

Colin Willock: Oral History Transcript

Name of interviewee:

Colin Willock

Name of interviewer:

Chris Parsons

Name of cameraman:

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1. The early years and the birth of Survival

Int: Colin I want to go back to the start of your involvement in the wildlife film business and in fact you were, shall we say, plucked from the world of journalism and the magazines were you not?

CW: No I don't think I was plucked, I think I parachuted in fact. Long before then, I always had a general interest in natural history and I can pinpoint the thing which started me off. When I was at prep [preparatory] school, Players did a wonderful series of fifty cigarette cards on British butterflies and they were absolutely beautiful and they sort of set me on fire. I thought gosh, if the British countryside can produce this sort of diversity, what's the rest of the place like, what's the rest of the world like? At school I was never very good at anything and particularly no good at sports, I suppose I was quite good at writing. But the education I really got at the two schools that I went to was from one or two dedicated masters who ran natural history societies, and I think that really got me in to the business, as it were. There was a price to pay for that. If you were a naturalist at a public school or a prep school in those days, you were either 'weedy' or 'wet', but it was well worth it.

I continued that as a general interest when I left school, but of course I'd always wanted to write, and I was a journalist. Before I went to television I was editor of Lilliput (1) and I started a paper called the Angling Times (2) which is now a tabloid, going very well, and eventually was assistant editor of Picture Post (3). It was a time when all the magazines were getting torpedoed by the arrival of television. Any magazine journalist, and particularly illustrated or photographic magazine journalist, realised that their days were numbered, and most



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of the Picture Post (3) boys jumped and went to the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] and started Tonight (4). By a chain of circumstances that I really can't trace back now, I went the other way and somebody offered me a job on This Week (5), which was then the sort of flagship current affairs programme of ITV [Independent Television]. I was totally unsuited to it, I mean in those days I wasn't terribly interested in politics, and it was a political programme. I found myself absolutely terrified as deputy editor of this thing having to go out weekly, and worrying that nothing would be there and the interviews wouldn't go right and all that. So I always, whenever possible, dragged the crew out to do some country events like point-to-point, or terrier shows, or fishing matches, or maggot factories and they realised I really wasn't cut out for the political scene, so I think that they were too nice to want to fire me. But when Anglia television started up, Aubrey Buxton, who was then the managing director of Anglia, later Lord Buxton, he was a very, very good naturalist, particularly an ornithologist.

Well, Aubrey started in East Anglia a very good local little programme called Countryman (6), which was really a sort of Peter Scott Look (7) type programme and this was successful as you would expect it to be in Norfolk, I mean everybody's, well not everybody, there was a tremendous interest in wildlife in Norfolk and so he came down to my company, or the company for which I worked, Rediffusion and said, "Look I've made this half hour, why don't you people make a natural history series?" I don't think the, I'm sure the directors of Rediffusion, I don't think they'd ever been outside in the open air, they'd never trod on a cowpat or anything like that and they'd probably have fainted if they'd got a fresh breath of country air. But John McMillan who was the head of programmes said, "Look, I tell you what Aubrey, if you can make a programme about wildlife in London then I'll believe it can be done and I may even give you an occasional series." So Aubrey, being Aubrey said, "Oh my dear boy, absolutely simple, no problem there at all." Then they looked around for somebody to do it and Rediffusion, this week particularly, were waiting to get rid of me, and they said, "For God's sake, take this guy, he's dragging us to maggot factories and terrier races, lovely things, but we really don't need this, take him."

So they took me and I was loaned to Anglia for one programme, the London programme (8), which looking back on it was extremely brash and **ingenuous**, but it had some new ideas in it. One of the new ideas which shocked and shattered most people including our friends at the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] at the time, is we employed a little known jazz musician called John Dankworth to write the score. It was a very good score, I remember it too but never mind, the 'wood-notes wild-boys' and the purists thought, 'Oh, terrible! Why aren't we hearing the birdsong?' and of course, as things developed there was a place for both. But it was a breakthrough, that was a breakthrough. Only there wasn't really a single foot of genuine wild London footage in the programme. I remember we took a fox in a laundry basket to Hampstead Heath in the dead of night in the belief we'd never film a London fox. Well there are more foxes in London in the suburbs than there are in the country. Anyhow, the animal got out of the basket and disappeared to The Spaniard's pub, never saw it again, it was all a bit like that. My researchers revealed that a puffin had once made a forced landing in the Serpentine. So we had a puffin in the programme, but the puffin had been filmed on the cliffs in Pembrokeshire, but you know, that was the way it was. We were sticking, really sort of 'postage stamps' of other people's film together and joining it with film links of Aubrey appearing in rather plummy tones in Hyde Park and other well known wild places in London. But it was successful and it got us off the ground. And before I knew where I was, Aubrey phoned me up one afternoon, "We are working on a second programme", that's right, about how the avocet returned to Havergate Island to nest (9). That again was using RSPB film with film links, I thought this is very unsatisfactory you know, we can't go on sort of sticking people's film together. I think I was working on the script of that at home one afternoon and Aubrey phoned up and said, "Could you go to Uganda next Thursday and catch some white rhinos?" and I have to confess I didn't know a white rhino from a black rhino at the time. I thought they were very large animals with a dangerous appendage at one end and if you annoyed them they'd probably show you the appendage, and I said, "Yes, that sounds very interesting, let's go."

So we then, I think at the very last minute, realised that we needed a wildlife cameraman and there hardly was such a thing in those days, there were some good ones around, but the sort of commando, Cessna, five

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Arriflex equipped chap you now find in the field just didn't exist. There were a few intrepid, some skilful, certainly knowledgeable wildlife cameramen. At the last moment we suddenly thought, God, we're going to Uganda to film a catching operation, we don't have a cameraman. So, Aubrey, there were Buxtons behind every tree of course, and so he phoned up his cousin at Horsey, John [Buxton], nicest possible chap and said, "John do you think you could go with Collin Willock and film a white rhino catch?" John is one of the most intrepid people I have ever known I think and also one of the most gentlemanly. As an illustration of that, we were going to join a team of rhino catchers who really you could have met them on the Oregon trail in 1860. They were sort of wild-west characters and I only discovered afterwards that John had packed his dinner-jacket, it makes me laugh even now. I said to him, "John, do you think that's really needed for rhino catching?" and he said, "Well you know, you never know, there are a lot of Buxtons about the world. You never know when you may meet one." I actually took a picture, which I've lost, of John sitting in Murchison Falls National Park, beneath a prickly pear in his dinner-jacket, but I don't have it anymore, alas! But as I say, he was not the best cameraman in the world, but he really wasn't afraid of anything. After the first appalling chase when we lassoed a three and a half tonner or something and it took the truck apart John said, "Right-o, jolly good." in the sort of voice he would have used if ordered to capture a machine gun post single-handed, totally intrepid. But, the quality of the film was pretty dreadful, but the excitement of it was tremendous and I think that (10), more than anything else established Survival (11), probably.

2. Establishing Survival

Int: So, what was the next stage after that, because you've got two or three isolated ones which were presumably one-offs and were scheduled as one-offs, so how did you move from that into an established series?

CW: Getting established I think with Survival (11) was a fairly gradual process. I think I was largely responsible for persuading Aubrey and the powers at Anglia, that it just wasn't good enough buying in film and sticking it together. We really had to build up our own team of cameramen, and own our own film, that was quite a revolutionary thought in those days. But I think some of us saw in the distant future, that if we lived, I mean if the unit lived over the next period of ten, fifteen, hopefully twenty years, it turned out to be thirty in my case, we were going to film things that were never going to be filmed again, because they couldn't be filmed again, they'd probably disappeared. And so, I think the button sort of was pressed and we began to see, everybody began to see, that the way to go was to build up a wildlife team and own every foot you've got, and what's more, when you've got it, preserve it. Later of course it was all transferred to tape to preserve, but that was a long way ahead. That was one of the real pleasures and joys of working in that particular outfit. It was rather like Popski's Private Army. It was sort of, I think saving the BBC's presence, for whom I have the greatest admiration, I think we were rather special. I think we were a team of people, it was a bit like the Foreign Legion in a way, or perhaps more like the Long Range Desert Group. They were a lot of guys who got on, and girls too, who got on extremely well, we had our frictions and so on of course, but it had an extraordinary sort of family feel about it. There were people like Alan Root and Des Bartlett, and Dieter Plage later on, ok we were all a bit rivalry, rivalries, friendly rivalries, but it had a quite, well I say quite unique, it had a unique feel about it which I still treasure to this day. When people say to me, "Don't you miss it all?", I say, "Well, it seemed like a wonderful dream, thirty years of that, but the thing I really miss is the people." and I think the people made the job a pure joy, and I often wondered why people paid me to do it.

The other question of course is how Survival (11) became established. That was a slow process because in ITV if you're a smaller company, small contractor you don't command the network, you have to go and plead with the network. And so we were only able to get limited slots at first. Perhaps we were making at first six shows a year and then the thing established itself and obviously it got audience figure —

CW: Yes, we became established in the obvious way, that we built an audience and once you start getting a

few million, or several million, I think quite more than several million on your ratings, then the big companies become interested in you. First of all Rediffusion started running us regularly, then we started having six half hours and six half hours later in the year. But of course we lacked what either one of the big ITV companies, or the 'Beeb' [BBC] had the power to command those slots. Never mind, I mean, I think in the twenty-nine or thirty years I ran the thing, I must personally have been concerned in five hundred programmes so there were quite a lot of programmes made. Of course the other big breakthrough commercially was that we made, that is to say, Aubrey Buxton made a partnership with J. Walter Thompson in New York, and of course the 'big bucks' was the objective. There was no way you could break into American network television in those days unless you had some real clout on the other side, so we made a partnership with J. Walter Thompson and they sold us to National Broadcasting Company (NBC), Columbia Broadcast System (CBS) and so on, and we were getting network shows. I think the first one we made was *The World of the Beaver* (12) or, I forget the actual title. But to do that, you only got on the American network if you had a well known figure doing the commentary, or a well known voice doing the commentary, a film star or someone who was at the top of the TV ratings. One had to go along with that, but throughout that period, a highly successful period selling to American network television, thank heavens we always had the say so, strangely enough the all powerful J. Walter Thompson were really our junior partners in a funny way. They were selling for us so we could say all the time, "No, you can't say that, that's not accurate" you know, "You can't do that." and so the shows were I think something you shouldn't, quite proud of really, something you shouldn't be ashamed of anyway.

3. Survival Anglia cameramen

Int: Right Colin let's talk about how you built up your wildlife cameramen, because obviously having got established and getting some credibility for making wildlife programmes, getting the interest of one or two of the companies, you needed the people to actually shoot the stuff, so how did you build up the stable, shall we say, the Survival Anglia stable?

CW: The first films were made in Africa, I told the story earlier on of John Buxton, and we really were reliant on talented amateurs. Then the bell rung, if this business is going to develop we've really got to build up our own team, and Des Bartlett was one of the first I tried to get, Aubrey Buxton said to me when I went to Africa in 1962 to make a film about the Nile, the Victoria Nile (13), "Try and find Des and see if you can get him". I met Des, he was filming caterpillars in a forest somewhere, caterpillars that stuck together the case for their chrysalis with saliva and bamboo, not bamboo, twigs, brilliant stuff, typical Des stuff. Des was typical Des, he was very straightforward, he's one of the straightest men I know actually and he said, "Look, I'd like to come and join you, but as long as Armand Denis for whom I film at the moment, and who brought me to Africa, is in business, I can't do it. I have loyalties first to Armand, but if he ever packs up, I'll phone you." And sure enough, about, I suppose five years later Armand decided he'd had enough. Des shot all Armand's film incidentally, none of the *On Safari* (14) film was shot by Armand or Michaela, although Armand in fact had shot some very good film pre-war himself, elephant training and so on. But, the moment it happened and Des had honourably cleared his masthead with Armand, he said, "Right, I'm on." and so he joined us.

The other very, very important means of communication and gathering the remarkable team we had was Professor Bernhard Grzimek, the distinguished director of Frankfurt Zoo. In himself one of nicest but most boring men I've ever met. He made some of the most boring programmes I've ever seen. But the fact is, in Germany, which can be fairly boring at times, they were highly successful. And he made his programmes really, in the cause of conservation. I think old Grzimek was in fact a sort of World Wide Fund For Nature in one man. Everything he did was channelled back into conservation. He had a television programme in Germany (15), and he had a magazine called *Der Tier*, or *Das Tier* (16) if I've got the gender right, most of the proceeds and profits from these two things went back into conservation. For instance, when the Congo civil war was on he kept the rangers going in what had been the Parc Albert, by providing their wages, nobody else was going to do that. He was really at the centre of things, he was very friendly with Aubrey, and

every now and again he would say, “Look, there’s a marvellous cameraman you must really give full rein to. I can’t use all his stuff, but he’s obvious for you.” One of the first was Alan Root, and Alan in my view, is the best single operative in the business. Because, the thing is in his head, his script, if you can talk about a wildlife film having a script, and I think you can, it was in his head, every shot was in his head, the way he was going to do it was in his head, and the thing came out of his head at the moment and looked like a whole film. That is surely the secret of making a feature film or a wildlife film. Alan had that great gift.

And after Bernhard Grzimek— his son Michael was killed flying his own aircraft in the Ngoro Ngoro crater in Tanzania, I think it’s fair to say that Bernard took Alan on, as a sort of, at least temporary surrogate son, a replacement for Michael. He couldn’t use all Alan’s talents and so he sent Alan our way and he was happy to work with us and made some great films. He made a lovely film about Karamoja (17), about the tribes, he went to the Galapagos for us. He made a film, at least I made a film with him, which he told me he hated more than any film he’d ever seen, it was called Nothing Going On [Little Game] (18). It was brilliant actually, it was about, it started with a group of people sitting at the lodge in Tsavo East or West, I forget which and the elephants come to the waterhole. The elephants have a drink and then they ‘sugar’ off into the distance, and the American tourists say, “Gee let’s go, there’s nothing going on.” and then you go and see on film what is really going on, which they don’t imagine. Alan said, “I hate that, it’s jokey”, but as time passed by we found that Alan was showing it to everybody and he thought it was the best film anybody had made for a long time, which shows you. Alan was bound to go his own way, he went to the BBC and made some marvellous films for them, but he is essentially a lone hand, a lone operator and is at his best doing that. But never mind, he made marvellous films for us and for the ‘Beeb’, films like Secrets of the African Baobab Tree (19), The year of the Wildebeest (20), which in my view is still one of the best wildlife films ever made. But the concept, I couldn’t tell Alan what the concept of his films should be, I maybe could write the commentary and make some suggestions, but in the end it was his show and good luck.

Then, who else came from Bernhard Grzimek? Oh! Someone very important and I would think this was towards the end of the seventies, he phoned up and said, “Ach”, I never knew Germans said ‘ach’ but they do, “Ach, I have a good cameraman for you” and so we said, “Fine, what’s his name?” He said his name was Dieter Plage and so Dieter came over and we liked him very much and we thought he was enormously capable. Then we got a terrible letter from an American wildlife, so called wildlife film producer whose name I won’t mention who said, “Beware, you are employing a crook. This man will take your back teeth out he’s utterly a rogue, a complete rogue.” And so, Aubrey looked at me and said, “Did you get that impression?” and I said, “No,” I thought, “this was one of the nicest, straightest guys I’d met for a long time.” So, we made some enquiries and we decided our informant was motivated by some jealousy, or hate or something and luckily we ignored it. Dieter was an extraordinary, extraordinary cameraman. He was nothing like the naturalist that Des Bartlett is or, Alan for that matter. Des Bartlett I think is probably the best all-round naturalist in the field anywhere. There must be people who can match him, his knowledge is encyclopaedic, and he has this extraordinary sort of patience and ability to delve and endless time. If it takes a year to put a bloody beetle on film, he’ll do it. Dieter was not like that, Dieter who incidentally became one of the greatest friends I’ve ever had, he was all sort of **mercurial**. He could have terrible blacks when things went wrong, and I remember being in Ethiopia with him when something went wrong and he sat in the Aztec for two hours looking as though he’d died, gloom and despondency. But equally you know, something went right and he was on top of the world. He was a very, as I say, a very mercurial personality. He had a newsreel cameraman’s sense of action he was often an editor’s despair. But, if you didn’t mind about **jump-cuts** if the action was good enough, you had it. But, if you put him in a sort of Kosovo, or wherever, or world war two, he would have come back with some of the best film. Because he had this, not only had this instant eye for action and a very good idea of storytelling, but also he had a, I suppose rather **teutonic**, not surprisingly, romantic eye. Slightly over-romantic, but he would produce some of the most beautiful shots of, let’s say, of a raindrop settling on a leaf frond in a rain forest or something. And you’d think, oh God I’ve seen all —, he shot more yards, sorry, miles of sunsets, you could run a month of sunsets on ITV if you wished without cutting to anyone else. I’d say, “For God’s sake Dieter don’t shoot another bloody sunset!”, “Ach! Colin, I must get this one, it’s fantastic!”

He was a very, he had the most developed sense of humour I think. Although he was essentially German, he'd almost forgotten to speak German. Never let anyone tell you Krauts [Germans] don't have a sense of humour, he did. He could see it in the most ridiculous things. I mean this is a silly story in a way but typical. I remember making a leopard film in Sri Lanka (21), a good place to make leopard films because there aren't any tigers, and so the leopard's the top dog, and as a result of that they are diurnal, they operate in daytime. Good place to shoot. One of the things leopards like eating is langur monkeys, and we were filming in a clearing one day and there was a troop of about twenty langurs, and suddenly they all perked up and looked round and then panicked, and all went back in the trees, and when they nearly got to the trees one turned round and came back and started looking in the grass. And Dieter instantaneously said, "He's lost his Swiss army knife." Now it may not sound funny but, it's a piece of sort of, almost a cartoon balloon piece of observation. That was the sort of sense of humour Dieter had.

4. Working with Dieter Plage and Des Bartlett

Int: You mentioned several times when we were filming as if you actually spent quite a bit of time out with Dieter and Des and so on?

CW: Yes I did, yes I did is no answer, is it? Yes, the joy of the job was I suppose, I was lucky and my wife was bloody lucky because she always came with me. I don't know how she did it but she did. I suppose I spent two months a year in the field, and I spent most of that time with Des, but practically all of that time with Dieter because we saw eye to eye, about films I mean. And Dieter, I rather contradict myself what I said earlier, Dieter was not a story man really, he could always see the brilliant start of anything. He'd say, "Ach! Colin, see how this film starts. We start in the treetops and we pan down and there is this anteater underneath and along comes —" "OK Dieter, fine, what happens after that?" So he relied on me entirely to supply the story ideas, and shape the thing and was very —, we meshed in that way. But Dieter really was a sort of first sequence man, and an action man, and I don't think, I haven't seen a better one.

Int: The rumour in the industry was that Des Bartlett shot an incredible amount of footage and shot everything that moved, and that it was up to people like you to actually carve a story out of it. Is that true or not?

CW: Yes I think that's quite true, quite fair really, my function I think, because I'm a story-teller and a writer and all the rest of it, was always to be, to see in advance, or to make the story, yes absolutely right. Des was at one point such an uneconomic operator, when he first went to Namibia, you're quite right, he shot every bloody thing that moved including grains of sand, and the point came when we really couldn't carry the traffic any more. We sold back to Des all the footage he'd shot which we didn't, hadn't used in films or didn't make films from. And he then went, as he is now, independent. But, being Des, and I think loyalty is Des's middle name he would always come back first and say, "I've got this, I've shaped it, do you want it, do you want to work on it, do you want to buy it?" You'd never find Des sort of betraying you, although I think he felt we betrayed him in some ways. I think it had got to the stage when there was a hundred thousand feet of footage we couldn't see we could use. Now, how much can I talk out of school here? You don't have to use it.

Int: You can talk out of school and you can say I don't want this to be used or be seen by anybody.

CW: Yes, I don't want to say anything really that is contrary to anybody's interests, but it was always, I think this is a fairer thing to say, it was always Des, I've said it to his face any how. It was always an amazement to

us how Des was able to stay in the field as long as he was, with the sort of, well, budgets he must have had. I mean even if its only husband and wife, you've still got vehicles and fuel and aircraft and all those things. But, Des has been able to do it in that old fashioned phrase, 'on the smell of an oil rag', he could sort of keep going. But, having said that, Des has a flat in Swakopmund, an **abode shack** in the Arizona desert, a condominium in the Grand Bahamas, Gran Canaria rather, and maybe I haven't got it all. In each of those is a stack of camera equipment which would only just go into a room a hundred foot by fifty feet. So how is it done? I don't know. He does it and he keeps going and I have the greatest possible respect for what he does. He has of course, through Jen who is a brilliant film, stills photographer, he has the most marvellous set of stills which the National Geographic stores for him and so on. But having said that, it's quite hard to live off the best set of wildlife stills in the world, because as you know agents take an awful big slice out of stills. But anyhow they do it, that's the marvel, that's the miracle. It's walking on water but they are still afloat. But I think that Des, I don't think he would quarrel with this either, once he'd got a smell of Africa that was where he wanted to be. I think he determined to die in Africa and he bloody nearly achieved it when the **Drifter** turned upside down, have I done that bit? No, no I'll do it again. He jolly nearly did die in an air crash of his own making, or somebody's making. But, I think he's determined that's where they are going to bury him and I think they will, good luck to him, but I think he will be filming just when they shut the lid down. And he'll say, "Ach! slate 34", just as they hammer the coffin down. But no, can I tell the story of Des's air crash?

Int: Yes

CW: Well, Des has always, very like Dieter and I suppose like other top ranking wildlife cameramen, he's always been an equipment man. Ah, a little story here, Des and Dieter have bought more Arriflex cameras I suppose, probably, than the factory's ever turned out. Arriflex in recognition of their loyalty and the fortune that they'd spent, they gave them a gold Arriflex camera badge.

Yes, I was going back to the crash, wasn't I. As one of his tools of his trade and I think he was quite right, if you are operating in Namibia, particularly up on the Skeleton Coast with great distances to cover, and some good things to cover too, but very hard to get to by transport quickly enough, road transport. So they went to, Des and Jen went to America and bought a thing called a Drifter, which is a sort of halfway between a microlite and a conventional light aircraft, and learnt to fly it of course. And brought it back, sorry, they bought two, two of them, and they were flying one afternoon in perfect weather and aboard Des's was Mary Plage, whose, as I shall tell, husband Dieter had been killed, filming. Des was flying Mary as a passenger, he'd invited her out after Dieter was killed, on a holiday and Jen was flying the vet from Etosha national park, perfect weather conditions, not a cloud in the sky and Jen looked round and suddenly Des wasn't in the air anymore. She flew around and discovered he was upside down in a swamp with the plane all wrapped round him. She landed and Mary was unconscious, but they got her out and laid her under a tree, the only tree there was in the shade, and she obviously had a bad back, and injury. Des was strapped in upside down and one of his ankles turned virtually back to front. They had no radio that could call help from any distance, that was back at their base at Murvy Bay about an hour and a half's drive away. So Des, Jen left Des hanging in his straps and put Mary with the vet in the shade of the tree. Drove back an hour and a half, radioed for aerial help and took over three hours to get back, expecting to find Des dead. There he was unconscious but hanging upside down in his straps. They cut him out, got him out, and the chopper [helicopter] came in, flew him out. He had three operations, three years later he's back on crutches filming. But the latest is, they've both been back to Florida and they've bought a twin engined Drifter, which they are going to film in.

5. The Survival brand

Int: What I wanted to say was, when you started Survival, ITV still was comparatively new, been going a few years, did you make a conscious decision that you wanted a brand that was significantly different from the type of programme made by the BBC?

CW: Yes, we did. Yes when we started Survival we saw the BBC as the establishment who were doing brilliantly at what they did, but in a rather stuffy way, quite honestly. I think that we also knew that if we were to live and survive then Survival had to go for a populist audience, and this meant a slightly different approach. I think it was Jeffery Boswell who coined the phrase that always made me laugh, wish I'd coined it, called "**Pop-nat-hist**", which was the sort of thing we did, with employing John Dankworth to write the score. But it was quite deliberate and I think Aubrey to whom many things are owed was the instigator and the guy who saw that this could all work. The sort of ground plan for the whole thing, he knew perfectly well that if we wanted to survive in the jungle of ITV, particularly as a small company with a sub-unit like Survival, Anglia being a small company, then we had to come up with something that would hold, if you like a Daily Mirror as opposed to a Times audience. Yes, perfectly true.

Int: Now, going on from that, as time went on I think the BBC also realised it had to change its image, one of the consequences of that was that the mainstay of early programmes, dear Peter Scott, had really come to the end of his time and Peter was very bitter about that, that period coming to an end. But in fact he then reappeared quite quickly actually with Survival. So how do you relate what you've just said about getting a new image with actually taking Peter on?

CW: Taking Peter Scott on was I think a very deliberate and conscious, conscious act on the part of Aubrey to have the right names on the letter heading. I don't think there's any question about this. Common practice after all, in commerce you get Lord this that or the other on your board as non-executive director. I think Peter, he was valuable in that way, although his market value was going down, no doubt. No fault of Peter's, I don't think he contributed a lot except as a front man if you like. What he did contribute was some, he spoke, OK he spoke my narrations and he spoke them very well. I never had any sort of real problems. I thought it wasn't always necessary to give the scientific name of every antelope or bird, beast, beetle or fish that arrived or appeared and I talked him out of that because I thought it slowed the thing up. Sometimes it was necessary, he was a little pedantic. One thing I admired him for greatly, my favourite film of all the five hundred Survivals with which I was associated was Des Bartlett's Snow Goose (22). I thought it was a highly romantic film and I loved it, because I love wildfowl apart from anything else. Peter had to come to terms with the American edition, and the American edition was exactly as I would have liked it. But, and I see nothing wrong with this, one of our American directors, a man called Farlan Myers was quite a good musician and he wrote a tune, a theme which we had a big orchestra for, and it sounded wonderful, it brings tears to the eyes every time you see it, or every time most people see it. And it was great, it was a great sort of Nelson Riddle arrangement, and he wrote quite a good, not trite ballad, but quite nice. It had, it was reminiscent of Born Free (23) in many ways. But anyhow we got Glen Campbell to sing this and I thought Peter will, he'll balk at this. But not a bit of it, he was very good, he thought it was great. He devised a link to get us into it, where Peter said, "Well, last time I met Glen Campbell he was singing at a World Wildlife —", or something and that was fine. He was practical in that way. He was a pleasure to work with, but I don't think beyond the name, at that stage, and of course the connection with the World Wildlife Fund, or World Wide Fund for Nature didn't do any harm, but I think creatively, that awfully over-used word, I don't think it added a lot.

6. The dangers of wildlife filmmaking

Int: Wildlife filmmaking is not always a gentle job it's actually quite dangerous and I think, certainly, Survival Anglia had a number of incidents where a number of really quite serious accidents have occurred —.

CW: Yes, I don't think it's any more dangerous than scaffolding jobs or probably less so. Peter Scott when he came back from various field trips, once said to me, "The most dangerous thing I ever do is cross Oxford Street." and I think that about sums it up really. The fact is that the really good operators know the signs.

They know when an elephant is going to charge, they know when a rhino is getting dodgy. And when things go wrong, and we had four tragic accidents, they were, three of them were not to do with animals, one was, and a very strange one. But we lost four people all told and they were all mechanical, all but one of them were mechanical accidents. Poor Dieter Plage was killed in Sumatra when he had a, I think a crazy thing, but it was a pedal driven helium dirigible, filming over the tree-tops. It buckled and he fell a hundred and forty feet. He should never have been in the bloody thing, if I'd been in Survival then I'd have fought tooth and nail for him not to have it, but it happened. John Pearson who filmed for us in the early days, good operator, he was an East African Airways pilot, he was shot dead by a Masai guard he didn't want in his camp, who got the wind up that there was a Masai raiding party out. He heard cow bells, he fired a shot, hit John between the eyes in his tent. That's not wildlife filmmaking. Then Ian Hoffmeyer with whom we worked a lot, was the capture officer for the Etosha National Park. He filmed with Dieter and I in Sri Lanka, filming elephant transfers there, transportation, he was killed, pitched out of his truck driving round Etosha Park showing some people round. Went in a rut, threw him out on his head and he died. Lee Lyon was the only one, Californian girl whom Dieter trained, filming her first film on her own, shifting some elephant calves from a Rwanda swamp to Kagera National Park in Rwanda, released one of the calves, instead of taking off into the bush as they normally do, came straight for her, pinned her against her vehicle, wiped her down the side of the vehicle and knelt on her. No one could have predicted it, but, of the four fatalities over thirty years, that was the only one you could attribute to animals.

7. The use of famous narrators, and the script writing process

Int: You were mentioning some of the commentators that you used —

CW: Yes, I think when we got into the American market we were always faced with the need to front the show so that it was promotable in American TV mags [magazines] and so on, with a famous name. The famous names include some very famous people, Orson Wells for instance. I went to Paris to record Orson Wells for a film we made with Roger Payne about southern right whales (24). And Orson, typically was doing his 'third man' act and was untraceable, and you could only find him through the friend of a French editor with whom he was making a film which no one knew about, and we'd no idea. We got to the studio in Paris late at night and suddenly Orson walked in, in a cloud of cigar smoke and he made a short speech to us all, which he was quite justified in making. He said, "Gentlemen, I've been in the film business, sometimes at the top of the film business for thirty five years, I don't want anyone to interrupt me, anybody to tell me what to do. I shall do the commentary. There's some Spanish in it I shall do it in Castillian patois, what they speak in Madrid, and when you've finished you can take the tapes and use which one you like." and he did it perfectly. Nobody dared raise a word, least of all me. At the end of the deal there was another puff of cigar smoke, and he was just like Harry Lime, he'd gone, we never saw him again.

One of the most charming and enjoyable people I've ever recorded with was David Niven. I went to a terrible, clapped out studio in the south of France in Cannes to record him and we were both very nervous surprisingly. I was nervous justifiably, I thought, working with a superstar, and David was nervous because he'd never done a voice-over before. And he was simply dreadful in the morning and then in the afternoon he said, "I tell you what we'll do fellers, we'll get in a barrel of red wine." So we bought him half a barrel of the local rotgut and we drank this steadily and he got better and better and better, it was a marvellous performance in the end. At the end of the, when it was all on the tape, I said to David, "I feel a bit awkward about this, asking you but, do you mind doing a few publicity pictures?" so he said, "No absolutely not!" and he stood up against a wall as if he was peeing. And there he was, and the shot is on my loo wall! But he genuinely was, that much overworked phrase, a lovely man to work with, awful show business term. But, he never failed to thank everybody quite genuinely, from the tea-lady, to the clapper boy, to the chap who brought the barrel of wine, and he was a charmer. He told marvellous stories about how he lived with Errol Flyn on a boat in Hollywood, in California. And he said, I'll sum it all up, he said, "I loved living with Errol, but the only thing you could rely on him about, was the fact that you could never rely on him."

Int: We're coming to the end now, I'd just like to know a little bit more about how you work because you were a writer and, you actually wrote most of the output of Survival Anglia yourself basically —

CW: Yes I did, sorry yes I did is no answer is it really. Yes, I suppose of five hundred films I must have written the words and shaped them and all the rest of it. It sounds very modest, but I suppose for about four hundred of those, but inevitably you realise, sooner or later someone's going to say 'thanks very much and goodbye', quite rightly. So, one trained up other guys to do it, and girls too. I have to say, I don't think they're nearly as good at it, but I would say that, wouldn't I? Because they didn't have, and I always believed this absolutely in my guts, that the secret of any television programme, or any documentary television programme, whether it's wildlife or anything else, is you've got to tell a story. And unless you have this born in you, or trained into you, or both, and for that reason good journalists do tend to have this ability, they've got to sink their own identity, of course they have, but they've got to tell a story as if it's *The Arabian Nights* (25) for the first bloody time. And if you do that, not many people can do it.

Int: That's great, there's some marvellous stuff there —

CW: Well I've enjoyed it. Actually, it's rather fun for me because I'm writing a book on a lot of that stuff called *Life on the Wild Side* (26).

END

Glossary

Teutonic: Informal, often derogatory remark

Adobe shack: Refers to an old run-down building

Drifter: Ultra-light aircraft

Pop-nat-hist: Term coined for the genre of Popular Natural History programming

Mercurial: Quick and changeable in temperament

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