

SUSAN McGLASHAN
Interviewed by Hazel Riseborough

At Pukawa, 4 Feb 2005

Tape 1, side 1

- Susan – how did a Patoka girl end up living in England?

- After I'd been to boarding school, I went to Canterbury School of Art, which was part of Canterbury College, now University, and there I met Max McGlashan who was doing chemistry. We got married eventually, and he had been offered a scholarship to go to England to study with a chosen professor of thermo-dynamics – physical chemistry – Professor Edward Guggenheim, at Reading University, so we went to Reading. I can't quite remember the year, but we'd been married in '47. It was probably '49 we went to Reading, and he worked there with Professor Guggenheim and got his Masters, but he was on leave from Canterbury, so although he was invited to stay on at Reading as a member of staff, he was bound to return to Canterbury. And we did return, and then again the offer was made from Reading and we returned there after 18 mths back in NZ. And we stayed in Reading for 10 yrs, and Max was asked to apply for the chair at Exeter University, which he did and he got it, and we were there for another 10 years. Then he was asked to become professor of physical chemistry at London University College, ordinarily known as the University College London and we were there for 10 years.[?] And during that time, because of the work he did, it was ²⁰ always more appropriate for him to be in England or in Europe at least.

So we were in England, and apart from his work in the university, he became involved in a gt many meetings, committees and so on which continued after his retirement – in Britain, but the meetings were international – some of them were in Europe or the States, but not so often. That continued even after his retirement from the chair – as Head of Department at UCL. We stayed on in London for a little while then moved to Sussex where we had a very nice country – well a house with a very large garden on the edge of the Ashdown forest, and we stayed there until my husband died. That would be 7 1/2 yrs ago now. At that stage I thought – Do I stay here, or do I go back to NZ? But it wasn't obvious that I should go back to NZ. I had a lot of my own friends in England, and in Europe, and a lot of interests, and although the family in NZ was a big draw they had their own lives, their own friends, and it seemed better for me to stay there. But not on the edge of Ashdown Forest because the garden was far too big. It was quite isolated and no fun to be there on your own unable to keep things the way you want them to be. So I then moved to Gt Missenden where I now live in Bucks, which has the attraction of having my brother's daughter living in the next village. That's Sarah McGill. And it's very close to London – I can get to London in abt 45 mins, and trains every half-hour, and it's very good. Not an exciting, romantic village, but it has everything in it, it is compact and everything is very accessible by foot. So that's where I am.

I try to come home to NZ every second year now. The best of both worlds, but it's a pity it's so far away. The journey is trying, and it gets worse in a way, but still, as long as I can do it, I hope to. Sadly we didn't have children, but that means there's no divided family. And if you don't have children you have to look upon – there are certain advantages, I feel. Compensations I should say really. The things I was able to do, and do with Max, that we couldn't have done. Go to places that I wouldn't have gone with him if there'd been children.

I had gone to Art College – School of Art, it was. It was in what is now the Arts Centre, in the middle of Chch. I can't say I kept up my art. I taught part-time for a while as schools in Chch, mostly in my final year of Fine Art. I taught at St Andrews and Christ's College and at Medbury^{Bury} but looking back I don't think I did much good at all! I do still see at least one of my former pupils in Chch, and he apologises for the fact that he didn't do better, and I think that with/in[?] his eye he could have done better.

- What are your early memories of Patoka, and leaving home to go away to school?

- Early memories of course are very happy. It was a wonderfully free life. My mother taught us until we went away to school because she didn't like the schooling we could have had and there was no really good school close by. There was no Patoka school and it was a question of going to Rissington. She didn't want that, and it would have been a long day for us, so she taught us by PNEU correspondence – Parents'

* Medbury

National Educational Union – English based schooling. It was v gd in many ways, abt literature, fine art, but my poor mother was not good at mathematics or anything scientific, so there are huge gaps in my learning that have never been made up for! So I went to Nga Tawa when I was 11. My sister went to Nga Tawa when she was 12, and she's 18 mths older than I so we both started off going to proper school, and boarding school was quite a revelation in many ways. But I was quite happy there. I don't think Catherine was. We had a very isolated time from the point of view of other children when we were at Patoka, because there were none living near us when we were little, so we didn't really have much association with other children. But somehow I think we got over that.

I wasn't an outdoor girl. We could have ridden, but really the farm was hard work for my father and the man who worked for him, and anything frivolous such as using horses just for fun, for riding, was out of the question. So we didn't. I suppose if we had been desperately keen to do it we would have. But we had no reason to. We had no friends who rode so we didn't think abt it. And certainly there were not riding horses around – they were working creatures. And so were the dogs – they weren't pets either.

I can't really remember our other activities. We walked a lot, round the farm. And I can remember when Thomas, my brother, was perhaps 8, and I was 10+ I suppose, we used to share in a lambing round. This was a very serious business. We weren't allowed to deal with anything terribly serious but we would come back and say we think there's a spot of trouble. And we did assist occasionally, and that was extremely serious! We could pick up cast ewes, and we could certainly alert my father. Thomas and I enjoyed this – Catherine never did that. She was not very interested in the outdoors I suppose. We used to read a lot, and our days were quite full somehow.

There was an interest in our family in the theatre of course, but at that stage it didn't really loom on our horizon. We knew Mother had been on the stage and that she was still interested. She used to get journals, I think called The Stage, I can't remember, but it didn't really – we didn't do much about it, until my sister went to school, and I think all newcomers were encouraged to take part in theatrical things, and that fired her interest and she took off, and did very well with ?? theatrical enterprises, which was unfortunate for me because I wasn't in the least bit that way inclined. When I went to school less that a year later than she did I was expected to be just as good and I was cast in something at once, and it was a disaster! Never again.

- When you went to England you had access to the theatre...

- Yes, we did, and Max's father – Max came from Greymouth, and Max's father had been very active in I think, the local Operatic Society, and he used to direct things, so Max was brought up in that sort of atmosphere, although he didn't act himself. But when we went to England, when we were in Reading Max produced plays with students and sometimes staff, which were performed at the university and he very much enjoyed that. And I took part in those – not on the stage, but with costumes and props. But before that, when we were in Canterbury, Chch, there was a tour which Ngaio Marsh took – of the Little Theatre drama group which we were part of – to Australia, and this was very exciting. We went to four places – Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra – can't remember the other place, perhaps there were only three. That happened in the summer – '48, I think, and we took Othello and Six Characters in Search of an Author – Pirandello. It was a good mix. And of course you can imagine, it was really great stuff. We were performing in theatres in the middle of cities and it was very exciting, and everyone made a big fuss about it. Unfortunately, in the final stages of rehearsal, before leaving NZ, Max went on ahead to look at the theatres and see what was needed in the way of staging and so on, and I succumbed to measles which I'd never had as a child – so I couldn't go when the rest of them went. I had to stay behind and that was very sad. However, I joined them in Sydney, and was in time for the first night. Mostly when we were there we were put up in university halls of residence. Good fun. But after we went to Exeter, Max just did not have time. He'd done that, and he really didn't have time, he was so busy with his university work. But we had done it, so that was nice. ... Exeter has a very attractive cathedral and cathedral close, and the university site was lovely, but now I think it has got a bit built out – they're for everlastingly expanding it. But we lived very close to the university. An attractive campus, and it was all fairly newly getting going when we went there. A comparatively new university, and when Max was appointed Head of Dept of Physical Chemistry, they were just opening up a new dept of physical chemistry, and it was expanding in that way in all departments. He got there just in time to move out of the old existing building, into a brand-new one. Sadly we have just recently heard they are closing down the department of chemistry at Exeter. That is true of several chemistry depts in English

universities because they are one of the more expensive depts to run because of laboratory space and equipment and unless you can produce a great many publications they are not considered to earn their keep. It seems dreadfully sad. In the south-west the only other university which has a chemistry dept will be Bristol. Very sad. I think Max would turn in his grave if he knew.

My life since I've been alone? – well, I have a little garden. Fortunately where I live it is called a retirement complex – it's very small, 17 homes in all, nearly all in houses, some separate, some semi-detached, as mine is, and we all a little bit of our own garden, and there is also a caretaker who cuts the lawns and does heavy things. And because I am so near London I go up very often for theatres and exhibitions – art exhibitions which I really enjoy a lot. There are so many visiting exhibitions in London often coming to big galleries, and little ones, so that's good fun. On the whole really I suppose my time is taken up with people, which is lovely. You have your own space but you can have as much of people as you wish, which is a great blessing. And you can choose when you do become gregarious and when you don't. But somehow people seem to crowd in a bit, and I think Ooh I must be a bit more selective! But I like seeing people. And there are things in the village I get involved with. There's also a very nice church there which quite often, especially in winter, every two months or so, has a concert, in the church, which is given mostly by people who have come from away, not just locals. Some of them very high standard.

When Thomas and Jane come they can stay with me because the little house, although it's not big, it does have a guest suite and space. And my niece is in the next village – it's very close. I can walk there in 25 mins. She has two children, a girl 17, and a boy 11. Chloe and Daniel. So when the family come we are all together and that's lovely for all of us.

- Do you think you have remained a Kiwi?

- Well, I don't think I am English, really – so I'm a bit mixed up. I think many people think I'm English, but some of them realize I am not. And some of them say You've still got an accent! So I think Oh deah! Max used to say You've got an accent. I haven't got one any more [in his Kiwi accent]. English accent – Kiwi accent – it doesn't actually bother me much one way or the other.

- But coming home is like coming home?

- Oh, yes. It's all very ... it changes, a lot as time goes by, but it's all so familiar. It's lovely. There's much I love about the look of the country and the people. But I just think I've been away too long to want to be here permanently. It's always love to come back and I just wish it was a bit nearer and one could do it more often, perhaps for shorter periods, but more often. Max came back gladly as a visitor, but there was no question of coming back to work. There wasn't his speciality here and there wasn't the stimulus and there weren't the contacts. There were European contacts too – not just in England, so it wouldn't have done for him. But when we first went to England, we went by sea, of course, and we came back by sea, and when we went back again we went by sea – and there was never time to come back by sea for a long time, and flying wasn't really on for ordinary people like us, and it was 13 yrs before we came back for the first time. That was a long long stretch, but there was nothing we could do about it. After that we tried to come more often, but again it was difficult for Max to get the time away. Even in long vacations there is work to be done and meetings to take...

Yes, sea travel was wonderful. But it was also rather funny because – was it about three weeks? – more? We went both ways, but the first time we came Panama and went back Suez. Maybe four weeks, and it was a bit strange because when we did it there were not a lot of people in the ship, perhaps, the first time, only about 40 – not a passenger liner, more a freighter, so the relationships with people became rather strange because there was no escaping, and some people got pretty stewed up about, well, anything. And although that didn't affect either of us, it was a bit funny, and one wouldn't like to do it now on a freighter which takes months, and there might be only nine or twelve. There's always one that's a bit of a pain! I remember – I think it was when we came back to NZ – Max was working on a thesis for something or other so he spent a lot of time in his cabin and didn't socialize much. I don't think he would have been inclined to anyway – so I was around and about on my own a great deal, and somebody, halfway through the voyage said something that indicated he had no idea there was a husband around! So I quickly disillusioned him. But of course it was lovely doing it the leisurely way, but just a bit too long. ... But we did look into a passenger-cargo type of voyage after Max retired, but they were going to take a very long time – about three months, and even that was not established because they were going to wherever they had to go, and again the number

of passengers was very limited and one thought – Oh no, not three or four months. So we never did it. But it would be fun to do... One-class passenger ships are fine – every time we did a sea voyage it was one class.... And touch wood I have never suffered from sea-sickness and nor did Max. And when everything was rocking like mad and people were being sick we used to go up and enjoy the wildness. So different from air travel, which is quite soulless by comparison. Something I still remember – the nostalgic romance about a ship sailing out of port, and sailing in too. There's nothing like that when you set off from Heathrow. One wishes to be unconscious the whole time.

- When you and Max came back you would have family and colleagues to visit in both islands?...

- Yes, because there were his parents and of course my family and he has a sister in Chch now, who was in Greymouth then, and friends made at college. So there was quite a lot to be done, and we also used to escape into the mountains and have nice walks which was good. Mostly we used to go up to Arthur's Pass because we knew that area well, and walk from there. We did go overnight – we walked across from Arthur's Pass to Greymouth – I can't remember where you come out on the other side. But we spent a night in snow somewhere, in the tussock – but only one night. No tent – no cover at all, but we did stay in a hut one night. But this night we were really high up and there was no cover. But we had sleeping bags

- Did you go out with an alpine club at Canterbury University and things like that?

- No we didn't. We went on our own if we went anywhere. And then when we were back in England every summer we used to go to the alps in Switzerland or to Austria. I don't think we ever climbed in the French alps, but we used to go to the Swiss alps and to Austria once or twice. The Swiss alps were our favourites and we used to go from one hut to another. We never hired a guide and we never went in a group. There were just two of us – we were extremely careful. Of course you had to be on mountains like that. We were always very careful about the weather and making sure the conditions were right and not to get into difficulties. Never ever had to have anyone come to help us. And we didn't want to be with other people particularly, especially people we didn't know. We did go once or twice – more than once or twice – with a very good friend from England who loved it too. But that was all. Mostly it was just the two of us. And that went on from year after year after year. It was our summer holiday.

In NZ we didn't go further south than Canterbury – not to Fiordland. We didn't have a car in those days, no means of getting around apart from public transport or kind friends. That really took off when we went to Europe.

- That's why you don't mind me dragging you around the bush here...

- No, certainly not. Oh no, it's lovely – it's just that I'm not as active as I was – and that is disappointing, but there it is. One is lucky to be able to do it at all – and to have done it. At a certain stage you accept that there are things you have got to give up.

- This business of living in England and being able to walk to the next village is nice. Is this along quiet roads? country lanes?

- No, not entirely. It is built up but it's not excessively built up, there's not traffic all the time. And apart from walking to Sarah in the next village, there are various walks I can do round about – not on the roads, through fields and woods. And they are lovely. Quite often I go alone and quite often with friends. I have other friends who like to walk too. The change of seasons are wonderful and the beech woods in the spring when the bluebells are out and the colours are lovely. Then in the autumn the leaves are changing colour and falling and that's beautiful too. Winter can be grim because there's an awful lot of grey – days on end. Grey and damp and chilly. The snow, when it comes looks beautiful...but it gets disgusting in time and it's very very uncomfortable. You get melting snow, driven over by cars, turns into a nasty mess, then it freezes overnight and it becomes very dangerous. It's horrible... shoes full of dirty water! That's why I try to escape here always – winter there, summer here.

- And if you don't come here one winter, where else might you go? South of France?

- No, I've never done those sort of things. And I certainly wouldn't do it in preference. If I'm going to have several weeks holiday, it would be New Zealand. It's just so much more appealing. But travel... I think it would be so good if we could be rendered unconscious – they could put us in the aeroplane in sort of slots, unconscious, and leave you there until you are about to land where you want to go, and bring you around with a quick injection. And it would be all over. And it would be economical because you wouldn't be eating or drinking!

- No customs, lining up with passports... I think you are very brave.

- No, I don't think I'm brave because the attractions are great, but – I just wish it were a little bit more congenial.

I'm leaving here on 15 February. I go right through. I don't enjoy overnight stops because you're on your own and have to do all that awful checking in, all over again. When I get back the days will be longer. Let us hope the worst of the winter weather will be over. There will be good friends there I'll be glad to see – and I'll have nice things to remember of my visit. I have a car coming to meet me at Heathrow - I don't like involving friends. It will whisk me off home – three quarters of an hour. It's quite good, and seems to be the most efficient way of doing it, and pleasant. Don't have to make conversation when you're feeling absolutely stonked?? I get in at five to six in the morning. So that's it. And I will have had a lovely time here, and I'll be almost looking forward to the next time. I don't get seriously jet lagged – I get over it quite quickly. There are obviously days when one is feeling dopey and not sure quite what should be happening when. But it doesn't go on very long, and it's always nice to get home anyway. Always.

- In your complex, if you don't want to cook have you ...

- No, there's no communal place one could eat. But if I don't want to cook there are pubs around about, in the village. Well, only one is a terribly nice place to eat – a few minutes walk. But mostly I do cook and eat at home. Electricity, not gas. I think because this complex was designed for older persons they don't have gas, for safety reasons. The houses are all designed so you can have a stair lift, and the doors are all wide enough to take wheel chairs if necessary. It doesn't look like a geriatric home, but these things are thought of. A neat little kitchen, but a proper kitchen, a dining room, attached to it, but part of the living room, which leads out into a conservatory. So really quite spacious. Two bedrooms, one with en suite, and also another little room which I use as a workroom, so-called, although all that really happens there is I write letters, and have files... But it could take another bed if you wanted to Two bathrooms and three loos – one on the ground floor. Luxury! It is very well set-up, very convenient. It suits me very well. And I'm just glad I was able to find it when I decided I could no longer stay in Sussex. I don't remember how big Sussex was, how big the garden was. I never quite know. I suppose... Well, Thomas would know, perhaps. An acre?

T - About that – might be a little more I think. The garden went down quite a way, and was quite wide. Acre and a half?

- Probably, and very pleasant. [ends]