

THREDBO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Honor Auchinleck – An Oral History

Interviewed by Jerry Krejzar, the Ski Club of Australia, Thredbo, 27th July 2017



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HONOR AUCHINLECK – AN ORAL HISTORY

The Ski Club of Australia, Thredbo, 27th July 2017

This is Jerry Krejzar sitting with Honor Auchinleck at the Ski Club of Australia in Thredbo on behalf of the Thredbo Historical Society. Interviewing Honor on the history of the Mitchell family, and the date is the 27th July 2017 (So as to record the history for The Thredbo Alpine Museum's archives).

Honor much has already been written about Elyne, as a respected author of the 'Silver Brumby' series of books, and also about your father for his pioneering and skiing expeditions throughout The Snowy Mountains. However instead of covering old ground, I wish to cover your life, growing up in Towong Hill, family life, and the family connection to Thredbo. Will you consent for the interview to be transcribed and the Oral History displayed to the public in the Thredbo Alpine Museum.

Yes I will.

Now Honor to place you in history who were your grandparents?

Well, my father's parents were Winifred Dibbs and Walter Mitchell. Winifred Dibbs was a Sydney lady and her father was Sir Thomas Dibbs who was with The Commercial Banking Company in Sydney; so in a way I guess, she became the business brains of the family; and my maternal grandparents were Sir Harry and Lady Chauvel. Sir Harry served in 'The Light Horse' in the Boer War and the First World War, rising to command 'The Desert Mountain Corps'. He was the first Australian General, that is a regular army General, because Monash was promoted at the same time, he was actually in the Reserve.

That's a well known name Monash.

Yes exactly, well of course Monash was on Gallipoli and on the Western front, and Chauvel was on Gallipoli and then went on to serve in Egypt and Palestine. So, apart from on Gallipoli, they served in different theatres of war.

And where did they come from?

Well, the Chauvel family came from the Northern Rivers, my grandfather was born on the banks of The Clarence River at Tabulam, and my grandmother was born in Brisbane; so their lives took them both a long way from home. My grandparents' house in Melbourne was filled with Chauvel family portraits and memorabilia from my grandfather's military service. There was a wonderful sense of story and my grandmother had a keen sense of history and was a great storyteller. My grandfather was a huge influence too because in many ways he was Elyne's inspiration. You see, Elyne wanted to succeed in life - she wanted to serve her country too. In her era as a woman she couldn't serve in the Armed forces, so she chose to pick up her pen and write.

Now we know who your grandparents were, but for the record who were your parents. (Laughter).

My mother was Elyne Mitchell and my father was Tom Mitchell and they were both very keen skiers, my father was a politician, he was the local member for Benambra in Victoria, and my mother of course was to become a renowned non-fiction and children's author.

And for the record again, where and when were you born.

I was born in Melbourne.

And what is your full name.

My name now is Honor Chauvel Auchinleck.

And when did you begin skiing Honor?

Well, I don't know when I started skiing because I think I was just a few months old when my father constructed a pram on skis, and it was a basket sort of pram which looked a bit breezy to be honest. Apparently I was put in it and apparently I screamed, and I screamed and so I didn't produce the pleasurable day's skiing that everybody had hoped.

Was that on Towong Hill?

No, it was over at a place called the Three Mile which was on the way from Corryong to Mt Pinnibar. As I have never been back to the Three Mile, at the end of I guess was somewhere towards the end of a logging track that extended into the bush-covered hills and mountains behind Corryong. The Upper Murray Ski Club skied there. I imagine that some still go up there and I must return someday and see if I recognize anything. But I don't really have any good memories of it. The first skiing I really enjoyed was at Dead Horse Gap which would have been, I don't know, about 1958 or something like that – we had some lovely days skiing up there at that stage.

Well that's interesting because my next question relates to those times – and the question is simply, when did you go skiing in Thredbo, and of course Dead Horse Gap is not very far away from Thredbo, so this is when you already went to Thredbo, or not?

It's before we went to Thredbo and of course my earliest memories were when the weather was really bad, we stopped at Dead Horse Gap because, you know in the early days in Thredbo they stopped the lift when it was too windy, do you remember that? And there was one time when a chair was blown off the lift, and when we came up for the day – who was going to give up the days skiing just because the chairlift had stopped; and it was a bit of a soft option to stop at Dead Horse Gap where you didn't really have to climb as much as you had to climb for skiing as you had to down here at Thredbo.

I get the impression that as a child you got to ski around the area around here before your time in Thredbo.

Oh yes, but there was a limit in the amount of distance you could cover with small kids of course. So you know, we wandered around the ridges of Dead Horse Gap in the direction of The Cascades, and of course we always wanted to find the mysterious Secret Valley Elyne had written about in the early Brumby books. When I asked where it was and if she would take us there, she'd wave her arm and point vaguely to the south east and say, 'over there'! Hahaha – well, she

said that one day we'd go to the Cascades but we never got to there because that was too far for little legs. And of course if the Cascades was too far, then the Secret Valley was even further.

Getting back to the fundamental question about your time in Thredbo as a child, do you remember much of that?

Oh I remember when there was the 'Old Hotel' you know there were those Swedish -- there was a military history to them, those buildings there, the wooden buildings.

We will cover a bit of that later. When did you attend school primary and secondary, before we get to that question?

My primary learning was by correspondence at Towong Hill and then I was sent away to boarding school at Toorak College on the Mornington Peninsula just outside Melbourne; and in a way that was the end of my real skiing career, because since, we just skied in the holidays which was a lot by people's standard, you know when I had been skiing with Mum three days a week, up until that time, it did not seem like I was skiing very much anymore.

That was similar to my experience at boarding school, because we only came to Thredbo when I was taken out of boarding school.

Exactly!

So you shared the same experience?

I shared the same experience, yes; but I had a lot of skiing before that time. It was not good for the education of course. Because if we skied for three days a week, Mum would always say we can catch up on the school work when we were actually back at Towong Hill. You know we would drive up here for the day, and really it's a two hour drive up here and two hours back, and I was too tired to do anything worthwhile on the days we were actually back at the farm. You know in a way you sort of ----

Before we get back to skiing in Thredbo, let's cover you growing up. Could you tell us what it's like growing up with an older sister and two brothers on a property such as Towong Hill?

Oh well we did a lot of things like riding. Indi went to boarding school quite early on, when I was about five.

So both of you went to the same school?

To the same school but you know, she is six years older than me so she finished the year before I started so we didn't overlap at Toorak College. Harry went to the local school and John and I did correspondence; and I think it was quite difficult because our interests were totally different. I enjoyed history and John was always more numbers orientated and that sort of thing, so yes it was quite difficult for mum to try to educate us because our needs and interests were very different.

And were you and the other children involved in the work on the property or not. How was their day to day life there?

It was difficult to be involved in a way because Dad was the local member of the Victorian Parliament and he was away from home a lot. There was a manager who took care of the day to day running of the agricultural operation. Without Dad working on the farm it was actually very difficult for us to be involved, because we would have been in the manager's way; and difficult for Mum to be involved as much as she would have liked without dad there really. In those times it was different.



Towong Hill Station - 1930s

So was that always the case where the manager had more responsibility of running the place.

Oh definitely, definitely. Although Mum tried to keep abreast with managerial decisions and the day to day running of the cattle station, it wasn't really her responsibility. Mum had the day to day running of the household and she supervised our correspondence lessons at the same time as taking some phone calls from constituents for Dad, keeping in touch with other family members and friends and of course some writing in the few peaceful moments.

And what are your memories of that, you know the general sort of family life, with the kids growing up there, cooking, and running around?

I mean doing correspondence was quite lonely in a way. I always craved more company and that was where Thredbo was quite good, because there were kids up here, where we were up at the weekend you would come across the kids up here which was great. Yeh – I mean we were isolated. Mum didn't like cooking and she had a cook whenever she could. Having said that, she did cook the most beautiful sponge cakes, light sponge cakes; somehow she made them in a billy, so they would stand you know, the height of the billy, and you could easily have made them with red and white stripes so they would look like children's author Dr Seuss's 'Cat in the Hat'! That sort of thing was good fun and there was always a sponge cake waiting for us when we came home from boarding school. Mum told me how she only ever cooked one loaf of bread in the wood-burning stove. When she whacked it with a poker and it went flying over the kitchen table --- that was enough to convince her that she wasn't a talented bread maker. Mum was an outdoor person who along with skiing in winter loved her walks up the hill behind the house. In summer she took us swimming at least once a day and almost every afternoon we went riding. I had a reasonably active childhood, the sort of childhood Mum had dreamed of when she was a child and young adult in Melbourne.

You see that was not what I was aware of – not of the general lifestyle on a property so I thought for our audience who could be interested in what happened, you know, were you close to town or ----

No, eight miles from Corryong and if you didn't go to the local school, and in those days Mum would put in what she called a 'store order' that was for groceries and then they were delivered, and the bread for instance came around with the mail two or three times a week, and you would pick that up at the mail box at the end of the drive. The bread was delicious. Dad said that when as POWs they were hungry in Changi he'd dreamed about bread, much to Mum's annoyance, the bread delivery was like a dream come true. There was always a huge amount of mail with Mum being a writer and Dad's political interests.

So you see we did go into town but not as kids who would go shopping with their parents as today for instance.

She was more into expeditions!



Elyne at rest during one of her expeditions

Definitely! She was more into expeditions whenever possible! And we grew up on the stories of her expeditions on skis and on horseback. I remember when I was about eight feeling left out when Mum went off on a riding expedition to the Cascades and the Tin Mines.

So the things that she did well and got right did she continue to do and perpetuate.

Oh yes, that was a brilliant aspect of Mum and her stories were

wonderful, but she wasn't a very domestic person

and she spent a lot of time writing. And of course, she was successful and when she received a manuscript back with a reject slip, she just tried a bit harder. In a way with the things she did well like writing and skiing she was a perfectionist. She was also stubborn and very determined and with some domestic help, she was able to practise the things in which she wanted to excel. Early on in my childhood we had married couples; the wife would do the cooking for the family, and the husband would do the gardening or the odd jobs about the place which gave Mum some of the freedom she needed.

Was that part of the manager's ---?

No. The married couples were organized by mum and with various degrees of success because it all depended on the personalities and it was difficult to get people who wanted to live on an

isolated property, you know three hundred miles from Melbourne and further from Sydney; so that was a bit of a problem.

Well we will get to that later, because that must have affected some of your siblings, they were probably scattered, you yourself took off, and maybe that isolation had something to do with it. Maybe we will get to that.

Yes, yes.

We have talked about the property, now what about the early Thredbo years. Commencing in 1958, when you and the Mitchell family stayed at Leo's, and I am not sure how much you remember, because you were younger than Indi and I was fourteen at the time and I had a big crush on her, as I told you last night.

Well you see I would not have remembered that: but I had a crush on, do you remember Steffi Kater¹ Willie and Rosemary's son; he was actually profoundly deaf, he couldn't hear but he was a very good lip-reader; he would have been eight when I was seven, something like that, a very good skier too, and I enjoyed his company. Rosemary had a lovely singing voice – I think she was Swiss. Anyway, she and Willie were very good skiers, at least that was what I thought. They stayed at Leo's too, although they were upstairs. So, if you had a crush, I had one too and Thredbo was a great place for that sort of thing!

Isn't that incredible in the tricks your memory plays, because I have a very good friend an ear nose and throat surgeon, David Pohl and he was of course Czech born, that is his parents were Czech and they went to Leo's or Thredbo at the same time; and he remembers all these details about me catching grasshoppers to sell to the trout fishermen when Leo took us all trout fishing. He would remember these little details that we were selling grasshoppers for a couple of shillings to the group of Czech fishermen to go fishing; and he remembers that, and I didn't remember.

No. I wouldn't have known much about that, because we didn't come up much in the summer, because of the bushfire danger driving up the Upper Murray. We came up for the summer races of course.

Well it must have been one of those times when I met the family because we met when we were at Leo's.

But that must have been in the winter holidays, wasn't it? I can't remember staying at Leo's in the summer. But as you say, it is funny the tricks memory plays.

We mostly came up at Easter and in Christmas and I didn't start skiing until 1964 so it might have been one of the summer races or something.

Well, there was one summer race here and I remember another one, we walked over across the snow, the part near Seaman's Hut, the big drift and I can't remember I would have to look up

¹ I have been unable to check the spelling.

what year that was – it might have been 63 – but we stayed at The Chalet then in one of the bunk rooms. I remember these old, black wrought iron beds.

Well that makes me think that you may not remember 1958 because I was fourteen then at Leo's.

Well, I might have been with them; 59 was my first real memory coming up here, and it was the first time I ate a Wiener schnitzel at The Hotel, and they had a band there, a T-box and a zither.

That's The Black Lodge, so what do you remember about 1959.

Well this is it. And I had a red homemade ski-suit out of gabardine, as this young thing; I remember skiing the Milk Run. When I fell over, my clothes got soaked and then I got cold. It was before any waterproofing.

Yea? How old were you then?

Six! There was a ski instructor called Max then.

Max Parker.

Well he was one of the first four here, surely. Now let's see if we can remember them, there was Leonhard, Helmut Pfister who didn't come every year, Sigi Wolf.

Sigi Wolf, he was from Stuben.

Well I saw him on the way back when we drove back from Ankara in 2005 and we spent a night in Stuben with the Wolfs, maybe two nights I can't remember, and he asked Helmut and his Australian wife Jill up for dinner because they weren't far way down at Schruns, and we had a great catch up; and that was the last time I saw Sigi. Apart from skiing, his love of the mountains and of food, his other great love was the opera.

I can't tell you which year he died, but he died ---

It was soon after that because his wife Gretl came out to Australia. She stayed with Patsy Paton and they came to dinner with us in Melbourne.

Well that's quite an interesting memory going back to seven years of age – you remember The Black Lodge and the Wiener schnitzel. (Both laugh).

And the T box and Helmut somebody playing the zither; can you remember his full name, I can't. He was blond and good-looking!



Elyne and the World War 2 Jeep used to drive around the property. In 1948 Mum and Dad drove it across the mountains to Charlotte's Pass.

No, no. I remember some of the Czech characters like Stan and 'the professor' and the fact that they used to play cards and there were lots of problems because --- but it's strange how your memory plays tricks on you, because some people remember more detail than others.

Yeh, yeh, yeh.

So going on from those early years what's the progression for your skiing at Thredbo, from 59 for how many years.

Oh well that's through the 60's really. I remember in the 1960's was one of those terrific snow years and I remember that was sort of the year taking off on skis and really enjoying it.

What skis were you skiing on, do you remember?

Yes I was skiing initially, on my father's old skis. Now they were the skis his father had bought him in Davos in 1913.

Honor they would have been long!

I can't remember how long they were. They were skis for kids, so they weren't that long. They were wooden and they didn't have any metal edges; in fact the edges were quite rounded which



was dreadful when you got onto ice. Absolutely shocking, and before we came up skiing, this was when we went up to Dead Horse Gap, well, we would go off to dad's workshop and we would wax the skis, and that involved heating waxes and ironing them on; I will never forget that it was the smell of melting wax on the wood-burning stove, and things like that, quite an intricate process, and to stop the wax sticking together you would put a wedge of cork and then strap the skis together at the heels and close to the tips.

Honor skiing in the early 1960's

Was it Kofix?

Oh yes, I remember Kofix, yeh, yeh, yeh.

So when do you recall progressing to the first skis with metal edges. I remember the first skis with screw-in-edges.

That's right, that's right, and they were Blizzard's.

And what year was that?

It would have been about 1963 maybe.

Mine in 64 were the same thing, a press down, not long thong, but a press down cable, where you press down in the toe, and that held your heel in place. We both skied on those in 1964 I would say.

That's right, that's right, and the cable you sort of hooked down under the front clip, and there was a plate where you would wind at the back, and the cable came around, and the boots were lace-up boots.

Koflach boots?

Yeh and they got wet and they stretched, and quite difficult to keep them tight enough and all that sort of thing; but the edges made the world of difference. I don't suppose I could have ventured beyond Middle-Station as it was then, on skis that didn't have edges, because you know, you just went all over the place; and dad would have been furious if I had broken his first pair of skis – you can imagine it – so when I had skis with edges I could go up to Kareela, which of course was the top station then.

So what do you remember about the topography and the lifts at that time in the early 60's.

Well the chairs seated two people you know, so side by side it was very different from today; and my god it was cold too on windy days, it was as cold as sin; and then it would stop for a long time too at times, and you were sort of stranded, and that sort of thing which was not a very nice experience; and on school holidays you would find some people would muck around and sort of swing their skis and you know ---

Right so covering that early history of Thredbo, there is one great skiing friendship that existed between Elyne and Leonhard Erharter, you will remember what a picture they painted carving perfect turns down Crackenback. So what do you remember from the first time you saw them, what do you remember when they were together?

I found him quite a difficult character, acerbic and peppery. A bit scary and very hard to please.
Join the club.



Leonhard Erharter skiing with Elyne in Thredbo in the late 1960's

Right, right absolute perfectionist, and I didn't find him an inspiring teacher, he was a very exacting teacher; my goodness you knew about it if you didn't get things right. I always understood that he was head of the Thredbo Ski School and the Number One in Zurs too. I wouldn't be surprised as he wasn't the kind of person to be a member of a team unless he was top dog. For a while I aspired to be in Leonhard's class – he trained the kids who raced – I wanted to please Mum and Dad who'd been distinguished ski racers. But the reality was that I much preferred to ski with Hans, Hans Pfurtcheller ² who came from the Zillertal.

I know the Zillertal it ends up at Hintertux, Zell am Ziller, and then Mayrhofen and then you end up at Hintertux. In fact Bernti started in Mayrhofen, that's off the subject.

Yea, yea well Hans was much, more chatty, he sort of was better with kids; so in a way Mum booked private lessons for me with Hans and she had a private lesson with Leonhard.

Which year was that, do you remember?

Oh goodness, early 60's, I needed space from that.

From that relationship?

Yea, that skiing relationship. Like Mum Leonhard was a perfectionist.

But she must have respected his technique and his skiing.

It was even more than that, they were great friends. Or should I say, they became great friends.

Despite his personality as we have discussed.

Well I think it was different between them.

In what way?

Well no! Mum had her secrets, so I simply don't know, but it was a close friendship, and I wasn't part of that and I didn't want to be.



Elyne and Leonhard – Thredbo in the 1970's

² I have been unable to check the spelling



*Albert van der Lee Elyne Mitchell and Leonhard Erharder –
Towong Hill Station 1980s*

To begin with I thought it was an uneven relationship with Mum offering a friendship that would never really be reciprocated. But then I realised it wasn't like that. During her lessons, as Elyne's instructor Leonhard was very patient and he, while he encouraged her, he never tried to persuade her to do anything that was risky. And of course, Elyne put everything she had into her skiing. Ultimately I think Leonhard was rather proud of her. I have a photograph of Albert, Leonhard and Elyne sitting together in the garden at Towong Hill happily yarning like the old friends that they were and really friendships like that are a great thing. I don't know, but I think it

might have been the last time Elyne and Leonhard saw each other. I don't know who took the photograph. Albert might know that.

I sort of get the impression that the friendship was based on the mutual respect for the technique and skiing.

Oh very much, very much that and her love of skiing and things like that. But I would imagine we really did not speak about it, but we all found it a bit difficult, yea, yea, yea. I went from Germany once with Mark and I together with our kids went to meet Leonhard; but you know life had already begun to be a bit sad for him then, when I understand he lost the sight in one of his eyes, but I remember him sitting down for a beer when I would have been having coffee in the morning; but people do that, yea, yea; but I didn't feel he was in the best place by then. I told Mum that we'd seen him and he was okay but I didn't tell what I thought as I didn't want to upset her. Her memories would have given her great pleasure and it was important that they were undisturbed. Having said all that, I think that Mum's conversations with Sigi had possibly been even more far ranging than those she had with Leonhard. Sigi was interested in everything and everyone. Like both Leonhard and Sigi, Helmut Pfister had grown up through the Second World War years. After all those years had touched their lives in a way that it would be hard for those of us born after the War to imagine, let alone understand properly. There was a sense of mutual respect too that I think was very important.

So I get the impression that the relationship was a very private one anyway.

Yes mum was a very private sort of person in many ways, yea, yea, and so was Leonhard.

That was based on the observation that 'mountain people' sometimes ---

I would have thought it was a combination of both of them. I mean she was a high achieving person, she pushed herself to the limits, you know to keep fit, she was a perfectionist she wanted to write well, she wanted to do tennis well, she wanted to ski well; you know which is a great

aspiration, but it's not always relaxing to live with that sort of thing in the family. Dad being the local member he was away a lot. He was enthusiastic in getting Falls Creek going, because Falls Creek was in his electorate.

(Break for a phone call)

Now Honor we have talked about your time in Thredbo, we have covered the 60's and now would be a good time to know what else you would like to talk about in respect to the 60's and onwards.

Yes well I think the thing that I really remember was the place, the happiness and Sasha's races that were held in the September school holidays and my parents were very keen that we raced, and things like that and you know, they always said you go in a race and you do your best; there were in a way highly competitive. It was difficult, but with Sasha's personality, you know there was always a good smile and encouragement and things like that. And the other thing was the other parents, there was a terrific camaraderie between the parents and I think that sort of created a really happy atmosphere.

Did you know Sasha well?

Well I did because she was a good friend of Mum's and I loved going up to Sasha's because she had that wonderful eye for fashion and the thing was that, you know if you are going to ski beautifully and do your best you might as well look good on the slopes. That sort of thing really appealed to me and Sasha had this lovely idea of colour too. She was always well dressed on the slopes and she always looked absolutely fantastic.

This is when she ran the shop I take it.

This is when she ran the shop and the lodge, we never actually stayed there we might have stayed there once. But Sasha was also widely read and she and mum used to discuss books and what they had been reading and things like that, and so it was good fun to go up and have a cup of tea with some ---

Strudel.

Oh yes, it was absolutely fabulous and of course Sasha had that wonderful story; and those people who had lived through the war years, you know I think they always wanted to talk to people who shared each others' experience – not to think that Mum shared the real wartime European experience. I think that mum had a very inquiring mind, always keen to know what other people had been through, what it had been like for Sasha. But of course you know skiing played such a big role in Sasha's story and Mum loved hearing her stories.

Did they talk about her trials and tribulations before the war and leading up to the war at all?

Not so much not so much and I never heard from Sasha about those early months after they arrived in Australia, and it must of been very hard, and it wasn't until I read Sasha's book just how difficult and lonely it must have been. I think Sasha was always a person that when she was talking to other people she picked on the brighter bits of life.

You know her sort of contact with people, it was like Rudi. Last night his daughter told us he wanted to create happiness and I think Sasha was like that; to create happiness and she did it. So no, we didn't hear much about the hard side of things. I think Michael was born in a DP camp wasn't he?

I think he was born on the trip out. But getting back to Tom and Elyne, those difficult years they had before you were born; let's get this straight for the record. I suppose Mum and Dad talked about it quite a bit because he was interned as a POW in Changi and had had his own experiences, I know because it is in the public record, and we should cover it a little bit for the history.

Well, he went into Changi in February 1942 after a severe car accident and the Fall of Singapore. I realized from his medical records that it was thought that his skull had been fractured, and he had bad concussion and he had lost his memory; and he was very fortunate that he was to meet up with Doctor Ken Burnside, and it was Ken who persuaded Tom to sit down and write his own memoir. Tom did this in Changi, and of course he had the Changi Ski-Club. Dad was a great participator in various clubs and POW activities. I think they helped him survive, and I think he always felt slightly guilty that he hadn't done something like the Burma Railway; he said that for prisoners of war that Changi had really been a holiday camp; but of course it wasn't a holiday camp at all, there were times when they were atrociously treated but Dad didn't really speak about it very much, he spoke about the starvation and that sort of thing, and he spoke about Lord Louis Mountbatten arriving at Changi, after VJ Day and talking to them. But he really didn't tell me much about it. I've put together what I know through reading. For Mum I think, the war years were the most formative years, possibly of her life – I think she thought she devoted her life to Towong Hill – and that in a sense set up awkward dynamics in the family. I never really got to the bottom of it but she was very possessive of Towong Hill and sometimes it was as if she felt that us kids owed her something for all she did to keep it going through the anxious war years. The mountains really became her beacon of hope and inspiration. For the last two years of the war, she couldn't get to the mountains as much, due to fuel being rationed. In any case the Alpine Way hadn't even been surveyed let alone built in those days so she would have had to have driven around via Cooma. The Chalet at Charlotte's Pass was closed for most of the war. It didn't open I suppose until after VE Day. But it was open for the winter of 1945 and she went skiing briefly then. Of course she rode out into the mountains whenever she could from Towong Hill, she camped by herself and she had friends to stay, that sort of thing. I think she felt she sacrificed a lot, you know she sacrificed her ski career to the war years and then of course to bringing up a family.

Stepping back just a decade or so before your birth of course, and sticking to Tom, what sort of stories did you hear about him pioneering in the Snowy Mountains generally?

Oh goodness, I don't think a huge amount about exploring in the Snowy Mountains. He told me about riding out to the cattle lease at Pretty Plain behind mobs of cattle with his Uncle Jack Mitchell from Khancoban Station. He talked about skiing in Switzerland, at Murren and Arnold Lunn of the Ski Club of Great Britain. He mentioned his sister, my aunt Honnor, saying, 'She could really have gone places but she didn't because she was lazy.' That probably meant that she wasn't as keen on racing as he was.

He spoke of skiing at St Anton in late 1938 and of how they had to stay in St Anton as Mum had broken her leg very badly and couldn't travel. In fact Dad had dislocated his shoulder so he wasn't in good shape either, although he was fit enough to go over to Garmisch-Partenkirchen where he met Hans Schneider whom he described as the father of 'modern' skiing. Tom also spoke about touring on the Western Face with George Day from the Chalet.



Elyne and Tom with their doctor and nurse in St Anton in 1938

Both Dad and Mum talked about the jeep trip they did with First World War Digger Ossie Rixon and family friend Bill Littlejohn. That was February 1948, not long after Dad was elected to the Legislative Assembly of the Victorian Parliament.

Is that another 'mountain type' personality?

Oh, it's also a post-war personality, you know he is serving other people, and trying to create a better world, and I think that was the post-war philosophy. But I mean that Dad still had severe injuries when war broke out his arm was still paralysed from a skiing accident in St Anton, and so he was finding it very difficult to enlist. What he really wanted to do, and there was a lot of correspondence about it was actually to serve in an Alpine Unit and of course Australia didn't have one, you know like the 'Bergjager' and failing to have an Alpine Unit created in the Australian Army in which he could serve, he went with the 8th division to Malaya. You know it was fate that actually sent him to the tropics and a tragedy for such a keen and accomplished skier according to my records, in the 1930s he was five times Australian National slalom, twice downhill champion and had been awarded a gold medal by the Ski Club of Great Britain. But once they formed the Changi Ski-Club I think that was probably very good for morale, it kept him going, it meant he met other skiers who he mightn't have met otherwise and they talked about some of their best skiing, favourite places and other like-minded people who'd shared some of the skiing. They also talked about the skiing that they would do after the war.

Honor you were saying that the Changi experience was quite a paradox to the dream of mountains and skiing – eh! What happened after, after Tom came back from Changi?

Well, he really wanted to recreate his old life on skis, and I think that was very difficult because they started a family almost straight off after the war. This meant that they couldn't share skiing and other mountain expeditions. The other thing was what was Dad going to do professionally? His heart was not in working on the land; he trained as a barrister and had been admitted to the Bar in London and Sydney in 1932.

When he came back from the war and he found that there were very few positions. I suspect the question was whether he really wanted to be a barrister - he always claimed that his education and his interests were far more political than legal in orientation. He'd stood for the Victorian elections in 1935 and didn't get in and again in 1937 with a similar result. He was elected after the war in 1947 which of course meant that his skiing career was going to change. I think he raced in Australia, he raced more in New Zealand in the late 40's and early 50's - we have his race results here and for the record I can easily put them in. And then they did manage the one skiing expedition in the winter of 1947 and I suspect that was Mum's last good skiing for about ten years and possibly longer. By the early 1950's dad was Attorney General for a short time. Sometime later he had a sawmilling accident when he rolled a log on his leg and that really put an end to his skiing career. He did go back to New Zealand I think in the mid 50's, he became then much more interested in the politics of skiing, ski racing and ensuring that there were international ski meetings. I think that he thought that was a very good thing for humanity.

Did he have anything to do with Bob Arnott who was involved in the setting up of the FIS?

Yes he was very involved, um no, I don't remember any of that apart from the importance of skiing, ski racing and things like that. There was quite a bit of correspondence in his papers about you know about his argument that returned servicemen should be able to perhaps buy lodges, or an interest in the mountains. I think he felt that was going to help them tremendously and he was probably quite right in that; but I don't think that was really actively pursued politically except in his commitment to getting Falls Creek going, and Falls Creek became his focus in the 1960's, there was no doubt about it; and that was in a way the parting of the ways in the family because Thredbo was closer for us, we could come up here for the day, but we couldn't go up to Falls Creek by the day. My mother didn't enjoy politics, she was too shy for that sort of thing and I think Falls Creek for those reasons had less appeal.



Do you get the impression that Tom gravitated towards Falls Creek whilst your mother decided to, and would go to Thredbo?

Yes, but I think she also needed her own life; she needed space and a sense of freedom in her own life. She wanted to regain her physical fitness. And yes, skiing and the mountains were a source of her ideas. Tom had a booming voice and was quite a dominating personality. I wouldn't go as far as to say he overshadowed her, because he didn't. I don't think that he did it on purpose, but possibly she found it difficult to make friends with people when he was around.

Striking out by herself a bit and skiing well gave her confidence and it meant that she could make her own friends among other skiers and mountain people.

Well let's touch on that because; well what do you think was her motivation, this spiritual, mountain type personality that she seemed to have. Almost that pioneering type personality that, we talk about?

I think it needed space for her to draw inspiration from the landscape, the fauna and the flora and also, physically moving through it – putting herself against the elements –

And how do you connect that with her creativity?

I think she needed to feel physically fit to feel creative. Her father General Sir Harry Chauvel had taught her that a fit body meant a fit mind and Elyne lived by that.

Now that's an interesting statement - as not too many people think along those lines - they think of physical fitness mainly as a pursuit for sport, or lifestyle, or health.

Well, having loved ski racing, in her own way Elyne was competitive, competing probably against herself as much as against others. But with the publication of her early books, Elyne was becoming more of a writer and her notebook and biro were never far away. On the farm she always had a notebook in her back pocket, and often there was a red or blue stain on her pocket where a biro had broken. She got onto a horse with a biro in a pocket, and of course she had broken it. Sometimes she carried a notebook in a bum-bag, but once she began to buy ski clothes from Sasha, clearly the bum bag was going to spoil the line when she was skiing. But she didn't ski much more than half a day and there would be a half a day of writing so that was the balance.



*Elyne enjoying a lunch break during trekking in the Snowy Mountains – late 1980's
(Photo - Pat Bowles)*

You tend to think that the skiing and the physical aspect, was related to when she pulled the pen out in creativity

I think that the two were inter-related. She did a lot of writing at Thredbo and then she'd go home and type what she'd written in her notebooks.

And not that we are going to talk much about The Silver Brumby as such, but these notes were all to do with some aspect of the book I presume, was it? Or was it other topics as well.

Oh yes, the transcribed notes were the drafts of books, articles and poetry. She was a keen poet, not in a very conventional way, and her book 'Vision of the Snowy Mountains' which was one of her later books which was illustrated with her photographs is beautiful.

I think that she found that aspect frustrating; she had terrific aspirations to be a poet and never really achieved it. She had aspirations to be a really good novelist, and it was ironical that it was the children's manuscript that took off and not her novels, you know.

Do you feel that she had some regret in that?

Oh huge regret she tried to do a skiing thriller, I remember typing it for her.

What a 'James Bond' type thriller?

Yea, exactly, exactly! (Laughter)

Set in Thredbo.

And in Europe, yes, yes.

Oh isn't that something, that would have been something.

'Cross on the Snow' I remember, and I still have a copy of the manuscript. Again, we ended up

selling her archives to the National Library and I hadn't come across it at all, by the time I was totally overwhelmed, huge volumes of paper; and I was living overseas and I had to put it into storage. That was difficult because when I visited Australia I had to sit on the concrete floor in the storage floor while I sorted the archive.

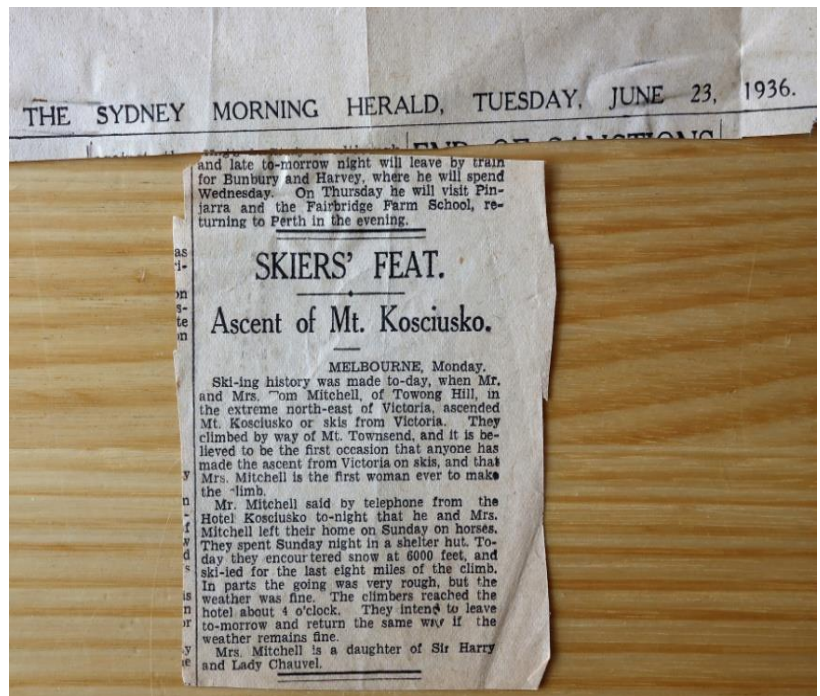
There was too much to cart around to where I was staying. I'll never forget how the cold of the concrete crept through the cushion and by the end of each day I had a numb bum. I think it was about four years after Mum died that I realise I had to do things differently – sorting the archive was hell. We approached the National Library and sent them the archive for assessment. And then of course when I came back to live in Australia a lot more came to light.

When you left the family home, we should just cover that a little bit, when you spent the time overseas, and before you came back.

I left in 1976 and I came back reasonably regularly – probably not when the kids were at school because it was difficult the school year over there is different and there are long holidays in our winter here and we tended to go off and find the sun in Italy or somewhere rather than coming home during that time.

So your children were educated in England.

Yes they were, yea in Germany and England. So my trips home had to be during term time ----- maximum time here with the family and minimum time away from the family wherever we were living. So it was always fairly rushed and quite exhausting.



Which I guess that means we have come full circle, because how many years did you say you spent thirty, thirty five?

Well we came back in 2009 – so it was 1976 to 2009.

So in that respect, talking about full circle, you started out of Towong, lived a fulfilling and adventurous life in Europe, no doubt, and now the Towong story continues and unfolds.

Well it does, it does.

Learning how to work a pastoral type life? In the Snowy Mountains.

Yes, well on the fringes of the Snowy Mountains , yes, yes, yes and Mark of course has taken to it, and it looks as though we might be skiing again too so how good is that. (Laughter). That's really great. So yes it has been full circle, I mean I was thinking where the skis were last night; yes I have still got my East German skis, the cheap ones I could buy, which skied around the Grunewald in West Berlin all winter and the only skiing we had of course was in Turkey a few years back, later, many years later. The winters were our busy time particularly when we were living in West Germany and we couldn't get away. Also we were in the North and we were a long way from really good skiing.

I guess it's fair to ask before we conclude the interview, what are your impressions in living for such a long time in Europe compared to coming back home?

Well it has been a very busy life; I mean it has been a fascinating life. Clearly we saw the last years, the last decade of the 'Cold War' and we have seen the impact of the Cold War on Europe. We witnessed the euphoria of Reunification and people pouring out of the East for the first time since the Wall was built across Berlin and the inner German border dividing East from West Germany. I remember wondering in 1989 what was going to happen to that huge arsenal of weapons that the Eastern Block had built up. That nobody seemed to talk about it seemed quite extraordinary. And then of course when the problems developed in Bosnia one knew that many of the weapons had come from the former Eastern Bloc countries. I used to think that had there been more weapons control, perhaps the problem wouldn't have developed in the way they did, but who knows except the world entered into a far more violent phase.

So you could say that you live quite a sheltered life at Towong now by comparison.

Apart from the fact that my daughter, our daughter works for the Ministry of Defence in the UK and they are going out to Sarajevo.

So you keep abreast of what's going on.

I keep abreast – it's good to keep abreast.

Well Honor thanks very much, it was a pleasure to interview you and to get to know the life story, or some of the life story of the Mitchell family; and it's very fitting that we should be sitting at the Ski Club of Australia where we look up, again, at the Thredbo – Crackenback.

Its magic, I have just had the most magic day skiing it's been beautiful.

And it will be great that you will be able to come back again - complete a full circle.



Elyne skiing in Thredbo in the late 1980's

Yes we will come back again, at least before the end of the season.

Thank you and you don't mind donating the transcription of this interview to Thredbo Historical Society.

Of course it is a pleasure, but I would like to have got it more together beforehand. I had it organized when you were going to come down in the summer.

Thanks very much once again, and we can always add more at a later time; thanks very much.



Elyne riding home over a ridge in the late 1930's (Photography taken possibly by Tom Mitchell)

This piece by Honour Auchinleck relates to Elyne Mitchell and was delivered some years ago and embellishes Honor's Oral History. It is included here as further reference

Frank, thank you for your kind words of welcome. Aileen thank you and my thanks also to Alan Fredericks and Chrissi Webb. It is a great pleasure to be back in Thredbo and to be here at the Museum which contains reminders of the Thredbo Elyne knew and of course I knew while I was growing up. Thredbo played an immense role in our lives.

This afternoon I'm going to talk about Elyne and Thredbo and Thredbo's place on *The Trail of the Silver Brumby*. Firstly, I need to place Thredbo in the context of Elyne's long skiing and writing life, so I shall start, at the beginning, well almost. Before the war the Chalet at Charlotte Pass, along with Mt Buller and Mt Ruapehu in New Zealand, was Tom and Elyne's most important ski destinations at a time when skiing was their lives. When they were engaged and Tom took Elyne skiing for the first time at Mt Buller, he told her, 'that skiing was his life'. The subtext must have been, 'well, if you are prepared to marry me, you'd better make skiing your life too, or else it won't work.' You can imagine that in the contemporary world, anyone who said that sort of thing to their intended would get a pretty dusty answer!

But it was at the Chalet at Charlotte Pass where Elyne learned to ski with Ernest Skardarasy, who was one of the first Austrian ski instructors to come to Australia for the Australian winter and European summer – there was considerable European influence in Australian skiing at that time and the architecture of our early villages tended to reflect this. My early memories of Thredbo stand out in stark contrast to the contemporary architecture where buildings tend to blend in with the surrounding bush.

The Chalet was central to Tom exploration on the Main Range and what they called 'Western Facing', that is skiing down those fabulously steep slopes that Tom and Elyne could see from Towong Hill in the Upper Murray. From the Chalet, Tom and Elyne, at sometimes together with George Day, Colin Wyatt and Curly Annabel, roamed to the Ramsheads.

In *Australia's Alps*, Elyne wrote prophetically, 'The valley of the Crackenback below Dead Horse Gap is one of the few places in our hills where a small alpine village would not be incongruous.'

Except for a brief glimpse of the Crackenback valley in 1947, Elyne did not return to the area for nearly two decades, during which time she reared four children, published two adult novels, some articles and short stories and *The Silver Brumby* was on the way to publication. While it is unlikely that Elyne's words in *Australia's Alps* had any impact on the choice of the site of Thredbo, for Elyne, after the war, the opening of the Alpine way and the founding of the fledgling village, Thredbo became the centre of Elyne's world. In the 1960s when I was learning to ski, Thredbo was a family village where everyone seemed to know each other and look out for each other's children. Elyne loved skiing, she made friends with like-minded people away from Tom's political life. Sasha Nekvapil, her husband

Karol and of course Frank were wonderful friends and I remember visits to her shop where there was the most recent ski fashions from Europe. Best of all was listening to Sasha and Carol yarning with Mum about Europe, history and the books they had read – the opened windows on Elyne's (and indeed my) perceptions of Europe's war and post-war experience. The Koman and the Van de Lee family were others, and I could go on paying tribute to people who kindly made up Elyne's world. Suffice to say that it was the kindness of friends and acquaintances and of the chairlift operators who made it possible for Elyne to ski for as long as she did. In my memoir *Elyne Mitchell: A Daughter Remembers* I describe memories of my experiences at Thredbo in the 1960s – I knew it well then, as Elyne took us skiing almost three days a week, not to mention the school holidays. For a couple of years there, I'm sure I skied more than the Clifford kids who actually grew up in the village, simply because they had to go to school and I did, or perhaps more accurately, didn't do a lot of correspondence schooling.

Always to an extent the non-conformist, Thredbo was where Elyne felt as if she was taken for what she was, rather than what others felt she should be. A notebook and biro were her constant companions, except of course when she was on the ski slopes – anything apart from a lift pass and some cash would have upset the beautiful lines of the wonderful outfits Elyne bought from Sasha! For Elyne, skiing was like a dance in which she strove for the perfect style as taught by the Austrian ski instructors – Leonhard in particular and of course, she enjoyed skiing with Sigi and Helmut.

Having said that, one would think that Thredbo was right on the trail of the Silver Brumby. Geographically, located as it is on the Crackenback River, in reality Thredbo grew up on the Trail of the Silver Brumby, rather than the other way around. *The Silver Brumby*, the story of which was set in an era before Thredbo existed, and its publication all but superseding the first foundations of the village.

Having put Thredbo in its historical context, I'm now going to talk about Thredbo and the trail of the Silver Brumby. The village is an ideal place from which you can base yourself for walking or cycling out towards the Silver Brumby Heartland in the Cascades. From Thredbo you can roam either on foot in summer, or cross country skis or snow shoes right throughout Brumby country to Dead Horse Gap, the Ramsheads, Mt Kosciuszko and the Main Range. Closer to Thredbo is Dead Horse Gap, Paddy Rush Bogong and the Brindle Bull.

Early one spring when we were walking on the Brindle Bull we saw hoof marks and ski tracks mingling on the snow – a few minutes later we saw brumbies peaking out from the snow gums and within seconds they vanished at a canter, with their mane and tails flying in the wind!

Published in 1958, Elyne had begun writing *The Silver Brumby* before building was begun at Thredbo. It is a period piece, based more on Elyne's pre-war alpine experiences, notably her 1941 ski trip out to the Cascades when George Day, Curly Annabel and Colin Wyatt lassoed a small brumby stallion. It is set in an era when stockmen took their cattle to their mountain leases for the summer months. It was a time that was vanishing into history with the building of the Alpine way which was opened in 1955.

Published in 1960, the sequel, *Silver Brumby's Daughter* takes us further afield on the Trail, over the Main Range and as far as the Grey Mare and then at the gallop, back to the Ramsheads, over the Crackenback and back to the safety of the Secret Valley. *Silver Brumbies of the South* and *Silver Brumby Kingdom* give a thrilling (or is it fearful?) description of the making of the Alpine Way from a brumby' point of view. In *Silver Brumbies of the South*, Thowra tells his old friend, the big bay stallion Storm that, 'Along the Crackenback they make a track wide enough for six horses!' In *Silver Brumby Whirlwind*, Thowra, when 'he looked downstream, he could see a host of twinkling lights all scattered around the foot of Paddy Rushes Bogong.' The 'twinkling lights' were the lights of Thredbo.

For Elyne and for us as a family, driving up to ski at Thredbo from the Upper Murray on the Victorian side of the Alps was not a journey for the faint-hearted, but it appealed immensely to her pioneering sense of adventure. Elyne describes an early journey in her foreword to the 1962 edition of *Austalia's Alps*, journey to Thredbo. Now with the sealed road all the way to Khancoban (and of course beyond!), it is easy to forget that the mud and the ice and the rock falls in the early days of the Alpine Way were very much a part of the Thredbo experience for some of us. It was almost as if the Alpine Way monsters were testing us before they'd let us through to go skiing! Occasionally we see piles of brumby stallion poo on the road – it is almost as if the brumbies are trying to say, 'We're back!' And who knows, one day someone might see a Silver Brumby roaming the bush near Dead Horse Gap, on Ramsheads, or further afield in the Cascades. His legacy is at large!

If you read on through the Elyne's Brumby books, you will find other landmarks.....I have always wanted to walk out to the Tin Mines. Thanks to Lou Gibson, I've been to the Cascades and I have that yen to walk further and expand my own knowledge of the Trail of the Silver Brumby.....