around the sites of Durham, with her Dad if she can drag him back out there, and if not with her old flame, John Cobb.

Hope is also writing a book, setting out *his* family's history around Durham and nearby properties, in the hope that the wider Australian community will appreciate the importance of 'country' to Wangkumarra and to us all. **Hope** comes to Toowoomba to meet with **John**, bringing with him a painting he has done for him.

Hopefully the film ends with footage of Durham amidst not only in full flood but also with local rains ...

Durham Downs – A Pastorale (w.t.o.)

A television hour documentary (or could be 2 x half hour)

**Concept document produced with the assistance of
the Pacific Film and Television Commission and Film Australia**

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8th May, 2006**

Durham Downs – a *Pastorale* (working title only)

One liner

Durham Downs – a *Pastorale* tells a powerful version of the Australian frontier story through one piece of land, a three million acre cattle station in far Western Queensland.

Short Synopsis

S. Kidman and Co has the pastoral lease on more than one percent of the continent of Australia, centred on Queensland's Channel Country. The 'jewel in Kidman's crown' is **Durham Downs**, three million acres of prime Channel Country land where Queensland meets NSW and South Australia. It would be a desert if not for its hundred miles north/south of the myriad braids of mighty Cooper Creek. This at least periodically rich country has been precious to both Aboriginal people and pastoralists and many battles have been fought to secure a share of its bounty. As the world runs out of oil, deposits once considered marginal are now vital. Durham Downs station is central to the currently booming Cooper Basin oil and gas industry. And its native title is being keenly contested, at a time when the Mabo and Wik court decisions are starting to seem a long time ago.

The Ferguson family is closely woven into the braids of this land's history. John Ferguson has managed Durham Downs for S. Kidman and Co for thirty years. His father before him managed next-door Naryilco station for Kidman for thirty years before that. And Ferguson relations are threaded through the history of other Channel Country Kidman stations. John's daughter Fiona, a single woman of 33, has worked for Kidman for many years, but like many other young people has found better pay and conditions in the adjacent mining industry.

On the wrong side of sixty already, John will retire in a year or two, and there does not appear a Ferguson of the younger generation to replace him. The Ferguson's celebrate the richness of their Durham heritage, putting on a huge bash for the wedding of Fiona's sister, Trish. But Trish is leaving for the coast to live with her husband Beau, who works in the booming Central Queensland mining industry. When John and his wife Jasaleen leave Durham, the family's tenure of the land will be finished. This is a 'devastating' concept for Fiona. She responds by exploring the history of her own family and others associated with Durham. She discovers that the braids of her own family's history are even more tangled up with the land than she had realised. As the Ferguson's prepare to leave Durham, others discover and rediscover their connection with this patch of dirt.

Rural Australians are often located within simple stories of triumph over hardship, of pioneers making land their own, where a macho culture of hard work and mastery of land reigns supreme. Much less is known of the people who work the land for distant landlords. This is a story of some of the people who have lived and worked on one particular S. Kidman and Co pastoral station over the last century. It is a story where many usual categories dissolve and where the past keeps knocking on the door of the future. All over the world the premium suddenly placed upon oil is creating new frontiers and shifting old verities: Durham Downs is one such place.

Durham Downs – a Pastorale (w. t. o.)

Detailed Synopsis and Concept document

Durham Downs Station is three million acres on the banks of Cooper Creek in Far South West Queensland. It has been leased by S. Kidman and Co for grazing since 1905, mined for oil and gas by Santos for the past twenty years, and is currently the centre of a dispute as to who are its rightful traditional owners. Over the years this land has meant many things to many people. It was a land of plenty for Aboriginal people, but the braided river channels of Cooper Creek were one of the last straws for Burke and Wills before their death nearby. Pastoralists thought it was ‘God’s Own Country’ for sheep before plagues of rabbits & dingos & drought forced a change. Steve Fossey planned to float right on by, but ended up finishing his round the world balloon trip here. And as the mining company Santos recently undertook a seismic survey they found skeletons in the sand hills that speak of dark chapters in Durham’s past.

Durham Downs – a Pastorale is a television hour, character-based documentary(though the treatment could also be written to support 2 x half hour or even 3 x half hour if there was a slot to support it). Using interview and observation, environmental cinematography, archival documents, film and photos and some stylised scripted elements a remote part of Australia is brought to life. The land itself, moving through an arc from sunrise to sunset and back to dawn again is the dominant character, but many fascinating human stories are also revealed. (Depending on how the story unfolds I could also use a seasonal metaphor, with Trish’s wedding in the ‘autumn’ of the Ferguson story, her parents departure from the land its winter, and look for a suggestion of spring/rebirth in the final stages of the story, when a new manager has taken up the reins)

As dawn breaks John Ferguson and his ringers are up working the horses that are still central to Channel Country pastoralism. John is clearly used to unrelenting work but work in the stables at dawn doesn’t count. Breeding and racing horses, along with drinking, are his main diversions and his tough, stocky form looks supremely comfortable in the stables. Pastoral labour is hard to find and keep right now and **Pup, Snow and Blue**, the ringers working beside John, are barely more than children.

We watch the ringers beheading chooks badly and cut to the station kitchen where John Ferguson’s aunt, **Betty** is slicing watermelon for a fruit platter. Alongside her **Fiona Ferguson**, her mother, **Jasaleen** and her sister **Trish**, are also working hard to prepare for Trish’s impending marriage. Among other things they laugh about the ‘indigenous chooks’ that have appeared as a result of the ringer’s handiwork. This is the first wedding to be held at Durham in recorded history. In voiceover Fiona tells us that she grew up in a ‘man’s world, no place for the woman Dad always said, and we turned out quite girly girls considering’. She has worked as a cook in the mining industry for years and is chief caterer as well as bridesmaid for Trish’s wedding. John appears in the kitchen as a cheeky presence stealing

goodies but Fiona tells us that as a child he was the strictest of fathers, rigorously segregating she and her sisters from the world of ringers and drovers just outside the door.

Fiona explains that she escaped her father's control through becoming Charity Princess in the Queen of the Outback competition, followed by extensive travel and a working life as cook for the mining industry. **Aunty Betty** talks of life as a 'Kidman woman', coping with the harsh environment without complaint. Fiona's story begins to reveal the changes to life in the Channel Country wrought by the Cooper Basin oil and gas industry. Earning 'good money' in mining convinces Fiona not to follow her mother, grandmother and great aunt into being a 'Kidman wife'. 'I'd like to be an owner's wife, fine, but not a manager's wife, because ultimately it's not ours'.

It is revealed that in one or two years John will have reached retirement age and the Ferguson family will have to relinquish control of Durham Downs. Kasey Chamber's *My Heart is Staying Here* (licence yet to be negotiated) takes us into a sequence about **Edith McFarlane** and others who have come and gone from Durham. Now aged 102, Edith came to Durham as governess in 1925, married the head stockman and ended up as manager's wife of next door Tanbar station for twenty five years. Edith hasn't lived in the Channel country for fifty years but as she says 'a part of me has stayed out in that country'. Writing about and remembering her time there is an important part of what sustains her.

Back in the kitchen, the pace of preparation for the wedding picks up. Fiona is engaged in a 'handover' to **Tracey White** and **Mandy Shervington**, two local part Aboriginal women who have agreed to manage the kitchen during the wedding and reception so that Fiona can be bridesmaid. As Fiona lays out for Tracey and Mandy the way she wants food presented, Tracey explains that her Dad was the fencer on Durham and they moved from place to place in their caravan across its vastness. She recalls thinking of Fiona as the 'princess in the big house', one day stealing a shoe from Fiona's Barbie as a way of sharing in the bounty. Fiona says that 'Tracey and I have been best friends forever'. So when Tracey considers Fiona has overstepped the mark, telling her how to do her unpaid job, she is not backward in coming forward.

Mandy explains that Durham is the land of her ancestors and that she has been coming back to Durham to work on contract cooking for the mustering camps, when she is not employed by the mining company Santos to travel with seismic crews looking for artefacts, sacred sites etc.

We cut to an ABC 7.30 report of June 2005 detailing Santos finding skeletons indicative of a massacre site in the Durham sand hills and suppressing publication of details of the find for ten months.

Edith McFarlane then recalls seeing skeletons under a Durham sand hill after a big storm back in 1925 and similarly concluding that it indicated that a massacre had taken place long before she lived at Durham. Edith is also able to shed some light on documents from Durham from the end of the nineteenth century, describing the widespread sexual abuse of Aboriginal women by shearers, when Durham was a sheep property and before it was taken over by S.

Kidman and co. ‘It happened’, she tells us, ‘anywhere white men were on the frontier without their women, otherwise why are there so many half caste people’

Edith goes on to describe a period of relative harmony between black and white in the 1920’s at Durham, when both Aboriginal women and men were critical to the pastoral industry but still maintaining many elements of their traditional existence. Through Edith’s memory, writings and photographs the story of **Elsie** unfolds. Elsie was born on Durham to traditional Aboriginal people in around 1920. When her mother **Emily** died giving birth to a sibling in 1925 Elsie was brought up between two cultures, spending her days in the Durham household - with Jean MacCullagh the daughter of the then manager - and her nights with her father **Curra Jack** in camp. Edith brings 1920’s Durham to life: women luxuriating in flood and coping with drought, a Chinese gardener producing a cornucopia of vegetables, strings of camels bringing additional supplies through the sand hills. She also hints darkly at the lot of the governess. **Jonathan Richards**, a contemporary research historian with an encyclopaedic knowledge of the Queensland State Archives, is able to fill in further gaps around the photos and Edith’s memory, which is starting to fail her.

Back in the kitchen preparing for Trish’s wedding, Mandy tells us that her elderly relatives were moved off Durham to Bourke in the 1930’s, which was where she was then born. **Betty Gorringe**, who worked in the kitchens of Durham as a young woman in the seventies explains, how her Aboriginal family came from NSW but ended up entrenched in the pastoral industry of Queensland’s Channel Country. She also details the way that her elder sisters got to know Elsie as an adult, the impact on Elsie’s life of her cross cultural childhood and her untimely death in the 70’s.

This is likely to be the place structurally to explain the native title battle currently going on around Durham, which led to the Federal Court of Australia sitting there in special session in 2003. Mandy’s uncles, **Cecil** and **Malcolm Ebsworth** will be important sources of knowledge, as will **Paul Gorecki**, the European anthropologist working as a consultant to the Wangkumarra people to whom Mandy and her uncles belong.

Rehearsals for the wedding are now in full swing. Trish Ferguson and **Beau** her partner and father of her two children joke with the local priest as they try out their vows, as Fiona, her mother Jasaleen and others of the bridal party look on. Beau’s parents both appear Anglo, but his dark skin reflects another thread of Australia’s complex racial history.

Betty Gorringe details that when she fell in love with the manager’s son in the seventies she was quickly moved out of employment at Durham. She fell into a disastrous relationship and when an unplanned pregnancy resulted in family disgrace, she took refuge with **Ruby Andrews**, who is now the cook at Wamanooks, an outstation of Durham.

As Fiona and Trish get dressed for Trish’s wedding, Fiona tells us that getting married had always been part of her dream, but with no husband in sight she is happy to help her younger sister realise her dream. By the time Trish struggles up onto her white horse in full wedding regalia, she tells us she’s ‘had a few champagnes’ and briefly it seems plans could go awry, especially as the generator fails. But soon after John and the station electrician get the power

going again, Beau and his groomsmen spray Aerogard all over their formal suits to keep the ever present flies at bay, and Trish rides side-saddle to her wedding ceremony on a magnificent white horse.

In the crowd that gathers to celebrate the wedding, we find many Aboriginal faces. One woman who embraces Jasaleen warmly is Ruby Andrews. In interview, as the sun starts to set, Ruby explains that her people are from South Australia, but having been moved off their land she and her husband ended up working for Kidman all over the Channel Country as contract fencers. Ruby describes her closeness to John and Jasaleen, saying that John feels like a brother to her,

On the lawn of Durham at the wedding reception we find three of John's cousins: brothers **Rusty** and **John 'Tractor' Ferguson** - now mayor of Thargomindah – and **Ted Brown**, the manager's son that fell in love with Betty Gorringe all those years ago. They explain that they are all descended from **Samuel Ferguson**, but laugh off suggestions that their common forebear could have been part Aboriginal.

On race relations in the pastoral industry Rusty and Dave are similarly quiet but Tractor tells us bluntly that although Kidman have absolutely depended upon Aboriginal stockmen 'You can't get a blackfella to run your show...the best stockmen in the world could have managed Kidman properties but weren't allowed to. Ruby Andrews confirms that 'they just didn't think of us like that – we were their right hand men, but they didn't think of us as managers'. When it is put to him that perhaps the Fergusons could have suppressed their Aboriginality in order to be Kidman managers, John laughs and says 'I don't know, maybe we have Chinese or Afghan blood, who can say, if we're Aboriginal Kidman missed out'

We cut to Paul Gorecki in his office in Brisbane: 'I'll tell you about Maori, often Australian families say they are Maori or Afghan because they don't want to admit to being Aboriginal. We cut back to Tractor, who when asked what makes Durham tick, says' 'What makes Durham tick is a fat little black bastard called Bindi Ferguson, ie John Ferguson, manager of Durham.'

As the night wears on Mandy and Tracey slave away in the kitchen, assisted by the young ringers as their waiters, battling a mini invasion of locusts that is par for the course at Durham. Outside dancing is breaking out. To the strains of Ross Wilson's Eagle Rock, Tractor Ferguson dances first with the bride Trish and next with Ruby Andrews. Fireworks plume over the Durham homestead and die away as music and drinking continues into the night.

Depending upon the precise broadcaster and slot for this documentary, this could form the end of the first of two television half hours or the midpoint that of an hour long documentary that begins to focus on the Ferguson's leaving Durham.

In interview Fiona tells us that since living back at home preparing for the wedding she feels that Durham is no longer the place she thought she knew backwards, that Kidman employees are treating her father with far less respect than she believes he deserves.

The morning after the wedding John Ferguson tells us that when he has left Durham, others will take his place that will do just as good a job. Some months on we find John out in a stock camp and observe the rhythm of his life closely as he struggles as conditions change to continue to manage the job that has been his life for thirty years. Mandy Shervington is one of those cooking in the stock camps and through her we come to understand what it is to return to land once roamed by your forebears as a casual employee. We also follow the debate over native title as it unfolds.

Fiona reveals that like Edith MacFarlane before her, she is writing a book to preserve the history of her family at Durham and others who have come and gone from its land. We travel with Fiona as she tries to sort through conflicting stories about where her great grandfather Samuel is buried and who he was in life.

We have seen that Fiona and Aunty Betty have a somewhat prickly relationship, but Fiona believes that Aunty Betty that Aunty Betty more than she has so far said the truth of the Ferguson family history. With a little more information and lots of unanswered questions Fiona heads for Brisbane to try to track down the truth of her family tree in the data base Paul Gorecki has amassed to help native title claimants and in the Queensland State archives. She also heads to Adelaide, to the archives of the Kidman company, to understand better the company's history and her family's place within it.

Tractor Ferguson has said that if Kidman wants to hang onto high quality employees they need to match conditions in the mining industry. Fiona has to manage paid work in the mining industry with her writing and research, so we also find her at work in the mining camps and are able to contrast this world with the parallel universe of pastoralism.

Durham Downs – a Pastorale will conclude with the celebrations as John and Jas Ferguson leave for the last time and as a new family takes up residence in their beloved Durham. This documentary braids together past and present of a beautiful and relatively unknown corner of Australia at a moment of profound change. And of all the characters we meet through the documentary, perhaps the place of Durham Downs is the most powerful of all.

Character Profiles

John Ferguson. Born and bred a 'Kidman man', like his father and uncles before him, John has been manager of Durham for thirty years. John spends a little bit of time at school in Tibooburra before he leaves school very young. John grew up with many Aboriginal people and it is rumoured that he speaks an Aboriginal language, but he often vehemently declares that 'I'm not a blackfella'. Whether or not this is true is one of the key narrative drivers of this documentary..

Fiona Ferguson is from a long line of pastoral managers. Her Dad John has managed the three million acres of Durham Downs Station -with its hundred miles of Cooper Creek frontage - for the Kidman Company for the past thirty years. His father before him managed next door Naryilco station for thirty years before that. And John took over managing Durham from a cousin whose son now manages Naryilco. So managing pastoral land for the company that owns more than one percent of Australia is in her blood. Fiona idolizes her father John and began this project wanting to create something that would ensure that his name will endure.

Fiona grows up at Durham Downs and as an adult stays ‘around home’ for longer than any of her siblings. As a child Fiona’s Dad keeps she and her sisters well away from the men that make up most of Durham’s population. As an adult she chooses to work as one of a very few women amongst many men. But instead of working in the pastoral industry, with its low wages and requirement that all its junior workers are single, she works as a cleaner and chef at the nearby Balera Oilfield and earns twice as much. Like her two sisters she enters the ‘Queen of the Outback’ quest, which with the help of her parents raises a great deal for the Flying Doctor and becomes ‘Charity Princess’. For the past few years mining work has taken her to Central Queensland to live and work. But her parents leaving Durham is calling her back and in 2006 she has been employed as station cook and gardener.

Edith McFarlane goes to Durham Downs to work as a governess in 1925. She wants an adventure a bit like her parents had before her time with William Lane in Paraguay and she wants to understand Aboriginal people. Life at Durham is a struggle, especially after the man she has fallen in love with at first sight disappears to another station. Edith endures and comes to build a family and a garden as the manager’s wife of Tanbar, the property next door to Durham. In the 50’s she is one of the ‘stars’ of a Film Australia documentary about the Channel Country. She meets lots of Aboriginal people at Durham Downs, including an influx escaping from another station. She remembers seeing skeletons in the sandhills of Durham after a big storm, and seeing the ruins of a structure built to protect women and children when under attack by Aboriginal people. But by the time she leaves the Channel Country thirty years later few Aboriginal people are left in the area. Edith self publishes two books about her years in the Channel Country, which are also a way for her to share her love of photography with the public. At 102 she is still lively and relatively fit, and spends a lot of time ‘thinking back’.

Elsie Jack/Thompson/Lumley/Lumby is born at Durham Downs or close by around 1921 and appears many times in Edith’s photo album. Clearly she is considered special by both her own people and by a succession of governesses and manager’s wives. Her childhood moves between various Aboriginal camps and Channel Country homesteads. She married traditionally to a much older Aboriginal man. But by 1953 she has been removed to Palm Island. She finds her way back to the Channel Country, lives in Winton, and goes droving down the Diamantina, but like many of her people, dies young. It may be possible for Fiona to track down her descendants.

Betty Gorringe is fifty three, part of an Aboriginal family that is legend in the Channel Country for their skills as stockmen and women and drovers. Betty's Dad, Bill Gorringe, ran the Planet Downs outstation of Arrabury Station, next to Durham Downs. She worked in the kitchens at Durham in the late sixties until she was becoming 'too close' to the manager's son and her employment was terminated. She goes on to meet her white husband David when he was a teacher in Windorah. Now Betty lives a comfortable life as David's wife in suburban Brisbane. But much of her time is spent thinking about her past in the Channel Country.

Tracey White grew up all over Durham Downs, as her parents travelled its three million acres as contract fencers. She has been friends with Fiona Ferguson all her life, although as a child she envied her life as 'princess of the big house'. Once, she stole one of the shoes of Fiona's Barbie doll as a way of having something of that security for herself.

Mandy Shervington is an Ebsworth by birth, and the Ebsworths have lived around Durham for generations, first as traditional owners and later as pastoral workers. Her family is at the core of a native title claim that had the Federal Court sit at Durham Downs in 2003, in an attempt to resolve rival native title claims. Mandy was born in Bourke. Now she lives in Eromanga, the small town closest to Durham, but comes back regularly as a contract employee to cook for the stock camps, when she is not being employed by Santos to protect Aboriginal sites from exploratory mining crews.

Background Notes

S. Kidman and Co

Sidney Kidman rose from obscurity in Adelaide in the mid nineteenth century. He made a lot of money building businesses that provided transport to the pastoral and mining industries that burgeoned in the late nineteenth century. He used his money to buy up massive amounts of pastoral land that others were casting off as too hard to run. He was one of the first to recognize the value of the 'Three Rivers' Channel Country because being regularly flooded by water from wetter parts of Australia it was easier to ride out droughts than elsewhere. He also pioneered the concept of 'chain of supply, where moving stock from station to station that he owned he was better able than others to 'ride out' the inevitable droughts that periodically arrive. Kidman and Co is still owned by his descendants.

Currently full employment in Australia, and an inland mining boom, is making it extremely difficult for the company to attract workers for its properties.

They welcomed the filmmaker to stay at Durham Downs in July for preliminary research and have agreed to future access for the purposes of making this document. Fiona Ferguson has secured access from Kidman and Co to all files relating to Durham Downs.

The Land and Environment of Durham Downs and the Channel Country

The Channel Country is in an often forgotten area of Australia where the states of NSW, South Australia and Queensland collide. Rain falls rarely and the area would be a desert, except that rivers laden with water from the tropical north flow regularly through this land. This land is also fed by the water of the Great Artesian Basin, where it can take up to two million years for rain that falls on one part of the continent to surface in another. Channel Country is defined by the floodplains of three rivers, the Georgina & Diamantina Rivers and Cooper Creek, and by the land they regularly inundate. Each of these substantial rivers 'flow' into Lake Eyre, which nevertheless spends most of its time as a dry saltpan. Most of the water disappears into thin air. Some flows deep underground. From above, these waterways are seen as a complex network of 'braided channels' that can spread laterally for up to sixty miles during a flood. This country's history is similarly braided, with stories that confirm and contradict and intersect with each other.

Because it has '100 miles North/South of Cooper Creek frontage' and many miles east to west of the Cooper's braided channels, Durham Downs in a good season is prime grazing country and is considered one of the jewels in the Kidman company's crown. Kidman secured the lease to Durham Downs in 1909 and has hung onto it ever since, recently renegotiating the lease for the next twenty years.

The Queensland State Archives Document describing Durham Downs in 1898.

Document 17276 of 1900(Col/142)

In 1900 **H. Fisher**, a Shearing Contractor writes to **Archibald Meston**, Protector of Aborigines to complain about what he saw at Durham Downs when he worked there as a shearer in 1898. He describes 'Stud Gins...kept exclusively for the use of the boss' and the 'general hands...(who

would) compel a gin to allow them to have connection...(and then) sit down to their meals without a wash'.

Meston forwards the letter on to Queensland's Home Secretary, along with two other similar documents and a note endorsing all three as 'mild examples of what has been shamefully frequent where there are no police, no public opinion and no press'. The Home Secretary asks the local police to assess the Fisher's reputation as a witness, and gets back mixed responses. One says that Fisher is a 'pugilist...a very prominent unionist and has a very strong prejudice against Squatters and Station Managers.' Another supports him. The archival record peters out. This is one example of the historical puzzles facing Fiona as she puts together her publication.

The Production So Far

This documentary project grew out of the earlier **Channels of History** exhibition and oral history project that was produced and directed by Trish FitzSimons, with funding from the Centenary of Federation and Arts Queensland. This earlier project, which looked at the history of the Channel Country as a whole, has provided an enormous amount of relevant material to this broadcast project. The PFTC paid for initial script development including a first showreel. Film Australia and the PFTC have jointly funded filming the wedding at Durham Downs which underpins much of this synopsis. It is likely that as the observational component of the production increases, the wedding may be less pivotal throughout the film than it appears in this draft.

Existing Material to Realise this script to which I own the copyright or have a non-exclusive licence

- Lots of photos of Elsie as a small girl - from both Ediths New and McFarlane and from the Rieck collection.
- Lots of photos of Durham Downs in the 1920's, showing it both as cornucopia and in a tougher season
- 2 hour Betacam SX Edith McFarlane interview, and the possibility to return for more material
- Road/driving footage of the Channel Country in 2000
- Road/driving footage of Durham Downs, 2005
- Much land, water, wildlife footage professionally filmed in the Channel Country, 2000
- Images from the Channels of History exhibition of Elsie and the two Ediths
- Fiona's extensive archive of personal family photos and memorabilia

Existing Relevant Archival Footage

- Back of Beyond, Shell Film Unit, 1954 (© Film Australia)
- The Inlanders, Australian Inland Mission, (© Uniting Church, 1948)
- The Channel Country, Film Australia, 1956 (including footage of Edith McFarlane in the garden of Tanbar Station, the neighbouring station to Surham)
- ABC 7.30 Report Footage from Channel Country Flood Season, 2000
- Cinesound Movietone News of Drought in the Channel Country 1930's(© Filmworld)
- Footage of Betty Gorringe's Dad, Bill, in the first Kidman rodeo in the 1930's – in the Kidman archive in Adelaide, yet to be precisely located.
- The Wooly West, 1929, silent, NFSA
- Extensive aerial footage of the Channel Country during the floods of 2000, shot by ABC TV
- ABC 7.30 report, 24th May, 2005 about the Santos company uncovering skeletons in the sandhills at Durham indicative of an Aboriginal massacre having taken place, and trouble with native title claimants in regard to Santos not sharing this knowledge with them.

Existing Permissions

- I have permission from S. Kidman and Co to access Durham Downs for the purpose of telling this story, and to film Fiona as she uses their archive in Sydney.
- I have release forms from key project participants including Fiona Ferguson, John Ferguson, Ruby Andrews, Tractor and Rusty Ferguson, Ted Brown, Jonathan Richards, Edith McFarlane and Paul Gorecki

Possible Story Threads to be further developed during the course of production

- **Fiona writing he book – the history she turns up and her responses**

*Burke and Wills traveled through Durham

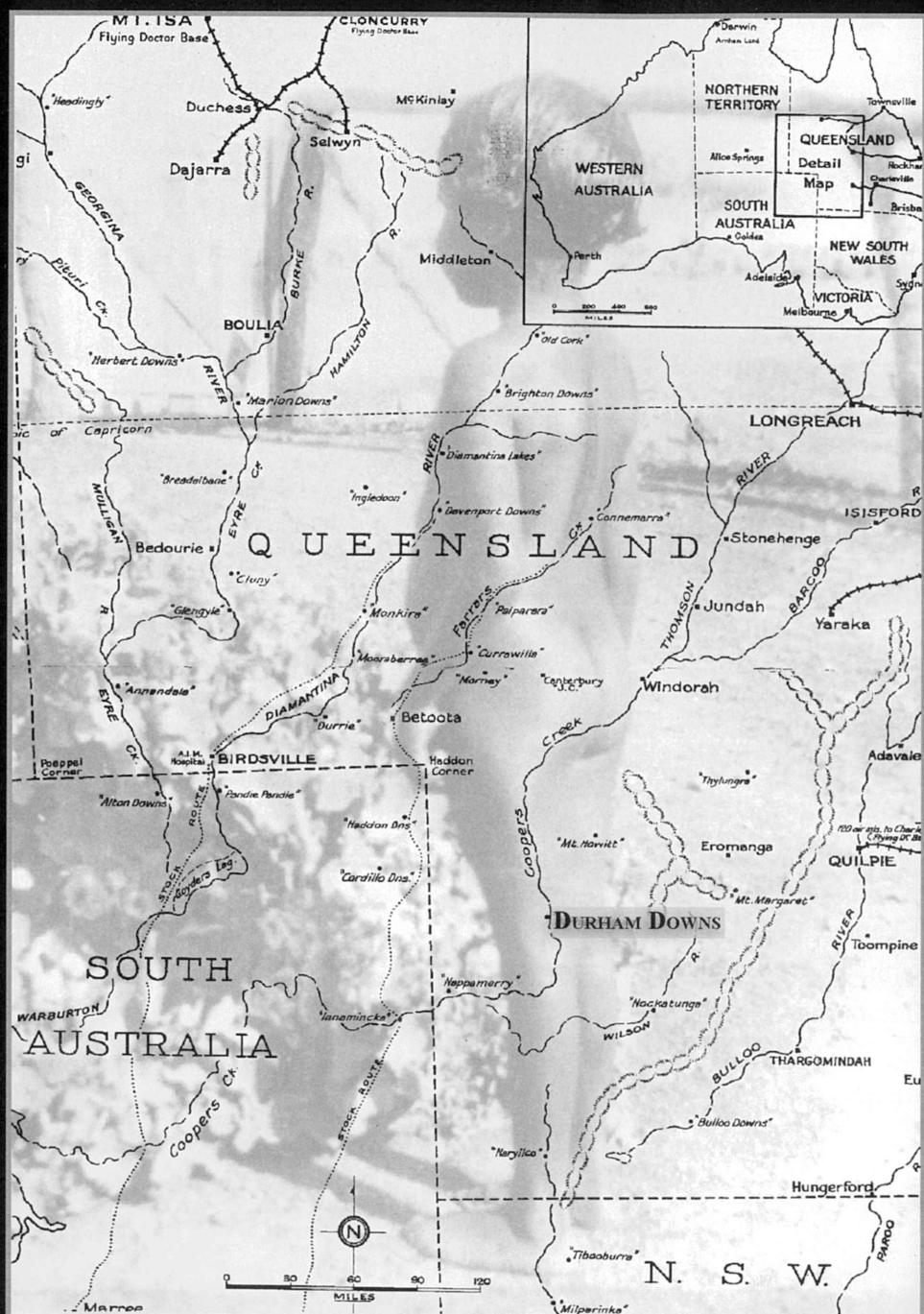
*Steve Fossey landed his balloon there in 2003 after this around the world trip

*Durham Downs would appear to have been the location of a massacre of Aboriginal people in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries

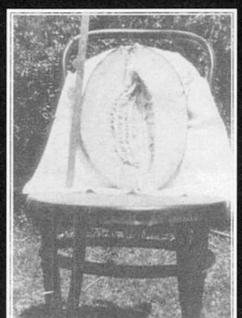
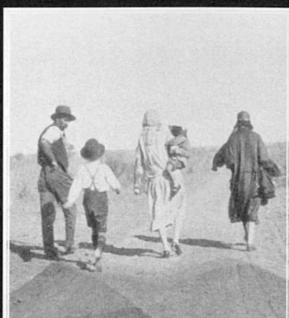
*There are three different extensive photographic collections of Durham Downs in the 1920's, one of them Edith McFarlane

- As part of the above – **Fiona tracing her possible Aboriginality and its impact on her identity and family relationships**
- **John Ferguson moving to retirement** and its relation to his chronic health troubles – diabetes, heart problems, heavy alcohol consumption etc
- **The unfolding of the native title conflicting claims for Durham**

useless workers for the Royal Flying Doctor Service and built up a friendly relationship with the aborigines. Elsie's plodding corps of boys always followed them from station to station.



"The past is another country"
- L P Hartley





"Especially after her mother died, Elsie would come to the house and be bathed and put into a clean frock and she would play around there... she spent the day down at the house and went back to the camp with the women at night."

I can remember watching her having a lesson in what is known as a corroboree. And that was - to watch her standing upright and just trembling ah from the shoulder right down to her feet. Not, not trembling in fright but a tremble that she could produce & that was what these black women had been teaching her. I know, later, when she was older, she had lessons with the little white girl when - when Jean started lessons, Elsie went too. She was a pretty little girl. Curly hair. I think she was a full blood black, not a half-caste child, as so many people out there were half-castes."

- Edith McFarlane



Director's Filmography

Snakes and Ladders: A Film about Women, Education and History 16mm, 59 mins., Documentary
(Pr/Dir with Mitzi Goldman), Broadcast: ABC, Channel 4 - UK Festivals - Mannheim, Tyneside, Creteil, Sydney, Melbourne

Retreat, 16mm Drama, 10 mins (Wr/Dir.) Festivals: St Kilda

Above Water, 16mm Docudrama, 23 mins (Dir) Festivals: Perth, Henri Langlois

Another Way?, Betacam, 54mins (Wr/Prod./Dir) Broadcast: SBS Independent

Channels of History, Betacam, 8 x 3min in touch screen interactive interface as part of travelling exhibition

Elsie's Story is a fifty minute compilation documentary that reconstructs the life of an Aboriginal woman who lived and worked her whole life round the Channel Country of far South Western Queensland. Rather than presenting a coherent biography, Elsie's story unfolds as an unfinished mosaic revealing facets of her life, her country and the times through which she moved.

Copious photos of Elsie as a baby and as a toddler appear in the photo albums of two young women both

happy. As well as being a focus of the young white women's attention, Elsie is shown with Aboriginal adults (one captioned 'The Queen and Elsie her youngest subject'). According to a letter accompanying the first photo album, Elsie was a 'faithful Aborigine who followed Edith and her husband from station to station'. Why this child was considered so special is one question that this documentary seeks to answer. What might Elsie make of other people's interest in her life? And what did this childhood mean for her later life? The fragmentary answers would seem to include cruelty, deceit and passion. The complex emotions that swirled between adults and children and children of different races on the frontier will also be explored.



named Edith, each in turn governess to the children at Durham Down's station in the 1920's. In the photos Elsie appears strong, healthy and

Elsie's Story is also about history and the process of constructing a history. What is history for and what attracts individuals to particular historical stories?

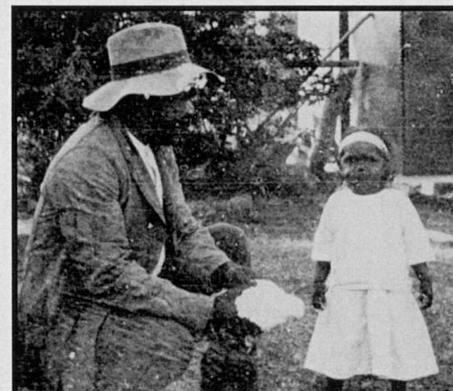
These questions are approached through the journeys of three key characters. They are: Norman Hodges - Elsie's twenty something grandson who can't settle fully into adult life

"We had Emily (Elsie's mother) and Ada. Ada was the wife of the King, Paddy. I can't remember the other names. Some of them were not originally from a tribe there. Some of them came down from Tanbar. In about 1925 the manager had taken some of them up to the little township of Windorah promising blankets to them, but when he got there, he put them on the mail truck and sent them down to the Mission and they did not like going to the Mission. Well word got back to them before the manager. They had a remarkable way of communicating and although it was 70 miles from Tanbar to the township, the others knew before the manager came back that the blacks were not coming back with him. So they packed up their few little bits and pieces and they walked down to Durham and that was in the midst of a howling drought."

- Edith McFarlane



until he understands his family legacy better; Trish FitzSimons -an Anglo film maker and oral historian who has been captivated by Elsie's story since first seeing her image in 2000 and Edith McFarlane - the 101 year old woman who knew Elsie and her country well a very long time ago. It is envisaged that Trish and Norman



will travel together to Durham Downs and the surrounding Channel Country to understand her country better and to piece together her story. Meanwhile Edith stays at home on the coast, her journey one back into the past and the complex histories that have unfolded before her eyes.

Elsie's grandsons' journey will start from his home in Echuca, in rural Victoria as he heads north into Queensland and his family's past. He will meet Edith McFarlane, who knew his grandmother and great grandfather, Pam Watson, a historian of the Channel Country frontier and Ann Curthoys a historian of indig-

enous Australian demography. He may look for Jean McCullough, the white girl now 90 if she's alive who was educated with his grandmother; find Elsie's grave in Mitchell; and visit the Stockman's Hall of Fame to see the first Edith's photo albums and to search for any public traces of his family's story. He will then travel on to Durham Downs in remote Outback Queensland and continue the search for answers to the riddles of his grandmother's and great grandparent's lives.

In Elsie's Story the distinctive ecology of the Channel Country - the inland delta of braided channels and red sandhills, its pulses of life giving water and its periods of cruel drought - is like a mercurial character that influences the human stories unfolding in its midst.

In the tradition of William Yang/Tony Ayres' **Sadness**, Peter Hegedus' **Grandfathers and Revolutions & The Inheritance** and Verena Rudolph's **Lucy, Elsie's Story** is a historical journey film where discovery is partial and the tone exploratory. In an Australia racked by the dissent of what have come to be known as 'The History Wars', **Elsie's Story** can contribute to emerging understandings of what Australia's history might mean for the present and future of the nation.

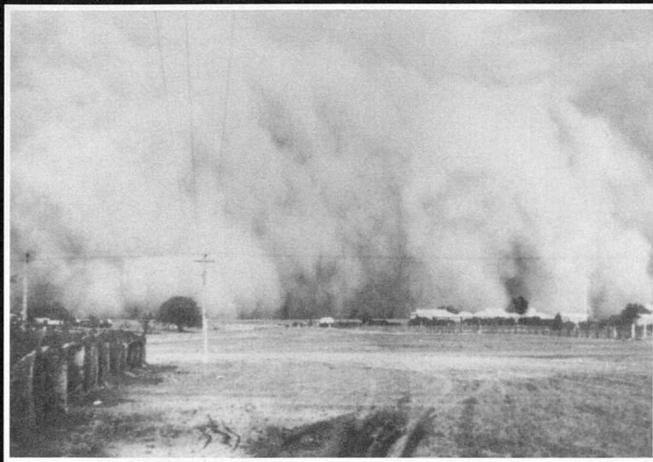
Existing Material to Realise Elsie's Story to which I own the copyright or have a non-exclusive licence:

- Lots of photos of Elsie as a small girl - from both Ediths New and McFarlane.
- Lots of photos of Durham Downs in the 1920's, showing it both as cornucopia and in a tougher season
- 2 hour Betacam SX Edith McFarlane interview, and the possibility to return for more material
- Road/driving footage of the Channel Country in 2000
- Much land, water, wildlife footage professionally filmed in the Channel Country, 2000
- Betacam interview and transcript with Dr Pam Watson - and the possibility to return with James
- Images from the Channels of History exhibition of Elsie and the two Ediths
- A hand drawn free standing figure of Elsie from the exhibition

Existing Relevant Archival Footage

- *Back of Beyond*, Shell Film Unit, 1954 (Film Australia)
- *The Inlanders*, Australian Inland Mission, (Uniting Church, 1948)
- *The Channel Country*, Film Australia, 1956 (including footage of Edith McFarlane)
- *ABC 7.30 Report Footage from Channel Country Flood Season, 2000*
- *Cinesound Movietone News of Drought in the Channel Country 1930's* (Filmworld)

All of the above has been used in the Exhibition phase of Channels of History, so Time coded VHS and some mastering material is to hand



Courtesy John Oxley Library



Courtesy: Enid Jones

The Channel Country

The Channel Country is part of the Lake Eyre Basin. It is an area where very little rain falls, but which is fed by the water from three key rivers - the Georgina, the Diamantina, and Cooper Creek. Because the land is extremely flat, when water comes the rivers break their banks and form a network of 'braided channels'. In flood time a single river can come to be up to seventy miles across. This area has been vital to humans for thousands of years.

It was:

- A key trade route and land of plenty for Aboriginal people, especially associated with the pituri trade.
 - In the path of explorers such as Gregory, Leichardt, McKinlay and Hodgkinson.
 - The foundation of huge squatting fortunes such as the Durack family's - who used the Georgina River as a road through to the Kimberley.

Durham Downs is in a truly remote corner of the Channel Country, where Queensland, South Australia and N.S.W. meet. Burke and Wills each perished nearby. In the 1920's it was part of Sir Sidney Kidman's pastoral empire, and home to many Aboriginal people (including many displaced from surrounding areas), a Chinese gardener and some Anglo workers - governess, manager, stockmen and storeman/book keeper. In 2002 Steve Fossett finished his solo round the world balloon journey there.

Photo by Guy Fitzhardinge



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Braided channels :
documentary voice from an
interdisciplinary,
cross-media, and
practitioners's perspective

This documentary is part of a creative research project funded by the Australian Research Council. It is produced by the School of Media and Communication, University of Queensland, and the State Library of Queensland.

ect entitled **Braided Channels**. An audio visual oral history archive has been created. A travelling social history exhibition entitled **Channels of History** has been developed. The exhibition is supported by the Queensland Cultural Trails Network, Arts Queensland and the substantial support of Griffith University.

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Except as specifically attributed, photos are from Edith McLean, courtesy Australian Stockman's Hall Of Fame and Edith McFarlane