

THE SILVEREYE

Interview Transcript, 2013

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This is one of the old microscopes from the university where I, of course, worked and the thing was that as technology moves on, people tend to throw the old stuff out. These were beautiful old brass instruments and I discovered one day that the guy down in the workshop was sawing them into pieces and using the rack and pinion out of them to make little other things that he needed. I thought this was terrible so I purloined a couple of them and have kept them ever since. They're just beautiful bits of old 19th century craftsmanship. That one, I think, particularly is a Carl Zeiss so they're lovely instruments that should not be thrown away, certainly not cut in half with a hacksaw.

That's a photograph of my partner, looking very glamorous when she was 21 on the way to England. Because in those days everybody had to go to the old country. We all did our stint overseas. That's from a photograph in *The West Australian* because in those days the social column had who was actually catching the boat to England or not.

This was a project we were doing on Silvereyes, little tiny birds which are best known for attacking grapes in Margaret River. The project started because one year the Silvereyes wiped out all of the crop. As I was a Zoologist I was approached because people thought we should know some way to stop birds doing this sort of thing. The problem was that we knew nothing about Silvereyes and why they attacked grapes at all. In the process

we discovered they live for 15 years and that's where the photo comes in. That's a photo of a X-ray. We're X-raying the skulls of the birds and from this we're able to get an idea of their age. Although everyone always assumed that small animals don't live very long, these little things live for years and years and they fly between Esperance and Jurien Bay and they know almost every fruit tree in the whole of Western Australia. They know exactly when the grapes are ripe and all the rest of it. We subsequently went on and we did a 5 year study on the Silvereye which resulted in us being able to tell the Vignerons how to protect their grapes against attack in very bad years.

These are targets made of Tantalum metal and they have an oxide that's been formed on them and that oxide contains a heavy form of Oxygen. We were using this to study the metabolism of Honey Possums, a little tiny Marsupial that lives on Banksias down in the south west. Amazingly complex process which involved us whizzing over to Sydney and exposing these little targets to a beam of protons. The end result of this was we were able to discover how much energy Honey Possums use in a day.

The project's long since finished but the craftsmanship that went into making these targets and all the rest of it was so nice. It's a lovely object that I've always wanted to keep an example of. We had lots of these of course, most of them were thrown away.



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