Cheryl Taylor

THE EXCELLENCE KEEPS COMING:
AN INTERVIEW WITH ELIZABETH PERKINS

Cheryl: Elizabeth, you’ve had a distinguished career in teaching, lecturing, researching and writing over forty years. What made you decide to become a teacher?

Elizabeth: As a child, I taught the buttons from my grandmother’s button bottle. There’ve been many clergymen in the family, and perhaps holding forth was a bit in the blood. I’m a rather shy person, so teaching has always been an effort.

Cheryl: How much did other people influence your decision?

Elizabeth: Not at all really, except that my father was very keen on one thing: “You girls must not rely on a man to support you.” Teaching seemed a sensible profession.

Cheryl: He must have had a lot of insight.

Elizabeth: He did realise that life could be difficult for women in marriage, especially at that time.

Cheryl: So in the 1950s and 60s you became a secondary school teacher. What stands out in your memory about those years?

Elizabeth: I liked teaching the students, although it was almost always demanding and I looked forward to the holidays. I was a boarding school resident mistress in Warwick. In summer time you got up to supervise piano practices at 5 o’clock. Before breakfast and after school the whole regime was directed by piano practices. The hot water system usually gave out before you got to bed. There were icicles on the taps in the morning. I was a bit chesty, and often went to bed with a cold shower, which I don’t think did me much good. That was the worst of it. The best of it was that I made friends, good friends.

Cheryl: How do you see education now, in comparison?
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Elizabeth: We taught mostly for a public examination syllabus. There’s more variety now but I don’t think there’s much more freedom. Most people say there have been dramatic changes, but if you stand back, some of the little hills and valleys of changes disappear, and the history of educational practice all looks a bit of a plain. I’m not saying that’s a bad thing.

Cheryl: How did you come to move on from teaching?

Elizabeth: In Warwick there was lots of tripping through the bush, swimming in dams and taking children on excursions. But nobody was interested in literature until Dorothy Green came as Principal. I’d already begun an education degree externally. I very much relied on the journals that were available then, like Meanjin, Quadrant, Southerly and Overland. They kept me in touch with literature and people’s thinking about literature. After I went to teach at PLC in Melbourne, I realised that I wanted to do further study. I returned to Brisbane because my father was very ill. Then I returned to university to do an MA qualifying.

Cheryl: How did you find that?

Elizabeth: Oh, it was just heaven. I realised that was what I’d been waiting for all my life—apart from having children, I always wanted that. That didn’t happen.

Cheryl: So in the late sixties you taught at the University of Queensland, and you moved to Townsville as a lecturer in 1970. How did you feel about North Queensland?

Elizabeth: Immediately I set foot in the place I loved it. I think you met me at the airport. When I got out of the plane— it was the end of April, and it wasn’t very hot, but it was dry, barren, I knew I was home. My father was born somewhere between Proserpine and Mackay, and maybe the north was in the blood too. It’s not only the University which was great in those days, and gave me opportunities I wouldn’t have had at a bigger University, but I think the environment is wonderful.

Cheryl: Is it just Townsville you like?

Elizabeth: No, the whole of North Queensland. I love driving to Mount Isa. There’s something almost atavistic about it. I like to visit places outside North Queensland but I wouldn’t like to live or die in them.
Cheryl: What events or people from your early days in Townsville stand out in your memory?

Elizabeth: I met up with someone I'd known in Brisbane when we were studying drama together, Pam Lythgo. She was teaching at what was then the CAE, and her friendship's been very precious. You are another special person. Don Gallagher, too, who was also a tutor at Queensland when I was there. There were some interesting people who came and went, like the Canadian—

Cheryl: Gordon Spiers.

Elizabeth: Gordon was my first encounter with the hippies. He was a keen conservationist, and introduced me to the concept of conservation which the Labor Party here supported. He began a local organisation, called GASP in Canada—Group Action to Stop Pollution. Yabulu and the smelting of ore from Greenvale was about to start. Then there were students, like Bruce James, who's quite famous as an art critic, a memorable person, and many other students, who were wonderful people to know.

Cheryl: How do see the changes which the University has gone through since those days?

Elizabeth: Some good, some bad. The merging of the CAE and the University was bitterly opposed on both sides, and it did bring big changes.

Cheryl: Now let's talk about your PhD and other research.

Elizabeth: I started to write a PhD on Matthew Arnold's criticism and was doing it from James Cook, but there was no one to supervise it. We didn't have a great deal of contemporary drama teaching here, so I decided to do a thesis on drama from Queensland Uni. Remember in the early days we did lots of productions, especially when Harry Heseltine was Professor, because he was so interested. Somebody said to me the other day, "I remember you at the University, you were in a play in a dustbin."

Cheryl: That was Endgame.

Elizabeth: And Don was in the other dustbin. You acted in and directed many plays yourself—Everyman, for example.
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Cheryl: The writing of Charles Harpur been one of your research interests for a long time. Why did you select Harpur?

Elizabeth: One of the people I was fortunate to meet at the University of Queensland was Cecil Hadgraft. I worked as his research assistant. We were looking at nineteenth-century newspapers in the Mitchell Library and I kept coming across poems by Charles Harpur. I decided to do an MA on Harpur, using the manuscripts in the Mitchell Library. Then somebody working for Angus & Robertson thought I might know enough about the manuscripts to edit a complete Harpur. That took ages, because I was already writing a drama PhD, and teaching, but it did come out. I was disappointed in it because it didn’t get properly proofread. They omitted certain useful things like the documentation of the manuscripts, which I had prepared for inclusion. I also started work on Harpur’s prose. Then, many years later, I received an ARC Grant, to prepare an edition for the Australian Scholarly Editions series in the Humanities Research Centre at Canberra. I’ve almost finished the first volume. It started with an immense bibliography, which must be the longest bibliography in history, of the variations in a poet’s manuscripts and newspaper publications. When people realise the extent of Harpur’s work, that will be a lovely hunting ground for scholars.

Cheryl: What other research do you particularly enjoy?

Elizabeth: Another good friend I made soon after I arrived here was Elizabeth Holt, who has a PhD in Filipino history. She interested me in the novels of Rizal, one of the major figures of Filipino history. I wrote an article on him and George Bernard Shaw and Harriet Beecher Stow—revolutionary writers publishing at about the same time. I started looking at Filipino poetry in English. Then by chance I began to write a biography of Tom Inglis Moore, with his daughter, Pacita. Moore was an Australian critic, poet and academic, who taught the first full-year university course in Australian literature at Canberra. When he was twenty-eight, he had been professor at the University of Manila, and so it all tied together.

Cheryl: What keeps you going on with literary research?

Elizabeth: I like literature, and I like language. I often felt that perhaps I had scattered my interests too widely, and I should have concentrated on two fields. I think partly too, one follows what one has to teach
There's no longer much chance of saying, "I'm only interested in Australian drama, or I'm only interested in nineteenth-century studies."

Cheryl: I was wondering how you respond to the new post-structuralist theories?

Elizabeth: In the early eighties when they first reached Townsville, for a few months I was sceptical. There were people like Kay Ferres who introduced the ideas of feminism and then Robert Dixon came and he had a really uphill battle, because some of the staff here, as everywhere else, resisted new theory. This makes the exponents rather dogmatic, because the resisters are so dogmatic.

Cheryl: Yes, I've been feeling that too.

Elizabeth: But as for post-structuralism, that's fine. I don't think any of it's terribly new, it's only been recast. Some of it has expanded our views of what our social boundaries are, but I can't see that there's been a lot of fundamental value change. Our ideas have remained intact, but we've had a chance to look at them from another point of view.

Cheryl: Do you think that we're justified in talking about a Renaissance in Australian writing, especially by women authors, taking place over the last ten or fifteen years? What's your reaction to the writing currently being published?

Elizabeth: If we'd known what women wrote in the nineteenth century, which we didn't until quite recently, I think we'd see that the women then were pretty adventurous. Barbara Baynton to me is more adventurous than Henry Lawson, and more penetrating. I love the old literature, but I can't look back and say writing was better then. Whatever is produced today, there's some lows and highs, and the highs are high. While shedding books, because I've moved my university office to home, I realised that I'm not always selecting the newest ones to keep, or the oldest. It could reflect my personal taste, but I think that what it means is that excellence keeps coming back.

Cheryl: I know that you've worked with, and had personal friendships with writers, such as Thea Astley, Margaret Diesendorf, Alma De Groen, Judith Wright, and with literary critics who are also writers, such as Dorothy Green.
Elizabeth: I think any academic is fortunate who has friends who are writers. All the people you’ve mentioned have been extremely important to me. I’d include the great drama critic, Lesley Rees, who, at ninety-three, has just received another award for his work. I think that perhaps Dorothy Green has been the most persistent influence. At one stage in Warwick I was pretty much in despair because I felt secondary teaching wasn’t really what I wanted to do with my life. There was a narrowness about it, and she encouraged me to think that I could go back to university and work at a different level with literature. Much of our thinking was similar, and we enjoyed the same sorts of literature. Dorothy never liked contemporary theory, so after a while I gave up trying to influence her. She had a much more incisive political mind. She was not only a literary critic, I think she was what you would call a socio-political critic. Margaret Diesendorf had a lovely, enormously lyrical, passionate kind of writing. I found it very exciting. Alma De Groen is still a very great friend. I think she’s one of the best of Australian playwrights. She simply will not write to meet a market, or even to keep the wolf from the door. She’s an artist playwright, and only writes when she knows that it’s something worthwhile. She’s not like us academics who have to get a lecture together, and realise how horribly inadequate it is, because the demand of the next lecture’s coming up. It’s good to meet somebody who’s working as Alma does.

Cheryl: I know you knew Judith Wright...

Elizabeth: Judith has been enormously important. For some years I was caretaker in her house at Mount Tambourine. I think her writing, her poetry, is one of the greatest we’ve produced in Australia. I can understand why she left poetry and moved towards social concerns, particularly for the Aborigines and the environment. Everybody thought it was a great loss, but those things, the environment and the Aboriginal people, weigh so heavily with her, that she thought poetry was self-indulgent, compared with what she might do.

Cheryl: What about your own creative writing? What aspect of writing plays do you find most rewarding, for example?

Elizabeth: I got tied up with Twelfth Night Theatre in Brisbane, and wrote a one-act play. The only play I’ve had published. I keep getting requests from overseas and in Australia to do it. I’ve written about thirty stage plays, which have been performed. That includes musicals for children. I’ve recently been on stage in Nicholas Nickleby,
and all the time I was thinking, “This is too much like lecturing to be really enjoyable.” I had this really cute costume, which the children liked—it had lots of frills round like a frilled lizard—but I kept thinking how talented some of the actors were, and thinking “I’d love to write a play for so-and-so.” Almost all my plays have been written because someone asked me to produce something for the stage. They’re nowhere, I mean I feel ashamed to mention them when I’ve mentioned Alma De Groen. I’ve often had the privilege of working with one of her first drafts. I realise the great gap between her work and what I produce.

Cheryl: You’ve been a theatre-goer and reviewer, both in Townsville and in other cities. What can good drama achieve for an audience or for society?

Elizabeth: I think that drama’s the greatest social force that you can have. Theatre is clamped down upon, in times of social unrest, or when you’ve got a tyrannical government. Many people don’t like live theatre because it’s so powerful, it makes a much greater impact on you than watching film or video. I was interested in responses of the audiences to Nicholas Nickleby. People who don’t normally go to theatre went because they had children or relatives in the cast. One of my friends has an Aboriginal partner, and he believed that theatre was only for whites—he hasn’t seen a Jack Davis play unfortunately yet. But he came along, and he thought Nicholas was great, and yet it’s a very European-centred play. I think there’s something trans-cultural about stage theatre.

Cheryl: What do you think is the main challenge in writing and producing a play?

Elizabeth: In writing it’s not to over-write or be too protective of every line, and not to fall into clichés. Directing the script is another creative process. The actual production is simply the logistics of it, of coordinating the whole thing. There’s a tremendous community group effort, even if people are being paid and it’s their job. It’s like fitting out a ship to go to sea in a gale. Everybody has to do their thing, otherwise the ship will founder. I was watching the children in the play recently—there were about thirty of them—and seeing them on stage, backstage, rehearsing, I thought it was as good a discipline in team spirit as any game of sport they could play.

Cheryl: Moving from theatre to a more dreary topic, what have you liked about being an academic?
Elizabeth: Doing work that appeals to me, and being able to enjoy thinking about your work. We were fortunate as you know in having a remarkably cohesive and pleasantly disposed department, which—um?—was due to the fact that we were studying literature, which has this ennobling effect. Since about 1985 we've been terribly short of money, which means that some of us have been pressured into working rather harder than we should have been. It's held up our research, and sometimes it may have affected the quality—I know it has for me. But being poor, which is what the department has been, in terms of money, is actually better for the moral fibre than having too much, and too much time on your hands. The department's been very flexible. Think how we took on a difficult course for the Aboriginal Centre, which we knew no non-Aboriginal department could succeed at, but we kept trying until the Centre could handle the course. We're teaching basic writing skills, which shouldn't be a tertiary subject. We've expanded and adapted, and on the whole we've pulled together. That sounds as though the department's morale is top-rate, but compared with other university departments I've encountered, and looking back, I realise I've been extraordinarily lucky to be a part of this department for much of my life.

Cheryl: Yes, I feel like that too. Someone said at the recent ASAL Conference, that if Dorothy Green were still alive, she would have been appalled at what has happened to universities over the last five years. What do you think about that?

Elizabeth: I think that it is appalling, and I wonder how long it can last like this. Corporatisation can be very damaging. I've got nothing against the University becoming more business-like, but making competition with other universities the be-all and end-all, I think that is dangerous. Perhaps the brakes will be put on before we end up at a place where the whole world is governed by a couple of mega-corporations. The situation is getting very close to that, and universities are just one branch of it. You'd only need a few multi-billionaires to buy up all Australian universities. But the essential part—I still think there's excellent teaching, excellent education going on in universities, simply because you can't destroy everybody. The lecturers, the students, still remain a little bit free of everything that's happened. Touched by it, affected by it, often adversely—hardly ever favourably, I'd say—but I don't think excellence has been totally destroyed.
Cheryl: You’re noted as a patient and helpful supervisor. Do you have a secret formula for relating to students as supervisor?

Elizabeth: I don’t know that all of them have found me patient or helpful. Every Ph D is different and takes me into interesting areas. Of course, as you grow older it’s easier, because your whole instinct is to try to nurture, whereas when you’ve got postgrads who are not much younger than yourself, you feel a bit wary: “What can I do to help someone who I know is more brilliant than I am...” That makes you a bit nervous about it. Age has some advantages. It’s not that you don’t think the candidates are more brilliant, you hope that they are. One of the first things I read when I started teaching—it was put in a masculine way, of course—was, “The teacher is very unhappy who does not have in his class a child who is more brilliant than he.”

Cheryl: I agree. Elizabeth, you’ve had a special interest in the issue of justice to Aboriginal and Islander people. You’ve also written plays about the plight of street kids and other social issues. What motivates your commitment to disadvantaged groups, and that area of activity, which has taken up a lot of your time?

Elizabeth: It’s more or less natural, isn’t it, to feel that way? I’ve been very shy, gauche socially, and made an awful lot of mistakes in social contacts, but I’ve always been very secure in myself. Even when I felt I was falling to pieces and suicidal, as many of us do at times, I’ve always had a sense of who I was. It was a sense that I am, therefore I am. So when you’re as secure as that, you’ve got lots of emotional energy and feel less threatened. I think the reason why people are afraid of Aborigines or migrants, for instance, is that they’re not secure enough in themselves to see that there are people who need help. They’re too frightened in looking after themselves. These are people who seem to swing through life with the greatest ease, but essentially they are uncertain of themselves.

Cheryl: On another justice issue, many of my younger students are convinced that the need for a feminist movement has passed, and that the goals have been substantially achieved. How far would you agree with that?

Elizabeth: I’d warn them that “The price of freedom is eternal vigilance.” It’s fine to think the battle’s won, and to some extent they’re right, especially if wage discrimination is gone. But I think it’s too soon to
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say, "Oh I've been there, done that." Those young people haven't been there, and they haven't done it. They've only inherited what other people have done for them. They don't have to be as aggressive as the earlier generation was, and they don't have to dislike men—a little compassion might go a long way I think for men—but then, just as when we're looking after young children, our pity mustn't let them get away with anything.

Cheryl: You're still involved in research projects, and still supervising theses, but what are your plans for real retirement?

Elizabeth: Gardening, more walking with the dogs, keeping the house cleaner, more reading, but also I want to write things for myself. I may travel a bit more. I've become quite interested in our Neighbourhood Watch group, which seems a valuable and useful one. In my feeble way as I dodder along I'll probably do some slight social thing.

This interview was recorded at James Cook University on Friday, 30 July 1999.